

Closing the chapter of hostilities

Pak. F. M. Chaudhri

By Fateh M. Chaudhri

IN the run-up to the next Saarc summit starting on January 4, 2004, in Islamabad, a spate of initiatives in India and Pakistan have warmed the hearts of those who wish the two states to have cordial relations. After a long wait, Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali received a reply to his August 6 letter from his counterpart Atal Behari Vajpayee confirming his decision to attend the summit in Islamabad.

Significantly, Pakistan's announcement, unilaterally and without any conditions, of cease-fire along the Line of Control (LoC), the working boundary, and even the Siachen Glacier, which India reciprocated, is holding and providing immense relief to the people of Kashmir. Restoration of air links between the two countries will take place from January 1, 2004. The resumption of the Samjhota Express train service, the possible opening of the Muzaffarabad-Srinagar as well as the Sialkot-Jammu bus service along the 75-mile-long route, the ferry service between Karachi and Mumbai, the road between Monabao and Khokharapar are in the offing. In order to back up the service to a quantum jump in the number of people likely to travel through these routes, steps are being taken to increase the number of the two high commissioners' staff from 55, to 110 in the near future.

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countries when discussing each other's initiative appears to be yielding to pro-active dynamism.

The pace of the CBMs has now acquired a considerable momentum because the impetus to rapprochement is coming right from the top. Together with some discreet push from the international community, the current positive postures are expected to substantially repair the damage done at Agra.

It is quite clear that the lack of flexibility in the stance of the Indian and Pakistani leaders on the complex issue of Kashmir has made the status quo a preferred alternative, which it is not. Let us also admit that the status quo implies continuation of painful tensions. And this, in turn, would imply huge costs both in financial terms and human lives. With more than a third of the budget going to defence expenditure in Pakistan and a significant proportion of

itself. However, instead of passing declarations and agreements in general terms, the two countries should start working quietly and diligently and, if necessary, with the help of a third party on a roadmap for peace and harmony acceptable to all the three parties — India, Pakistan and the people of Kashmir. The preparatory work must address, step by step, the concerns India has repeatedly aired about cross-border infiltration, and that which Pakistan as well as the world has termed as human rights violations in the Indian-held Kashmir. The question of the will of the Kashmiris remains vital.

The preparatory work should also determine how to associate the representative Kashmir leadership in the rapprochement process. This intricate and difficult issue must be addressed as the previous agreements between India and Pakistan, for

example, the Tashkent Agreement, the Lahore Declaration, etc. could not forge ahead because the Kashmir leadership was not there as a party. At the same time public needs to be educated and the incorrect information in books for schools and colleges in both countries should be revised so that a congenial environment is created.

Let us admit that the recently announced cease-fire cannot hold if there is no progress on the Kashmir dispute. At the same time Kashmir cannot remain the bone of contention forever; 56 years are enough. This single dispute has deflected us from the crucial task of social and economic development for more than half a century while the rest of the world has tackled the real issues of poverty, ignorance, malnutrition etc much better than we have done in this part of the

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Pakistan and India have also agreed on 500 products for tariff concessions as part of the South Asia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA), and Prime Minister Jamali has endorsed the idea of a meeting of Saarc commerce secretaries on free trade before the Saarc summit Islamabad. President Musharraf has also offered to withdraw troops from Kashmir if India reciprocated in its part of Kashmir. India is reported to be ready for talks on troops cut at the LoC. Bilateral talks over the Baglihar Dam have taken place and the World Bank is getting into the picture to sort out the issue.

The cumulative weight of all these measures in the last few months is far more than one can recollect having seen in such a short period in the past half a century. It is generally believed that once we close the chapter of war and unending hostilities and open the road to peace, prosperity and happiness will fly in.

It is quite evident that the blurred visions of the sub-continental leaders in the past are giving way to an enlightened approach. The force of the painful rejection factor that almost always gripped both the

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the same in India, human conditions in both countries would pose immeasurable risks including the phenomenon of continued violence.

A paradigm shift of resources must take place from spending on military to investment in literacy, education, health, nutrition, safe water supply, rural infrastructure, employment generation, enhancement in productivity through technical enrichment of people, regional trade, etc. It would be naive to believe that Pakistan has the military might or diplomatic clout to settle the Kashmir issue and significantly reduce tensions.

It would be equally naive to believe that India can leave the Kashmir thorn in its flesh and hope to become a regional power. While the centrality of the Kashmir issue cannot be denied, it is necessary first to focus on a host of extremely important CBMs and implement them so that it may lead to an amicable resolution of the Kashmir issue.

Of course, India cannot ignore the Kashmir dispute because the lingering shadows of this problem might cast dark clouds on the rapprochement process

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Let us also admit that both countries need a tension-free environment to attract domestic and foreign investment as well as a stream of valuable tourists. The year 2004 is crucial. In view of the general elections in India in October 2004 — if not earlier — the preparatory work should start right away.

The civil society, in general, and the Pakistan-India People's Forum, in particular, should impress upon the political stalwarts in both countries that the deepest wish of the people is peace, and that the fate of 1.5 billion people of which more than one-third live in abject poverty, cannot remain hostage to the politics of gestures only.

Similarly, the international community must remain engaged to nudge the peace process ahead. Almost 500 million people have been waiting for the economic dawn in their lives for too long. Is it not reason enough to initiate and stay on the course of rapprochement with utmost sincerity?

The writer is a former senior adviser to the World Bank.