

Breaking the ice on Siachen

By Qudssia Akhlaque

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In 1989 an understanding was reached between the then prime ministers of India and Pakistan, Rajiv Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto, for disengagement of troops to the time of 1972 when the Shimla Agreement was signed between the two countries. It was then left to the defence ministries of the two countries to work out the modalities. Subsequently, the defence secretaries met in June 1989 at Rawalpindi and discussed specific proposals for the resolution of the Siachen conflict. At the end of their two-day meeting, a joint press release was issued and its operative part read: "There was an agreement by both sides to work towards the comprehensive settlement based on redeployment of forces to reduce the chances of conflict, avoidance of the use of force and

the determination of future positions on the ground so as to conform with the Shimla Agreement and to assure durable peace in the Siachen area. The army authorities of both sides will determine these positions".

In 1992, Pakistan Defence Secretary Salim Abbas Jilani went to India to sign the agreement with his Indian counterpart, N.N. Vohra, who is currently India's pointman on Kashmir. However, at the last

DIPLOMATIC NOTES

moment, India backed out because the then prime minister Narasimha Rao did not want the agreement to be signed. He stated certain political difficulties as the reason. The change of heart at the last minute also evoked criticism within India. Even J.N. Dixit, India's current National Security Adviser, wrote in an article that it was not a prudent policy that India had adopted at that time.

In November 1998 when Siachen

negotiations began between the defence secretaries, the Pakistani official asked for a revival of the understanding reached in 1992. However, he was told that a fresh understanding would have to be worked out as a number of developments had taken place since then.

The same line of argument could be revived by the Indian side now — and this time perhaps with a pointed reference to Kargil.

At an altitude of around 20,000 feet, Siachen is the world's highest and coldest battlefield. Although the exact figures of Pakistani and Indian troops stationed there are not available, it is learnt that the number runs in the thousands. According to a serving Pakistani military official, Pakistan has deployed between two to three battalions there. A battalion comprises around 800 troops. The Indian troops stationed in the area are said to be thrice as many. When this reporter asked a senior diplomat at the Indian high commission in

Islamabad for an approximate number of Indian troops stationed at Siachen, his response was: "We won't have such sensitive information available with us here".

According to one estimate, controlling these heights costs India up to \$1 million a day.

THE Saudi proposal for an Arab or Islamic force for Iraq that has been welcomed by the Americans appears to have few takers in the Muslim world. Or at least not till they have seen the back of the last of the US occupation troops in Iraq.

Many see the proposal as a non-starter and they have good reasons for it. Even potential contributors from the Muslim world (including Pakistan) seem to be having second thoughts in view of the worsening security situation and deepening kidnapping crisis in Iraq. Pakistan has decided to adopt a "wait and see" policy till the idea gels. At this stage the

Foreign Office has chosen not to go public with its view on the issue. It is mindful of the fact that even within the region there are clear differences and it would rather not be a part of any intra-regional quibbling.

Pakistan proposed a multinational Islamic force at the 30th meeting of the foreign ministers of the 57-nation Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in Tehran last year in May. However, the US-backed proposal of a Muslim stabilization force under the OIC umbrella did not get an encouraging response even then from key Muslim countries. While Malaysia and Turkey were receptive to the idea, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria and other neighbouring countries of Iraq had serious reservations. The countries opposed to the idea had argued that endorsing the principle of working with foreign occupation forces would set a wrong precedent — a perfectly valid argument, especially at a time when US threats are also directed at other Muslim countries.

Breaking

ISLAMABAD: Can one hope for a breakthrough in the new round of Indo-Pakistan dialogue on the contentious issue of Siachen Glacier that opens in New Delhi on Thursday (today)?

This is a much asked question in diplomatic and political circles as defence secretaries of the two South Asian nuclear states enter into the talks. There is guarded optimism of making some headway towards a resolution of the two-decade-old armed conflict over the world's highest battlefield.

This will be the second meeting between the defence secretaries of the two countries on Siachen under the composite and integrated dialogue framework agreed to between the foreign secretaries in 1997. The last meeting was held at New Delhi in November 1998.

The talks are likely to focus on specific proposals. The Siachen heights were under Pakistan's control since 1947 but were occupied by India in

1983. The Indian move was seen as an act of aggression by Pakistan as well as the international community.

Pakistan is expected to reiterate its call for unconditional withdrawal of Indian troops from Siachen. The Pakistani side expects that India in view of the "present positive atmosphere" would restore the status quo ante as it existed prior to its military incursion in 1983.

Pakistan and India both lay claim to the Siachen heights. Pakistan maintains that the heights are on its side of the Line of Control (LoC) but India's contention is that the LoC stretches along the Saltoro watershed, which is their demilitarized zone. Pakistan disputes this claim saying that the area west of the LoC joining point NJ9842 and the Karakoram was under Pakistan control from 1947 till India occupied those heights. Another argument put forth by Pakistan to back its claim on Siachen is that it had been granting permission to foreign mountaineer-

ing expeditions to visit that area. Pakistan also asserts that in occupying the Siachen heights India violated the Shimla Agreement, which precluded use of force by the two parties.

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Letter from New Delhi

Kashmir: India's basic position

Pak. F. Rehberi - India

By Kuldeep Nayar

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NATIONS, like individuals, look ugly when they break rules. This was the nth time that Pakistan raised Kashmir at the Saarc foreign ministers' conference in Islamabad. The rule is that no bilateral issue will be raised at such meetings. The violation not only exasperated India but also other members of the Saarc.

Pakistan's obvious purpose was to focus attention on Kashmir, something which it has been trying for quite some time. In reality it wants India to accept Kashmir as a disputed territory.

I have not been able to make out Islamabad's obsession. This is the status which New Delhi cannot accept for many reasons. It primarily means an amendment to the Indian constitution which lists Jammu and Kashmir as part of the Union. Any alteration in the state's status needs a constitutional bill that requires for approval by a two-thirds majority in each of the two houses of parliament. How is it possible for any government in India to take such a course?

Without using the word 'dispute', India has, indeed, conceded the point. When it discusses Kashmir it comes to that, although not in so many words. After all, New Delhi does not hold talks with Islamabad on Tamil Nadu, West Bengal or even Pakistan's neighbouring states of Punjab, Gujarat or Rajasthan. Why only Jammu and Kashmir? This should have satisfied Pakistan.

When the Shimla Agreement between Mrs Indira Gandhi and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the then prime ministers, singled out "Jammu and Kashmir" for "a final settlement," New Delhi said in no uncertain terms that the status of the state was still to be determined. More recently, former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee

the talks with Pakistan, taking it away from the prime minister's office led by Atal Behari Vajpayee to the ministry of external affairs headed by K. Natwar Singh, who says he does not have to "consult" anybody. The talks between him and Pakistan's Foreign Minister Kasuri in Islamabad have made the confusion more confounded. Both are saying different things while maintaining that they are making progress.

New Delhi has, however, travelled far from its original position over the years. There was a time when it would refuse even to talk on Kashmir. Manzur Qadir, the then Pakistan foreign minister, told me how General Ayub Khan, then Pakistan's martial law administrator, was furious when Jawaharlal Nehru refused to entertain any discussion on Kashmir during his visit to Pakistan to sign the Indus Water Treaty, more than 40 years ago.

Ayub's version as recorded by Qadir is: "Nehru was insulting. I tried to talk to him on Kashmir thrice, each time with the observation that since both countries had solved a big problem like the Indus Waters, they should tackle Kashmir to settle things once and for all. Every time, Nehru either started looking at the ceiling or outside the window. Once I felt that he had gone to sleep. He simply did not want to talk on the subject. He was an accepted leader of India and people in Pakistan listened to me; we should not have lost that opportunity."

Opportunities have, indeed, arisen even after the Nehru-Ayub meeting. The biggest was at Shimla in 1972 when Bhutto reportedly agreed to accept the Line of Control as the international border. But he dare not even broach the subject after return from Shimla because Pakistan had not yet got over the humiliation of losing the Bangladesh war.

Still it is stuck in the minds of Pakistan's rulers that the valley

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and President General Pervez Musharraf underlined the same point in their joint statement.

They specifically mentioned Kashmir as a topic for talks. Had Kashmir not been a matter pending settlement, the question of discussing it again and again would not have arisen.

My impression is that Pakistan has no policy on Kashmir. It kicks up dust all the time to confuse the issue. Except the contention that the state should become part of Pakistan because of its Muslim majority, what claim does it have over Kashmir? On the one hand, it says that the independent status of the state is not acceptable. On the other, it knows fully well that the demand of the preponderant majority of Kashmiris is for 'azadi' (independence). Even Pakistan's most loyal exponent, Syed Ali Shah Geelani, says if it is the 'azadi' the Kashmiris want and they would have it.

The only policy of Pakistan seems to be to get Kashmir. From day one after partition, it has been trying to occupy Kashmir forcibly. First, it was the adventure by regular and irregular forces of Pakistan. Then it was the Bhutto's war of infiltration and finally it was the exercise by General Musharraf at Kargil. All failed because Pakistan was not militarily superior to India.

Ultimately, it was former prime minister Nawaz Sharif who admitted at Male before the then prime minister Inder Gujral that Pakistan was not in a position to take Kashmir forcibly from India. It goes to Sharif's credit that he said India was not in a position to give Kashmir to Pakistan on a platter.

India too has no policy on Kashmir. It tries to keep Farooq Abdullah and Chief Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed on its side and, at the same time, begins a dialogue with the Hurriyat leaders who hate the two.

New Delhi has already downgraded

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should be part of Pakistan because it has Muslims in a majority. The facts as they are, this is not going to be possible.

No amount of Pakistan-sponsored infiltration has changed the situation. All that it has done is to communalize the Kashmir movement which was once indigenous in content and national in character.

Islamabad fails to realize that Kashmir is not a religious issue. One way out is people-to-people contact, not only through easy visas but also through free trade. Both countries should become a single economic unit (with Bangladesh added) so that the ties of trade and commerce develop into the ties of inter-dependence and friendship. Once the people of the two countries come to have an equation of that level, Kashmir will be automatically solved.

The writer is a leading columnist based in New Delhi.