

Peace process at work

By M.H. Askari

Pak - F. Rehmani - India
Dawn
25-8-09

THERE continues to be a question mark against the fate of the India-Pakistan peace process initiated by former prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

A young Indian peace activist, Amit Chakraborty, who spoke at a meeting in Islamabad the other day, maintained that Vajpayee, an unswerving Hindu fundamentalist all his political life, had been under pressure from "external elements" (which he did not identify) when he extended a hand of friendship to Pakistan President, General Pervez Musharraf. He then came to Islamabad in February to participate in the Saarc regional summit and jointly with President Musharraf launched the peace process. Whether, with the induction of the new government in New Delhi, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is also vulnerable to external pressure is of course anybody's guess.

However, following the substantial meeting in China last Monday between the foreign ministers of India and Pakistan and the preceding extensive official-level discussions on a whole range of bilateral issues including the sensitive nuclear weapons regime, there is reason to be optimistic and agree with Pakistani official spokesman Masood Khan who has declared that the peace process continues to be "on track and on schedule."

Pakistan's foreign minister Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri, in a needlessly effusive statement following his meeting last Monday with his Indian counterpart Natwar Singh went on record to say that the two countries have successfully "taken the first step in the right direction." He also affirmed that Mr Natwar Singh has the desire to continue to work for the resolution of all the problems dividing India and Pakistan.

Significantly, most reports appearing in the Pakistani press have quoted only Kasuri on his discussions with Mr Natwar Singh in China. However, Mr Kasuri has reported his Indian counterpart as reiterating that the Congress-led government would take the peace process further than what the BJP-led government had done. He maintains that their discussions had helped to develop a degree of mutual trust and understanding; both were aware that the two countries faced "major problems."

Curiously, Mr Kasuri also said that he had not discussed with Mr Natwar Singh the details of either reducing the risk of nuclear confrontation or of solving the fester-

stand continues to be a plebiscite under the UN resolutions to determine Kashmir's future he also accepts that when the concerned parties came to the negotiating table some sort of compromise could be considered.

Going by press reports, it would seem that he said that the time for each party to depart from its "maximalist position" "in a spirit of flexibility" would be at the negotiating table. Nevertheless, he maintained that the core issue bedevilling relations between India and Pakistan was the Kashmir dispute. While reiterating that Pakistan was prepared to resolve all disputes in a sincere and honourable manner, he said: "We are not fighting on the Wullar dams and Sir Creek". The peace process he said, meant the resolution of Kashmir?

The reality of what the president has said cannot be disputed. However, it would be fair to suggest that peace in the region cannot for all time remain hostage to the Kashmir issue. There is an overall demand in both countries for an end to the tensions between them, and the spontaneous response to the increased opportunity for an easing of people-to-people contacts in the recent months also strongly suggests that there is a sincere yearning for normalization of relations between the two countries on both sides of the border.

The extent of the agreement reached at the bilateral talks is a tricky matter, as exemplified by the nuclear policy. It also demonstrated the almost unprecedented will of both sides to eliminate the irritants standing in the way of a peaceful relationship.

However, what would probably bring about an enormous psychological change in the people's perception of each other in India and Pakistan could be the doing away with the present restrictions on sports and cultural exchanges, flow of information, books and newspapers, visa procedures and travel facilities. In a tension-free atmosphere the people would hopefully get over their misappre-

It is too early to suggest that the new Indian government's strategy in respect of its dealings with Pakistan has fully crystallized. There are

indications that New Delhi has no reservations about continuing with the peace process.

hensions about the real motives of those who are in power on the other side of the border.

People in both countries have a right to breathe freely and be sure that they were not kept under watch as suspect or potential saboteurs while visiting their friends and relations across the border.

As far as Kashmir is concerned, considering the scale of hostility with which the people of the state view India's authority and the blood-letting which the Indian security forces have to suffer would sooner or later make New Delhi realize that it cannot keep the people of the disputed state under subjugation for ever. They are fighting a valiant battle against the forces of occupation and their number and their determination to achieve their goal of freedom is what would ensure a victory. The reality is that there is very little that Pakistan can do to help them win this battle.

It is too early to suggest that the new Indian government's strategy in respect of its dealings with Pakistan has fully crystallized. It is still somewhat tentative but there are indications that New Delhi has no reservations about continuing with the peace process which began when Mr Vajpayee was in power.

Comments in the Indian press already suggest that Mr Natwar Singh who had the reputation of being "the angry old man of Indian foreign policy" when he was in government more than a decade ago, is beginning to find that the world has changed a great deal in the interregnum.

A commentator writing in the prestigious New Delhi weekly *India Today* has said that the policy objectives of Mr Manmohan Singh's government "take on a different outlook when confronted by the international dynamics which are radically different from what they were when the Congress left office in 1996." The commentator goes on to say that "the peace process as it stands at present will need fresh fuel by the time Natwar and Kasuri meet to review things..." The meeting has taken place since the comment was published.

Presumably, the Indian foreign minister would now have a clearer perception of Pakistan's expectations. The perception should be even clearer after the meeting between the foreign secretaries scheduled to be held in New Delhi on June 27-28. However, there can be little doubt that it is in the vital interest of both India and Pakistan not to let the peace process go off the rails.

Understandably, the details of any precise method of dealing with these two issues could not have come under discussion since no such method has yet been suggested. The risk of nuclear confrontation and the fallout of the Kashmir dispute are matters of utmost concern to both New Delhi and Islamabad. Hopefully, too, the urgency of involving the people of the war-ravaged state of Jammu and Kashmir in any process for breaking the impasse would also have been duly brought out in the foreign ministers' meeting.

Mr Kasuri has underscored the need for durable peace in the region and this obviously cannot be achieved without the Kashmiri people's active involvement. As the peace activist Amit Chakraborty emphasized, any approach to the Kashmir problem had to be trilateral and not bilateral.

An opinion poll that Mr Chakraborty had conducted in Srinagar showed that the Kashmiri people overwhelmingly wanted to be rid of the Indian hold on their homeland. However, only about five per cent of them believed that Kashmir would want to exchange the Indian domination by an arrangement for Pakistani domination over the territory. They clearly favour "independence" but what exactly they mean by that was not clear in his one-man opinion poll.

Mr Kasuri contends that the top leadership of India and Pakistan would inevitably have to be involved in a resolution of the Kashmir issue. He did not rule out the possibility of a meeting between General Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh "once the ground had been prepared" for such an approach; the leaders had to meet to find a solution with which India and Pakistan as well as the people of the disputed state could live.

It is important to realize that the so-called groundwork for a final, workable resolution cannot be entirely left to the discretion of the bureaucrats at the working level. As Mr Kasuri himself recognizes, Kashmir is a challenge to the leadership in the two countries. There has to be a shift in the declared positions of the two countries and its nature and extent cannot be left to the bureaucrats to decide. It would inevitably be a political decision and the political leadership would be in the best position to decide about a strategy for such a shift and then get it accepted by the people.

Apparently, President Pervez Musharraf recognizes the need for a possible departure from Pakistan's declared position as he had at one time hinted that a solution outside the UN resolutions could perhaps provide a way out. In his recent interview to London's *Sunday Telegraph* he affirmed that while Pakistan's