

# Delhi talks not encouraging

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PERHAPS the only redeeming feature of the two-day talks in Delhi between the foreign ministers of India and Pakistan which ended on Monday was what an Indian journalist called a complete absence of rancour. Rancour has more than once marked such bilateral talks in the past.

Overall, however, the talks remained largely inconclusive. No progress was reported on any of the eight items listed on the bilateral agenda. The lacklustre aspect of the talks has even been seen as suggesting that the India-Pakistan peace process has got stuck in a limbo. A news report has claimed that the interlocutors at the very outset "shared inconsistencies and traded allegations over Jammu and Kashmir" that could put the very process of the peace in jeopardy. The Indian allegations were, of course, most strongly refuted by Pakistan foreign minister.

The Indian foreign minister claimed that India was committed to 'deepen and widen its engagement with Pakistan.' Mystifyingly he prefaced his remarks by saying that diplomacy provides hope, not salvation. This proved almost literally true as the talks progressed. Even Mr Natwar Singh's claim of a modest progress in the form of his having developed a measure of rapport and mutual trust with his Pakistani counterpart sounded too much like a personal statement. He said this at the joint press conference. Mr Mahmud Kasuri nodded his approval.

It is reassuring that neither side is interpreting all this as a failure of the talks and both Mr Natwar Singh and Mr Kasuri have affirmed that the meetings and the peace dialogue process will be continued.

Curiously, the expected publication of the joint statement which is an established ritual of such bilat-

with a large section of the Indian people. The Indian Muslims associate him with the demolition of the Babri Masjid by Hindu militants and with the more recent Gujarat anti-Muslim riots.

Judging from the press reports, the foreign ministers' discussion of the Kashmir problem was largely sterile and only gave them the chance to reiterate their known positions. At the very beginning of the talks India brought up the controversial issue. Expressing India's deep concern in the matter, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh himself in his statement focused on this issue, reportedly maintaining that "the very starting point of the composite dialogue process was based on the 'genesis that Pakistani territory will not be allowed to be used for launching terrorist operations.'"

This could hardly be seen as an appropriate way to begin a dialogue on the subject and the Pakistan foreign office spokesman, Masood Khan, strongly refuted the allegation, implying that India was attempting to mystify the peace process. This could not but queer the pitch for a sensible exchange of views on the subject.

In the meeting with Indian foreign minister Pakistan reaffirmed its position on Kashmir and maintained that it would be difficult to sustain the peace process unless "India addresses it in the interest of the people of Kashmir."

The Indian external affairs spokesperson Navtej Sarna made the atmosphere murkier by asserting that what Pakistan was saying was not in "consonance with the spirit in which we have conducted the composite dialogue so far." He added that Pakistan itself had been in favour of "a rhetoric restraint regime" for the dialogue. Mahmud Kasuri's response was fairly, conciliatory and he even declared that "good relations with India are in the interest of Pakistan."

Interventions by official spokes-

eral diplomatic contacts did not take place immediately after the talks ended. In the meantime foreign secretary Riaz Khokhar, who had earlier had a meeting with his Indian counterpart, left for home immediately after the second day of talks and in any case was not scheduled to stay on until the end of his minister's visit to New Delhi. But does his prompt departure for Islamabad indicate that the joint ministerial statement would be finalized in Islamabad? There is no way to confirm such a conjecture.

However, it was evident from the statements of the two foreign ministers at their joint press conference that the two-day meeting could not achieve much that could be called substantial and that the two did not find it possible to signify an unqualified agreement on any of the items of their agenda. Most of their statements remained ambivalent. This is obviously disappointing.

Many of the items on the agenda were not too complex. For instance the date for the expected reopening of the Indian and Pakistani consulates in Karachi and Mumbai could have been announced, not only because there is already an agreement on it in principle but also because it would have met the hopes of the people on both sides of the border. It would also have had a positive impact on the future of the peace process. The proposed easing of the visa procedures does not seem to be too complicated a matter. A final decision about them would not need to await any further discussion and hopefully would not be postponed until the next foreign secretaries' meeting scheduled to be held in December.

The joint statement issued after the first day of the talks was typical of diplomatic brevity. It consisted of four short paragraphs and confined itself to polite generalities such as that the talks were held in "a friendly, cordial, affable and constructive atmosphere" and that the two countries would "explore ways and means of taking the (peace process) forward." What else could the first high-level contact between the two countries, after a lapse of some three years and with a good deal of advance preparatory exchanges, be?

The exact purpose or significance of the meeting between Foreign Minister Mahmud Ali Kasuri and the Indian opposition leader, L.K. Advani, is difficult to guess. Mr Advani does not have a very pleasant image as far as Pakistan is concerned, nor is he exactly popular

persons have become a part of the India-Pakistan bilateral contacts to discuss their outstanding problems. Pakistani media persons could sense the heightening of tensions at Agra as some of the Indian spokespersons attempted to make frequent interventions while the discussions among the leaders were still in progress. This contributed in no small measure in the summit getting stymied without reaching a conclusive stage.

It would be unfortunate if at the very outset the Kashmir dispute becomes an insurmountable hurdle in the way of the composite dialogue and resolution of bilateral problems. Both countries have allowed the Kashmir problem to become intractable and made it a point of honour. Thus, the foreign ministers' decision to continue with the ceasefire on the Line of Control (LoC), despite their differing perceptions of the Kashmir issue is encouraging. However, it is difficult to visualize at this stage how the mindset of the decision makers in India and Pakistan would undergo the necessary change.

India's National Security Adviser, J.N. Dixit, who will inevitably have to play a part in resolving the issue while discussing India-Pakistan problems has gone on record in his book on India-Pakistan relations to express the view that the Kashmir issue has a direct bearing on the prospects of peace and stability of the region and both India and Pakistan must realise the ground realities inherent in the situation. He went to say that India on its part should accept that the trouble in the state cannot all be attributed to Pakistan and India too must accept responsibility.

Dixit has then gone on to pose some important questions: Can India and Pakistan accept Jammu and Kashmir becoming an independent state? Can India maintain effective jurisdiction and control over Ladakh, Jammu and Punjab if India were to accept the valley and the Muslim majority areas in the state acceding to Pakistan? Will India be able to maintain its internal unity in demographic, ethnic and religious terms, if any of the currently circulating proposals about resolving the dispute is given serious consideration?

Being part of India's power elite Dixit would perhaps make sure that a way out is found and that the composite dialogue is not allowed to get obscured by a cacophony of rhetorics.