

Letter from New Delhi

Now the 'peace bomb'

By Kuldip Nayar *Pak. F. Federation
Dawn 24.1.07*

IT was not a day after. It was 10 days later. The peace bomb had exploded in Pakistan in the shape of a joint statement. The devastation of hardliners was nearly complete. At Lahore and Islamabad the people I talked to spoke about travel and trade, not jihad or jung (war).

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and President Pervez Musharraf had given words to their silent prayers. They had become so tired of terrorism and so pessimist about their country's future that they had only to be caressed to spring to response.

This does not mean that there is no odd note in the pleasing music of conciliation. A few religious groups and the remnants of hawkish mind use strong language when they criticize the joint statement. For them, the "anti-Indianism" represents the ethos of Pakistan. But their number is small and they look isolated. The desire to make up with India is building into an avalanche, threatening to wash away every impediment in the way of normalization.

In the process, Musharraf has gained in height and acceptability. It is not that the sentiment for democracy has lessened but it is felt that he is better than the alternatives available in the country. Nearly all political parties go on reiterating their backing. The army corps commanders have gone on record to support the joint statement publicly and most newspaper columnists — a powerful lot in Pakistan — have suddenly begun to argue that India is the country's best bet. This may well be a genuine realization. But it comes at a time when people are ahead of them and firmly believe that they must bury the hatchet with India.

Former prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, rang up a Pakistani editor last week to complain that the Lahore Declaration he had signed with Vajpayee was no different in content from the joint statement. He is probably right.

The Jamaat-i-Islami, which has welcomed the joint statement too, had at that time shown its anger by throwing brickbats at diplomats and others who were travelling to the venue of banquet in honour of Vajpayee at Lahore.

Indeed, the mood in Pakistan has completely changed. Partly it is because of the 9/11 attacks and America's ultimatum to Islamabad to come on board to fight against terrorism. Partly, it is the fallout from the people-to-people contact and visits by parliamentarians to each other's country. I could see when I led the Indian parliamentary delegation to Pakistan six months ago a recognizable change taking place in the attitude of the people, a sort of determination to have peace as if the past 55 years had been a waste.

People in India are still niggardly in their reciprocity. True, those who made fun of the 'mombattiwalahs', lighting candles at the border, look sheepish. The BJP that has followed an anti-Pakistan line is cautious because it realizes that Vajpayee has too much stake in peace. The property scribes are embarrassingly too vociferous in their support. Still the mood across the border is more upbeat and more gushing, although laced with suspicion.

Yet the biggest change has come in Musharraf himself. He is unrecognizable from the Agra days. He has given up petulance and learnt patience. "He is really a changed man," top journalists told me. Some attribute it to the attempts made on his life. Some think that Washington has twisted his arm. They may be contributory factors.

What really counted with him was Vajpayee's assurance and his own conviction that India and Pakistan could solve the problems, including Kashmir, through a composite dialogue. At one stage during the talks in Islamabad, Vajpayee's insistence on a particular phraseology on terrorism made Musharraf say that they could drop the joint statement. The atmosphere became tense. But then both of them changed the tone and tenor of their talk to span the distance.

It is not only Musharraf but also the Pakistanis on the whole who have put their faith in Vajpayee despite their dislike for the BJP he leads. Their expectations from him have soared high and they are await-

Musharraf has gained in height and acceptability. It is not that the sentiment for democracy has lessened but it is felt that he is better than the alternatives available in the country.

ing something concrete, however small, emerging in the next few weeks. The mere beginning of talks will not satisfy them; something else should come along.

At several meetings of intellectuals, journalists and legislators I raised the question: What would they like India to do? One suggestion that came up at every meeting was that visas should be made available across the window without the condition to report to the police (I was shadowed by the Pakistani police even this time). People argued that the spies did not require a visa to travel; they had their own ways to come in. Another suggestion was to reserve seats for the Pakistani students in our technical and management institutes. And at all the meetings the resumption of trade was proposed without waiting for the operation of Safta (South Asian Free Trade Area) two years hence.

On Kashmir, I was surprised to find the absence of rhetoric or even the demand for its integration with Pakistan. A solution should be found, however long it took, was the general opinion. True, people are willing to wait but it would be folly on our part to believe that without a solution on Kashmir or the mere status quo could normalise relations.

One who knows the mind of Musharraf warned me that he might wait for a year for the solution of Kashmir. If it did not take place by then he might go back to his 'old ways.' I hope not. But some equation on Kashmir, if not a solution, should come about before Musharraf gives up his uniform as the chief of the army staff at the end of this year. An army chief in Pakistan becomes a point of parallel authority the moment he steps in.

Maybe, some steps should be taken to institutionalize what has been proposed in the joint statement. Our parliament should endorse it. Once our parliament puts its seal of approval, the Pakistan National Assembly and the Senate would be forced to follow suit.

The writer is a free lance columnist based in New Delhi.