

# Have we learnt to live as neighbours?

*Pak. F. Relat. - India  
Dawn  
20.1.09*

By Syed Shahid Husain

SAARC is over and so is the ordeal of the citizens of Islamabad and partly Rawalpindi. Islamabad was completely shut down including the civil courts, the federal government, the airport and the business centres. Even the Supreme Court was shut down.

The area where the federal government offices are located happened to fall within the red circle where no one was allowed to go except those on security duty or the invited guests. Enormous cost in terms of inconvenience to the citizens of Islamabad and to the business can only be guessed but not correctly calculated. All this cost was imposed in the name of security.

It was an admission of failure on the part of the security apparatus, as they could not ensure security in an environment of normality. The occasion proved to be a bonanza for the security agencies because the finance division must have granted their wishes for limitless funds without demur, because no official functionary would dare refuse funds demanded in the name of security for fear of being blamed for jeopardizing it. All normal rules regarding expenditure must have been suspended in the name of emergency governing the conduct of the conference. The taxpayer was the poorer as a result.

Complete shut down of a city can be justified only in case of war. The US too has acted in great dread of the possible terrorist

energies were focused on trying to please the Indian prime minister. One of the most presentable members of the federal cabinet was appointed his minister-in-waiting. An earlier choice for the honour was shelved to no small consternation of the minister concerned. The hosts of the conference were made to suffer an agonizing wait for the decision of the Indian prime minister whether to meet the Pakistani COAS doubling as the President. This he did and that was the crowning moment for the hosts.

The tense moments when the two met were transparent for the viewers to see. The host reluctantly stood his ground to receive his honourable guest perhaps on the advice of Foreign Office not to appear too keen or too welcoming rather than follow his instincts of showing traditional warmth and respect for an esteemed and elderly guest. The Chief of Army Staff later

Islamic activists were present in large numbers, obviously encouraged by their well-known handlers, to damage the cars of visiting dignitaries to the venue of dinner hosted by the prime minister of Pakistan for his Indian guest at Lahore Red Fort or to cause maximum disruption. This time the COAS was master of the ceremonies and Jamaat-Islami was purring like a tame cat in the warm embrace of the LFO and the 17th Amendment.

Five years of wasted opportunities after the bus 'yatra', we are now prepared to accept the bus, rail and air connections between the India and Pakistan as a huge progress, although the same had existed prior to 1999. What went wrong was the 'Kargil', which was considered by the Indians as a betrayal. Two years later another opportunity offered at Agra was frittered away by an irresistible desire to appear tough and to show that

there could be no compromise on the core issue of Kashmir. That is history now. The last straw on the camel back was the terrorist attack on Indian parliament, which the Indians blamed on us. So far one has not seen much evidence though.

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In 1999, the talks that began at the secretaries level between India and Pakistan but did not make much progress because of the peculiar mindset of the bureaucrats on either side of the divide had prevented a desirable outcome. Our prime minister did not have a clue of the people serving him or their inclinations. So much so that the principal member of his team included a foreign secretary who was expressly hostile to any

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attacks and has closed Las Vegas, Chicago and the city of New York to some aircraft. They had closed all the airports in the wake of 9/11. They have mandated air marshals for the foreign flights unless they want to lose access to the American space. No other country has resorted to such drastic measures.

The Saarc conference was only an insignificant international event where seven south Asian countries, most of whom do not seem to matter to the outside world, met. Similar situation confronted the British when the US president came calling recently to savour his victory over Iraq with his soulmate in London. Anticipating huge protest against the most unpopular US president, the British were asked by the sole superpower to shut down London for the duration of the presidential visit.

But the Mayor of London contemptuously turned down the request. The 'honoured' guest, fearful for his security in a country where not one prime minister has been assassinated in more than a century, was forced to enter the Royal Palace through the back door and exit too from there. Heathrow airport continued to function normally and so did the courts. In the Second World War Churchill is said to have famously remarked when told that the courts were functioning that there was no further cause of worry. But we shut down our capital city for a much lesser reason.

SAARC was overshadowed by newfound bonhomie between India and Pakistan. All official

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characterized the outcome as a leap forward.

Indeed! So much self-congratulation on the happy conclusion of the 12th Saarc conference may perhaps be premature. One is forced to think that the Saarc conference degenerated into a forum of bilateral talks between India and Pakistan. Nobody seemed to notice the importance of the conference intended to be an International gala to discuss mostly the economic issues relating to all the seven countries of the region.

Islamabad declaration issued at the conclusion of the bilateral talks between the Indian PM and Gen. Musharraf binds the two countries to start a composite dialogue after six months or maybe as early as next month. India has assured Pakistan that it would hold sustained talks from February including those on Kashmir. Such a dialogue will be preceded by a discussion on matters like trade and people-to-people contact.

People have missed reactions. Most are euphoric. But some are outright cynical about the prospects. The present situation where we have arrived after so much endeavour, resembles the one that obtained at the time of Vajpayee's visit to Lahore in a bus, about five years back. The differences in setting are crucial. Then the Chief of Army Staff had refused even to be present at the reception for the Indian prime minister and Jamaat-i-

progress in talks with India which he considered to be an exercise in public relations. It is, therefore, important for General

Musharraf or the prime minister to choose the team very carefully so that they subscribe to their desire of durable understanding between the two countries.

An episode may illustrate the point one is trying to make. This writer led one of the several delegations to India to discuss water related issues, as part of the composite dialogue. In the first fifteen minutes of the discussion, the Indians realized that the talks were not going to lead to anywhere. Then, they started discussing weather and spent the remaining four hours of the allotted time for discussion on a joint statement, on the subject.

The two foreign office 'babus' spent the time struggling with two dozen odd words which could be styled as a joint statement and with which both could live in peace without inviting the opprobrium of having conceded anything. So much effort was lost on this non-event that other participants ceased to take interest. The following hot but polite exchange between the foreign office 'babus' alerted one. This is what the Indian 'babu' was saying to his Pakistani counterpart:

"This is the draft that you yourself corrected half an hour back. It has only been typed. I haven't changed a thing."

One is wiser after the event. One hopes that 57 years have given enough reason to both the countries to change the tack and learn to live as neighbours.

E-mail: sshusain@hotmail.com

## Iraq contracts

THE White House's course reversal to let Canadian firms bid on billions of dollars worth of construction contracts in Iraq was overdue. The policy switch recognizes the reality that the United States needs allies — and not just in Iraq.

Last month, the Pentagon said countries that opposed the invasion of Iraq were ineligible to seek some of the \$18.6 billion worth of contracts financed by U.S. taxpayers. The announce-

ment came as Bush dispatched a special emissary, former Secretary of State James A. Baker III, to ask several nations to forgive some of the loans incurred by Saddam Hussein's regime.

France, Germany, Russia and Canada were among the countries deemed out of the running for the reconstruction contracts.

Fortunately, the shunned countries did pledge to write off some of the billions of dollars

left over from the Saddam days. Paris, Berlin and Moscow, like Ottawa, recognize that crippling Iraq with debts is a recipe for instability.

Arab nations that are owed additional billions of dollars and are at greater risk from Iraqi instability also should forgive much of the debt and count on making up their losses in trade with a free, prosperous Baghdad.

—Los Angeles Times