

# Slow progress in New Delhi

By Afzaal Mahmood

Jammu Pak - P.R. India  
Majors

THE "modest progress" claimed by the foreign ministers of Pakistan and India appears to be rhetorical rather than real as no significant agreement had been reached at the conclusion of the two-day talks in New Delhi had been reached.

The disappointment of the people of the two countries is all the more poignant because the long-awaited talks were the first structured political dialogue between the foreign ministers of India and Pakistan in 40 years. The last such talks were held between Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Sardar Swaran Singh in 1964.

Significantly, Mr Natwar Singh had predicted the outcome of the talks even before they were held. Playing down expectations, he said that "there will be neither a breakthrough nor a breakdown in the dialogue process." He was slammed by India's main opposition party, the BJP, for "prejudging results of talks with his Pakistani counterpart."

However, given the deep differences over Kashmir and terrorism publicly aired by the two sides, an important achievement of the recently concluded talks was the determination to carry on a sustained engagement with each other. The foreign ministers agreed to continue the composite dialogue as well as the ceasefire that has held since November 25, 2003. Also, the two sides will hold meetings to discuss conventional and nuclear confidence-building measures, and India has agreed to expert level talks to consider CBMs in the conventional capacities of the two armed forces.

The decision to continue the composite dialogue has not caused much surprise because neither side wants to take the blame for breaking off the talks. Unless there is a change in attitude, the fate of the second round will not be much different from the first which failed to yield meaningful progress on any of the aspects of the eight-point agenda discussed and that included Wullar Barrage, the Baglihar hydro-electric power project, Siachen, Sir Creek, security and Jammu and Kashmir.

The announcement of some more CBMs, mostly of minor importance, is a step in the right direction. But they will fail to gladden the people because some of the CBMs announced earlier have not been implemented so far. The consulates in Karachi and Mumbai, shut down in the 1990s, continue to remain closed despite an agreement to reopen them a few months back. At the moment, people from all over Pakistan have to go to Islamabad to apply for an Indian visa. The same is the case in India where one can get a visa for Pakistan only in New Delhi. Mercifully, the two foreign ministers have agreed to speed up the reopening of the two consulates.

In November last year, India and Pakistan agreed to revive the Munabao-Khokrapar link that remains frozen since the 1965 war. Technical level talks on this issue have also been held, but the agreement to reopen the link remains unimplemented.

The way things are moving is not promising for the future of the peace process. The

first round of the composite dialogue, which began on an optimistic note, failed to make real progress on any of the items, including the less intractable issues. The foreign ministers' talks were expected to break the ice, reverse the negative trend and create a positive and hopeful atmosphere for the second round. Sadly, this has not happened.

It bodes ill for the peace process that signals from across the border have been unexpectedly negative. The Congress, has raised doubts about Pakistan's sincerity towards the bilateral talks. The All-India Congress Committee at its recent session even wondered whether New Delhi was dealing with the "right regime" in Islamabad. The resolution passed by it went on to state: "We seem to be dealing with a neighbouring government that has failed or is unable to deliver on its promises." Regrettably, these strong

---

The way things are moving is not promising for the future of the peace process. The first round of the composite dialogue, which began on an optimistic note, failed to make real progress on any of the items, including the less intractable issues. The foreign ministers' talks were expected to break the ice, reverse the negative trend and create a positive and hopeful atmosphere for the second round. Sadly, this has not happened.

---

words were used by the ruling Congress party just days before the two foreign ministers were scheduled to meet in New Delhi.

The Indian home ministry's annual report for 2003-2004 has accused Pakistan of inciting terrorism in occupied Kashmir and several northeastern states bordering Bangladesh. It has also accused the ISI of employing various means to destabilize India.

On the day the two foreign ministers began their talks in New Delhi, Indian Defence Minister Pranab Mukerjee ruled out any move to reduce military presence in the Siachen Glacier or in occupied Kashmir, thus effectively pouring cold water on two key issues of the composite dialogue between India and Pakistan.

During the recent foreign ministers meeting, India rejected the China model for talks with Pakistan to resolve the Kashmir dispute. The suggestion was made by Mr Khurshid Mahmood Kasuri to appoint "higher level representatives" to resolve the Kashmir dispute as India and China had did for their border dispute. Declining the offer, Mr Natwar Singh argued that sound mechanisms were already in place to resolve the Kashmir issue. The fact, however, remains that the quiet and patient diplomacy, of the China model, is a much better way to resolve intractable issues like Kashmir.

According to some reports in the Indian media two factors seem to have influenced New Delhi's attitude towards the ongoing dialogue with Islamabad. The first, of course, is the real or perceived increase in cross-border infiltration. Mr Natwar Singh conveyed to his Pakistani counterpart his government's serious concern over the alleged increase in the level of infiltration and vio-

lence in Jammu and Kashmir. The second reason may be Pakistan's reticence on some Indian proposals.

During the first round of the composite dialogue, India reportedly put forward 72 "new ideas" on the bilateral agenda with Pakistan but Islamabad remained allegedly non-responsive. Most of the proposals dealt with improving communication and commercial links between the two countries. According to a report in *The Hindu*, in order to dispel Pakistan's fear that the Indian emphasis on people-to-people contact might be a ploy to put the Kashmir issue on the backburner, India also put across "an expansive agenda for cooperation in Kashmir that could create conditions for a final resolution of the difficult question."

Amongst the Indian proposals, the important ones were: the Indian offer to initiate transit trade across each other's territories; the opening of the Attari-Wagah land route for trade; in view of Pakistan's insufficient petroleum — refining capacity India offered to extend a diesel pipeline across the border; though not before showing a lukewarm indication regarding the natural gas pipeline from Pakistan into India. New Delhi has now suggested that if the principle of transit is agreed upon there could be pipelines of different types crossing the border.

The other Indian proposals included study tours, student and conference visas and commercial performance by the borders. An expansion of the list of holy shrines for visits and an increase in the size of pilgrim groups were also proposed. Pakistan has accepted the Indian proposal for facilitation of group tourism. As announced in the joint communique released on Wednesday, India and Pakistan have now opened up their countries to group tourism.

It may be observed that the foreign ministers' talks in New Delhi took place a few weeks before a meeting scheduled in New York between President Pervez Musharraf and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Meeting on the sidelines of the United Nations, the two leaders are expected to discuss all the bilateral issues between the two countries and the difficulties and complications involved in addressing these.

In a joint news conference after the two-day discussions, the two foreign ministers held out the assurance that they would intensify their search for durable peace in South Asia. The joint communique, issued on Wednesday, also reiterated the confidence that the composite dialogue would lead to a peaceful settlement of all bilateral issues, including Jammu and Kashmir, to the satisfaction of both sides. "These are brave words. But such statements can be reassuring only if they are backed by sustained efforts to achieve concrete results. New Delhi must realize that if it delays or avoids engaging Islamabad on the Kashmir issue it will undermine current efforts to make the peace process a success. The bitter truth, however, is that while almost everyone wants the peace process to succeed and bilateral relations to be transformed, wishes in the Indo-Pakistani context have seldom been self-fulfilling.