

Farewell to belligerency

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New year bestowed two unique gifts on General Musharraf. First, desperately sought constitutional cover and legitimacy to his uniformed Presidency. Second was PM Vajpayee's visit and his agreement to resume "Composite" dialogue to discuss all disputes including the core issue of Kashmir, the real bone of contention between the two rivals. Both leaders have displayed great courage and statesmanship and revived the hope of over a billion of poor inhabitants of subcontinent, 40 percent living under poverty line, for a better and prosperous future.

Scared by constant threat of nuclear war, international community led by USA has been working very hard to resolve the Kashmir issue and establish cordial relations between the hostile neighbours. Whether they succeed or not the Americans wish to resolve Kashmir being the flash point for next nuclear war. Four wars and emergence of Bangladesh have failed to resolve the dispute and promote peace.

Race to procure and accumulate sophisticated weapons, missiles, and atom bombs to build up defence have cost billion of rupees from the meagre resources of these poor countries denying their poor people the basic necessities of life like food, housing, medicines, education, livelihood and even portable water. Their development indices particularly Pakistan's are the

lowest in the world.

Kashmir issue has been complicated by the vested interests of elite ruling class of Generals, feudals, religious leaders and industrialists each grinding their own axe. Generals take a major share of unaccountable budget in the name of security/defence, enjoy best perks and concessions besides major share in the government. Clergy in the name of Islam and Jihad takes its pound of flesh in donations from people/government to kill and shoot at will by their armed militias.

The industrialists want no trade with India for fear of losing huge profits by import of cheaper better quality items from there. But for these selfish elements who have been damaging relations under the cover of "National Interest" Kashmir issue could have been settled long time ago when S. Patel offered the exchange of Kashmir with Hyderabad, under UNO plan or in 1964 when Nehru sent Shiekh Abdullah to meet Ayub Khan. Somehow or other our governments mostly military as opposed to democratic ones in India, thought they could wrest Kashmir with force of arms.

Every time they miscalculated and underestimated the enemy with dire results. But most of these facts/truths were concealed from the public except 1971 debacle. General Musharraf, architect of

Kargil, is a hawk like other Generals, and was reluctant to meet Vajpayee on his visit to Lahore, but now has learnt to be more flexible. He bowed to the demands of reconciliation more under American pressure than his own people whom he commands like a regiment. Irrespective of reasons or allegations of "sellout", "face saving", "caving in", he must settle this intransigent dispute for good with a spirit of give and take.

It is the key to welfare and happiness of over a billion people of subcontinent. As a dove I have always advocated a policy of Shanti/shanti (Peace) through dialogue and negotiations across the table rather than sabre rattling or battlefields. Recommendations of American think tanks and track II diplomacy etc., should be considered. Past must be buried for the sake of peace and old positions ignored as announced by General Musharraf. Pragmatism and flexibility is the solution to this intractable issue.

As opposed to hawks, religious militants and some misconceived generals, my own estimate of situation is that you cannot conquer Kashmir by force and India will not surrender it on a platter due to its own compulsions. So a via media compromise is the only answer. These views have been expressed earlier at the cost of losing friends and alienat-

ing people. Independence dawned with bloodshed, violence, arson and abductions. The mistrust and suspicions have been the hallmark of relations. Kashmir adding to the bitterness lead to wars and nuclear threat. People are tired of this confrontation/threat and poverty and praying for final settlement of Kashmir so that they can live in peace. Opening of bus, rail, air, ferry is welcome. Exchange of culture/sports teams and delegates of journalists, lawyers, intellectuals, artists, film stars should be encouraged. Books, magazines, newspapers should be regularly exchanged. There should be liberal visas to encourage and promote people to people contact. Mutual trade/import should be preferred.

All adverse propaganda should be stopped. There is hardly any reason to doubt the credibility of Vajpayee when he declared at Minar-e-Pakistan on his last visit that history can be changed but not geography, friends can be changed but not neighbours, and that secure, stable, prosperous Pakistan was in India's interest.

No doubt it can be an historical opportunity for both the leaders to transform this dangerous nuclearised zone into area of peace and harmony where, like good neighbours they join together to zero there weapons on their common enemy which is poverty, ignorance and disease and not on each other. Success is within their grasp and history will record their names with golden words.