

Letter from New Delhi

A significant breakthrough

By Kuldeep Nayar

IDEOLOGICALLY, I do not agree with the BJP because it is as much polarizing the society as the Muslim League was doing before partition. Still Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, who heads the BJP-led government in India, must get the credit for not only unfreezing relations with Pakistan but for spanning the distance with President General Pervez Musharraf despite the fact that the latter had authored the Kargil war script and sabotaged the Lahore peace accord.

Vajpayee's contribution is substantial: he rose above personal hurt and the damage the Pak-sponsored terrorists had caused to India, including the attack on Parliament House. This required courage, conviction and consistency which Vajpayee showed in abundance. A meeting between the two leaders was a foregone conclusion although the media on both sides made it look a mystery. Once Vajpayee agreed to attend the Saarc summit at Islamabad, it was obvious that at some stage he would meet Musharraf. How could he have come back without meeting him when Vajpayee wanted to see whether his initiative would mature or not? Even otherwise, it would have been a slap on the face of Islamabad which it would not have forgiven or forgotten.

It is apparent that Pakistan had given some assurance on the dismantling of terrorists' camps before Vajpayee left Indian shores. That is why Vajpayee's principal secretary Brajesh Mishra met many officials in Pakistan. He wanted to make sure that Vajpayee's pre-condition for the stoppage of cross-border terrorism was met before India would agree to a dialogue.

Musharraf, after two attempts on his life, is serious in taking action against the terrorists and the organizations which the ISI encouraged at one time. Yet the worse part is that there are so many freelancers now that the mere Islamabad's assurance cannot eliminate terrorism. This may have been the reason why Vajpayee had talks with some religious leaders who had egged

of East Pakistan.

The Kashmir problem is difficult to solve because both countries have painted themselves into a corner that does not give them exit without losing face. Vajpayee seems to have explained to Musharraf the difficulties New Delhi faces in having an exclusive solution for the Muslim-populated valley. That explains why Vajpayee said in a press interview that Pakistan must appreciate the problems India has to cope with. His point that some part of Kashmir has been given away by Pakistan to China is pertinent.

Islamabad's objection to take up the matter with Beijing is understandable because its dependence on China is total. When America is pressing Musharraf to make up with India, he feels all the more dependent on China.

However, he cannot afford to annoy Washington. This is his predicament. Problems will go on cropping up, as Vajpayee says, and both countries should go on solving them 'peacefully and patiently'. It is apparent that Pakistan has raised some problems other than Kashmir. One of them is the Indus Water Treaty. Islamabad has already approached the World Bank regarding a power project which is coming up in Kashmir.

India's effort all along has been that Pakistan should confine itself to peaceful methods while seeking a solution to the problems between the two countries. This is what Lal Bahadur Shastri emphasized at Tashkent when he met Ayub Khan in January 1966 after the 1965 war. Ayub was not agreeable to give up arms when it came to sorting out problems with India.

No doubt, there has been a welcome breakthrough at Islamabad. But it is going to be a long haul. Vajpayee and Musharraf understand this. They are not hastening the process. In the past, the accords

on the terrorists in the name of jihad. Musharraf must have requested Vajpayee to do so because the meetings took place in the midst of Saarc summit sessions.

The two countries can bottle up the Kashmir valley if the terrorists refuse to give up violence. The killings in Jammu came up for discussion at Islamabad and it was pointed out that one of the assailants was a Pakistani national. Islamabad has promised full inquiry, denying the participation of a Pakistani.

That New Delhi would agree to a dialogue on Kashmir was clear when Brajesh Mishra was included in the delegation. Vajpayee depends on his judgment. Mishra had prepared the ground to some extent before Vajpayee arrived in Pakistan. Will the dialogue lead to a solution is difficult to say? But the dialogue, when it begins in February, will be properly structured and include several matters besides Kashmir.

There is no doubt that unlike the talks in the sixties between Swaran Singh and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, then foreign ministers, the proposed dialogue will be more meaningful. New Delhi is more conscious than before that the LoC will not be acceptable to Islamabad as an international border.

After the Bangladesh war when I met Bhutto in 1972, he had in mind a Trieste-like solution of Kashmir. It is worth considering. Under an agreement signed between Italy and Yugoslavia in October 1954, the Free Territory of Trieste (a disputed land since the World War II) was divided between the two along the existing demarcation line, with minor changes.

The agreement also guaranteed facilities of free travel between the two countries. This proposal was mooted between Mrs Indira Gandhi and Bhutto at Shimla but he said he could not sell it to his country after the loss

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When Shastri threatened to depart from Tashkent, the Soviet Union moved in. First, it put pressure on Shastri not to insist on the renunciation of force because that was understood in the charter of the UN whose member Pakistan was. When Shastri said, "You will have to look for another prime minister," Moscow relented. It then worked on Ayub who was in no position to return empty-handed.

Even then when the talks were resumed Ayub brought a four-line draft which he hoped would satisfy Shastri. The draft contained only a general statement on the efficacy of finding a solution to Indo-Pakistan problems through peace. Shastri was not satisfied and suggested an amendment which Ayub had to accept. In his own hand, the then Pakistan President made the necessary changes, including the phrase: "Without resort to arming." (The corrected draft in Ayub's own hand is in the archives of India's Foreign Office.)

No doubt, there has been a welcome breakthrough at Islamabad. But it is going to be a long haul. Vajpayee and Musharraf understand this. They are not hastening the process. In the past, the accords between India and Pakistan have been an event, celebrated immediately and regretted later.

Any settlement will have to be evolved. That the two sides seem to have appreciated this is a plus point. Both governments should, however, see that people-to-people contact grows.

For that it is necessary to relax visa restrictions. Buses, trains or planes mean nothing if people on one side cannot travel to the other side freely. Even if Pakistan drags its feet on this point, India should unilaterally take steps to make visa only a formality. The South Asian free trade agreement (SAFTA) will help break trade barriers. Still no conciliation between the countries will be lasting if it is not underpinned by the people.

There is so much suspicion, so much lack of faith on both sides that every rumour is considered a fact and every fear a reality. If mistrust does not go, the best of agreements would come to naught. Even a small problem will be magnified. Kashmir is a symptom, not the disease. The disease is suspicion. Until that goes, India and Pakistan will continue to be distant neighbours.

The writer is a freelance columnist based in New Delhi.