

# Peace talks

## Down on track

h.6.04 By M.H. Askari

AFTER several anxious days, when the future of the recently launched India-Pakistan peace process appeared to be in jeopardy, the prospects of the resumption of the dialogue between Pakistan and India is once again being seen as promising.

The Indian foreign minister, Mr Natwar Singh, has clarified that the talks would adhere to the original schedule and would not be confined to the rigid framework of the Shimla Agreement. If, in the first place, in a previous statement, he had not made observations which cast a shadow of uncertainty over the peace dialogue, both countries would have been saved their moments of anxiety.

Mr Natwar Singh, in a statement on May 30, had suggested somewhat categorically that "India will pursue talks with its western neighbour" on the basis of the Shimla Agreement of 1972. As a seasoned diplomat having dealt with India-Pakistan problems over a long period, he can be expected to remember that the Shimla Agreement was not negotiated in the happiest of circumstances from Pakistan's point of view.

But for the statesmanship which the late Mr Zulfikar Ali Bhutto demonstrated at the time, Pakistan would not have come out of the Shimla talks with its dignity intact. India had militarily intervened in the crisis created by General Yahya Khan aggressiveness and the intransigence of the Bengali leadership in the then East Pakistan, which led to the latter's secession. Mr Bhutto secured a reasonable deal. It is reassuring that Mr Natwar Singh believes that India and Pakistan should not remain prisoners of their past.

More importantly, about the same time when Mr Natwar Singh made his earlier remarks, the Indian prime minister, Mr Manmohan Singh, assured Prime Minister Zafarullah Khan Jamali in their telephone conversation that India was firm in its commitment to move forward and pave the way for resolving all outstanding bilateral issues including that of Kashmir.

Mr Natwar Singh, in an exclusive interview to the widely circulated *Hindustan Times*, has given the assurance of "frank discussions" on all bilateral

their very survival.

It has to be recognized in both countries that the common people demonstrate a sense of euphoria because of the knowledge that their security arsenals are now equipped with nuclear weapons. The delivery systems in both countries have also been developed to a fairly high level of technology.

While in India the ultimate decision to use or not use a nuclear weapon will apparently lie with the political authority, in Pakistan this decision will be the prerogative of the defence or security apparatus.

It has to be acknowledged that while the political elite in India is normally not hysterical, where nuclear weapons are concerned it has proved itself to be hasty and even mindless by carrying out the nuclear tests in May 1998 which left Pakistan with no option but to follow suit.

To make matters worse, the Indian leadership which was in power in New Delhi at the time daunted Pakistan in the short interval when Pakistan had not quite decided to go for its blasts by asserting that Pakistan should note "the change in South Asia's strategic environment."

Both countries have since been engaged in a mindless pursuit of nuclear weaponry and its delivery system. The late Dr Iqbal Ahmad had aptly remarked: India's mindless rightwing leaders who started it all and then proceeded to goad Pakistan into baring its nuclear capabilities may never acknowledge that "they have committed a crime against India and its neighbours, and that not one good — strategic or tactical, political or economic — can accrue from the blunder."

However, the right-wing (Vajpayee, Advani et al) are now no longer in power but it is doubtful that the Congress, which even though it has come to power mainly with the support of the left wing i.e. the two communist parties, has the moral courage to bring about a radical policy change to neutralize the consequences of India's nuclear adventure.

The redeeming feature is that the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) whose support is crucial to the survival of Manmohan Singh's government has always been strongly

issues including Kashmir. India has also since conveyed to Pakistan its acceptance of the schedule for the talks on nuclear confidence-building measures (CBMs) and the meeting between the foreign secretaries of the two governments.

The Indian foreign secretary has also confirmed that the foreign ministers of India and Pakistan would have a meeting in August, as already scheduled, and the basis of the bilateral talks would be not only the Shimla Agreement but also all subsequent agreements and understandings between India and Pakistan.

A section of the press has reported that Mr Natwar Singh has said that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's government had "no fundamental differences" (on the India-Pakistan peace process) with the erstwhile administration of Vajpayee "who had built a warm rapport with General Musharraf."

As a Gulf newspaper has observed "the war of words" between the two countries which had started with Mr Natwar Singh's earlier controversial statement now appears to have ended. It is unfortunate that the Indian foreign minister should have evoked the painful memory of the Shimla Agreement and also speculated that perhaps a resolution of the Kashmir question could be found on the basis in which New Delhi resolved its border dispute with China.

Not unexpectedly, in a sharp rejoinder, the Pakistan foreign minister has stressed that unlike the India-China dispute, Kashmir was not a mere territorial dispute but an international dispute which could not be settled without addressing the aspirations of the Kashmiri people.

It is reassuring that following the acrimonious exchange between the two foreign ministers, both Islamabad and New Delhi now seem to agree that all such contentious issues should be dealt with in the course of the bilateral talks which have already started. As Mr Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri has said, "the search for peace and stability is imperative for both Pakistan and India."

Perhaps, the most important aspect of the bilateral talks which will recommence later this month is the schedule for the official level talks on the nuclear CBMs slated for June 19-20 and the foreign secretary level talks proposed for June 27-28.

This would be the first time that the two governments would be getting down to discussing the issue in a serious businesslike way. However, it would unrealistic to presume that the discussion would enter a decisive stage in this first encounter between the two neighbours on a matter which touches upon

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opposed to the Bharatiya Janata Party government's nuclear policy.

In a statement issued after India's nuclear blasts in May 1998, it demanded denuclearization of the region.

The party's Polit Bureau called upon the New Delhi government to declare that "it would not induct nuclear weapons and build a nuclear arsenal triggering a nuclear arms race in the subcontinent." The Polit Bureau also called upon "all peace-loving patriots" to carry forward India's long cherished desire "to rid this planet of all nuclear weapons" and force the government to adopt positions which would help preserve peace and security in the region and strengthen good-neighbourly relations."

With its strong presence in the Lok Sabha and its indispensability to the survival of Manmohan Singh's government, the CPM can be expected to pressure the Congress and its allies into adopting the same policy towards the nuclearization of the regions. If a dialogue by India is sustained with Pakistan and some degree of normalization is achieved in other areas of India-Pakistan relations, a movement towards nuclear disarmament may also become a possibility. It will certainly not happen soon but over a period of time it may actually come about.

President Gen Pervez Musharraf's decision to telephone Ms Sonia Gandhi and invite her to visit Pakistan was a gracious gesture. It appears that she would be happy to visit Pakistan.

The Indian foreign minister himself has said: "Sonaji has been invited to Pakistan and I hope a programme would be chalked out for her visit...she would certainly receive a big welcome from its (Pakistan's) people."

It cannot be said that the late Ms Indira Gandhi was always well disposed towards Pakistan. Let us hope her daughter-in-law will show a more congenial disposition in her dealings with Pakistan.

Indian Prime Min-