

A good beginning

Down 3/27/04 By Afzaal Mahmood Pak. F. R. India.

THE success of the Delhi meeting between the foreign secretaries of Pakistan and India marks a good beginning to the composite dialogue initiated to resolve all bilateral disputes.

Foreign secretary Riaz Khokhar, who led the Pakistan delegation to the talks, was quite appreciative of the milieu prevailing in the Indian capital. "I saw and found them serious, committed and determined to move forward on a composite dialogue." He went on to add that the two sides had agreed "to have serious, sustained and constructive dialogue on the question of Kashmir." Being an old hand at dealing with the Indians, Mr. Khokhar, however, hastened to caution against creating a hype about Pakistan-India talks, saying high expectations must be avoided.

The success of the expert level talks on nuclear CBMs, followed by the positive note on which the foreign secretary-level meeting has ended, clearly indicate that ditente between India and Pakistan has survived the Indian elections and the change of government in New Delhi. Though external affairs minister Natwar Singh had initially rattled Islamabad by his repeated references to the 1972 Shimla Agreement, he backed down from his original stand and has taken steps to reassure Pakistan that the marked improvement in bilateral relations, seen in the final months of the Vajpayee government, would persist.

Meeting foreign minister Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri on June 21 in Qingdao, China, on the sidelines of a regional conference, Mr. Natwar Singh reassured his Pakistani counterpart that his government remained committed to the path of dialogue to solve all bilateral issues. They also agreed to remain in regular touch and provide continuous political guideline to the ongoing process.

The Pakistan delegation has every reason to be more than satisfied with what it succeeded in achieving at the Delhi meeting. Without reading any deeper meaning into a reference to the United Nations Charter along with the Shimla Agreement in the joint statement issued after the foreign secretaries meeting, the fact remains that it has rattled many Indian analysts.

Even the former foreign minister in the Vajpayee government, Yashwant Sinha, criticized the Congress-led government for letting Islamabad "walk away with more than its due." Issuing a formal statement on behalf of the BJP, Sinha listed reference to the UN Charter in the joint statement as "intriguing." He argues that reference to the UN Charter "weakens our approach that all issues between India and Pakistan should be resolved bilaterally and may give an opening to Pakistan to bring in the old UN resolutions on Jammu and Kashmir and involve third parties in the negotiations. Government of India should have avoided such a formulation."

During his visit to New Delhi, Mr. Khokhar succeeded in holding "useful discussions"

with prominent Kashmiri leaders including Syed Ali Gilani, Shabbir Shah, Yasin Malik, Abdul Aziz and Mirwaiz. This was a creditable achievement since Pakistan has always held that Kashmiris are a very important party while the Indian stand has so far been that the Kashmiris cannot become a third party in the talks between India and Pakistan. As a matter of fact, the BJP's spokesman, Yashwant Sinha, described the meeting with Kashmiri leaders as "the most disconcerting development of all" and severely criticized the government for "facilitating the interaction between the Hurriyat leaders and the Pakistan delegation." It is not yet clear whether the meeting with the Kashmiri leaders reflected a change in New Delhi's thinking or was the result of Pakistani high commission's efforts.

Symbolism and rhetoric apart, both

The coming weeks will witness a flurry of activity on the diplomatic front. It begins with a meeting yesterday between the two foreign ministers on the sidelines of a regional conference in Jakarta. In July, Mr Natwar Singh is expected to visit Islamabad in connection with a meeting of the Saarc council of ministers. Mr Kasuri has been invited to New Delhi in August, where the two foreign ministers are expected to review the progress achieved so far. This will be a crucial meeting and its outcome will determine the tempo of the composite dialogue.

ingrained in Indo-Pakistan diplomacy, the Delhi meeting accomplished two tangible and noteworthy achievements. After about ten long years, Islamabad and New Delhi at last realized that it was time to put an end to the sufferings and hardships being encountered by thousands of divided families on both sides of the border. It was agreed in principle to re-establish India's consulate-general in Karachi and Pakistan's consulate-general in Mumbai. It is hoped unnecessary time will not be wasted in working out the modalities by the two governments.

Another significant decision was that all apprehended fishermen in each other's custody would be immediately released and a mechanism put in place for the return of unintentionally transgressing fishermen and their boats from the high seas without apprehending them. Also, steps would be taken for early release of civilian prisoners. But the need of the hour is to find a permanent solution to the fishermen's problem which is the result of the undemarcated boundary in Sir Creek. It is 38 years since the dispute in the Rann of Kutch was resolved through arbitration and more than 1000 kilometers of boundary was demarcated in two years. But a small piece in the Rann of Kutch (Sir Creek) has remained undemarcated in all these 38 years, thanks to the lack of will on the part of India and Pakistan. The Sir Creek demarcation problem has become over the years almost as intractable as the Kashmir problem.

It goes to the credit of the New Delhi meet-

ing that the two foreign secretaries agreed that discussions on the remaining six subjects of the composite dialogue — Sir Creek, Siachen, Wullar Barrage/ Tulbul Navigation Project, terrorism and drug trafficking, economic and commercial co-operation, and promotion of friendly exchanges in various fields would take place between the third week of July and the first half of August 2004.

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The Congress-led government has reassured Pakistan that it is committed to the path of dialogue, but no one knows whether that path will lead anywhere. Unless both sides are prepared to depart from the hard positions of the past on Kashmir, there can be no hope of finding a solution acceptable to all parties. Without leaving the trodden path and adopting innovative ideas, the dialogue on Kashmir will ultimately lead to a blind alley. It is a peculiar twist of circumstances that the all-powerful Sonia Gandhi and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh cannot get away from the beaten path and adopt an innovative and realistic approach to the Kashmir problem, even if they want to. The former because of her foreign origin handicap and the latter because of his Sikh connection. None of them would like to be accused of a sell-out.

The Congress-led government's foreign policy team is dominated by what the *Economist* calls "crusty former diplomats." External Affairs minister Natwar Singh and National Security Adviser J. N. Dixit have served in Pakistan as India's ambassadors and are generally regarded as hardliners in their approach to Pakistan. Pakistani interlocutors will find them real hard nuts to crack.

Recently, there has been another unfavourable development. While in opposition, the Congress party last year supported Mr. Vajpayee's "hand of friendship" to Pakistan... The Congress-led government, justifiably, expected a similar gesture from the BJP now in the opposition. The recent harsh criticism of the government by the BJP, directed at the foreign secretary-level meeting in New Delhi, has dissipated the hope of a bipartisan policy towards Pakistan on Kashmir and other bilateral disputes. If the reports about the hardliners taking control of the BJP and Mr. Vajpayee's intended retirement are correct, then it is a sad development not only for the dynamics of India's internal politics but also for the promotion of Indo-Pakistan relations.

The writer is a former ambassador of Pakistan.