

Pakistan, India *Pak. F.R. India 10/1/04 The Nation* resuming talks

BY TANVIR ZAHID

Governments of India and Pakistan have, at last, agreed to resume the talks process for resolving all outstanding disputes including core issue of Kashmir peacefully and amicably.

Though the level for resumption of talks between the two countries have not been decided, in all probability it would be held at the Foreign Secretaries level towards the end of next month and then in due course may be followed by a meeting between the Foreign Ministers of India and Pakistan either at New Delhi or Islamabad or any other neutral venue.

The decision to resume talks was the major outcome of the 12th Summit of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation held in Islamabad from January 4 to 6, 2004. Besides measures for promotion of trade, curbing of terrorism and greater cooperation in different fields among the member countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation i.e. India, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and host Pakistan.

The SAARC Summit was attended by top leaders of the region including Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee who came to Islamabad for this purpose.

Kashmir issue was not discussed at the SAARC forum in line with the charter which prohibited raising of any bilateral matter or dispute among the member countries.

But quite expectedly, Kashmir issue figured prominently during the meetings Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee held first with Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali and then, more importantly, with President Pervez Musharraf.

The Indian Prime Minister's meetings with the President and the Prime Minister of Pakistan on the sidelines of the SAARC Summit were not on the agenda. But while in Islamabad, the Indian Prime Minister sought making courtesy calls on General Pervez Musharraf and Premier Jamali.

Obviously, when the leaders of two countries meet even for cour-

teous calls, the problems and irritants hindering the good cordial relations as well as matters of mutual interest also figure during the exchange of views on such occasions.

And, this was what happened at the meetings between the leaders of India and Pakistan when they met. Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee thanked the President and the PM of the host country for making excellent arrangements for the SAARC Summit and the exchange of pleasantries was followed by discussion of all outstanding disputes and irritants hindering cordial and good neighbourly relations between the two countries.

Result of these deliberations was not all that unexpected. It was very much pleasant and appreciated by all concerned at home and abroad.

Besides one-on-one meetings with Pakistani leaders, the Indian Prime Minister not only attended all SAARC Summit activities but also was present at the dinners hosted by President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Jamali in honour of the leaders from the region.

All these formal and informal contacts on various occasions resulted in both countries reaching the agreement to resume the process of talks to resolve all outstanding disputes including Jammu and Kashmir in a composite manner next month.

President General Pervez Musharraf afterwards described this development as history being made by two countries; agreeing to hold composite talks on all matters.

Prime Minister Jamali called for removal of irritants that hampered good relations between India and Pakistan.

Both the President and the Prime Minister expressed sort of optimism about the outcome of the talks once the process which New Delhi has so far been evading was resumed.

Pakistan, during the last couple of years, has been persistently and repeatedly making offers to India for talks at any level, any time and any venue for resolving the all disputes including core issue of Kashmir.

Going many steps further, Prime Minister Jamali announced a number of goodwill measures in November 2003 for promoting good relations by unilaterally announcing resumption of air and rail links between the two countries.

While evasive of resuming talks unconditionally and demanding end to alleged cross-border terrorism the Indian Government reiterated the allegation at all forums instead of responding positively for offers from Islamabad for resuming talks to resolve issues for ensuring lasting and

standing disputes between the two countries should be resolved at the earliest as already much time has been lost and much bloodshed caused.

Kashmir issue and other outstanding problems could be resolved with good intentions, commitment to peace, sincerity of purpose and welfare of the people being adhered to by the leaders in New Delhi and Islamabad.

Good neighbourly relations between India and Pakistan after resolving the Kashmir issue and other disputes through the process of talks, being resumed from next month and hopefully to be continued afterwards as well, would mean prosperity, progress and development of the respective people with the governments of two countries utilising their energies, time and resources for the well being and welfare of the masses at large instead of indulging into hostilities and levelling of allegations and counter-allegations against each other.

The resolution of all problems peacefully and amicably through the talks, a welcome process indeed, would also bring peace and stability in the region.

The agreement on resuming talks between the two countries has been welcomed by all around the world. While appreciating the developments taking place in Islamabad, all world leaders have felicitated the leadership of both India and Pakistan for showing spirit of goodwill and statesmanship and wished them well.

Let the resumption of talks process continue and succeed in resolving Kashmir issue and other disputes as a good omen for starting of the New Year 2004.

If the leaderships in both countries remained committed to promotion and strengthening of good relations then all irritants hindering these otherwise cordial neighbourly relations could be resolved amicably and peacefully to the mutual interests of both the peoples of India and Pakistan as well as the Kashmiris who have been struggling, fighting and suffering for securing their rights.

Let history be created more by resolving lingering Kashmir issue as such moments of goodwill and promotion of good friendly relations to the mutual interest of people of India and Pakistan do not come too often, somehow. Let us avail the golden opportunity provided by the holding of the SAARC Summit in Islamabad and resolve all disputes before the 13th Summit held at Dhaka in Bangladesh in January 2005.