

BJP's hate strategy

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By Maqbool Ahmad Bhatti

THE lower house of the Indian parliament, unanimously adopted a resolution on April 8, deploring the US-led war on Iraq and seeking immediate cessation of hostilities and withdrawal of coalition forces. The opposition had sought to use the word "condemn" instead of "deplore", but a compromise was struck to make the resolution unanimous. This action was taken more than two weeks after an official statement by Islamabad, also deploring the attack. Presumably, Indian legislators felt that they could not afford to miss out on a moral stance, given the world-wide outrage over this war which even the UN secretary-general called illegal.

The real face of the BJP-led government has been seen in the pronouncements of Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha, who first sought to justify similar pre-emptive action by India against Pakistan. In a newspaper interview on April 2, he declared that India "will do whatever it takes" to fight Pakistan-sponsored terrorism in Kashmir, including possible "pre-emptive operations". When the spokesman of the US State Department officially stated that there was no parallel between the situations in Iraq and Kashmir, Mr Sinha came up with the suggestion that the US must consider intervening militarily in Pakistan since it fulfilled all the conditions in Iraq, including involvement in terrorism, and possession of weapons of mass destruction. This time the notion was countered at the level of Secretary of State Colin Powell.

Mr Sinha had the image of a moderate when he was finance minister, but as foreign minister, he has clearly sought to ingratiate himself with the dominant BJP faction, headed by Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani. His attempts to justify pre-emption against Pakistan by India or the US speak of moves to capitalize on the situation created by the US-led attack on Iraq. The BJP has found it electorally rewarding to stir up hate against the Muslims within India and against Pakistan among the neighbours.

With elections in 11 states in the offing, the BJP is trying a strategy of demonizing both Muslims and Pakistan as a vote catcher. This strategy had succeeded in winning the party a two-thirds majority in Gujrat assembly but it did not work subsequently in Himachal Pradesh where the BJP lost power to the Congress party. Clearly, the Advani crowd is staking its future on fostering hate towards Muslims in a manner that has aroused a critical reaction among responsible Indian leaders. Former Prime Ministers V P Singh and I K Gujral have expressed concern that the ruling party is creating further obstacles to a lessening of tensions in South Asia, whereas the need of the hour is

to resume dialogue to resolve differences peacefully.

Despite its well-known ambitions about a hegemonic role in the Indian Ocean region, this hate strategy reflects an approach that is unmindful of the fact that half the Indian Ocean littoral states happen to be Muslim. Nor do the champions of Hindutva realize that maintaining a credible secular image is regarded as being central to holding together this multi-ethnic, multi-religious country of over a billion inhabitants.

The unilateralist strategy of the Bush administration suits the BJP government, which also believes in the exercise of power rather than principles in the conduct of diplomacy. India, it may be recalled, was the first country to welcome the ballistic missile defence initiative, launched in May 2001 by

for fighting poverty to armaments. The nuclear weapons possessed by the two has turned the region into a nuclear flashpoint. With the conflict in Iraq creating new tensions in the Middle East, the US is keen to present itself as a peacemaker and as a force for peace and stability.

While New Delhi keeps breathing fire, Pakistan has remained steadfast in seeking the resumption of the dialogue started at Agra in 2001. President Musharraf has never wavered in his stand that normal relations between India and Pakistan, that could make a vital difference to their future, would be possible only after they have worked out a settlement of the Kashmir issue. To pave the way for it, he believes the two sides must accept that a solution cannot be found through confrontation and conflict but has to be sought through dialogue.

Secondly, a plebiscite for ascertaining the wishes of the Kashmiris to which India objects might be set aside, provides India abjures the idea of Kashmir being its "integral" part which is unacceptable to Pakistan. Thirdly, negotiations can start on other issues concerning which the two countries can show flexibility.

Pakistan also believes that once the dialogue resumes, and the eight-point agenda already agreed in 1997 between the two countries is taken up, the two countries

can make progress on many significant issues. These include the proposed oil and gas pipelines from Iran to India through Pakistan, bilateral trade and resumption of communication links that were shut off by India in December 2001.

The deadlock in relations between the two countries is often ascribed to Pakistan's failure to stop "cross-border terrorism". Pakistan insists that it is keeping the pledge made by President Musharraf on January 12 last year and that what India calls "cross-border terrorism" is in fact the continuation of the militant struggle launched by the Kashmiri people in 1989, in the course of which they have made great sacrifices. A suggestion has been made repeatedly that India should agree to a considerable increase in the number of UN observers along the LoC to monitor movement across the line. India refuses to consider the idea, since it wants to keep any mediatory or facilitating role for the UN or any other third party out of Kashmir.

The threats of pre-emption made by Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha not only attracted rejoinders by the US; leaders of China, France and Britain have also reacted with a sense of concern and urged that the differences between India and Pakistan be resolved by peaceful means. As the situation in the Gulf improves, Mr. Colin Powell has reaffirmed the commitment of the US to remain engaged with both India and Pakistan, with a view to facilitating peaceful negotiations. One hopes that the BJP ideologues would pay heed to the urgings by world leaders as well as responsible circles within India in favour of a positive approach to the solution of bilateral problems.

The writer is a former ambassador.

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President Bush. The events of 9/11 were seen by the BJP government as providing an opportunity to crush the Kashmiri liberation struggle by dubbing it a terrorist movement. Washington has sought to establish a strategic partnership with India, both in its anti-terrorist campaign and its long-term goal of containing China.

With Israel exercising a decisive influence on Washington, New Delhi has also developed a nexus with Ariel Sharon's regime that is engaged in genocidal repression of the Palestinians. India has felt emboldened to step up its repression and brutality in Kashmir after achieving a certain amount of success in presenting the Kashmir freedom movement as being backed by terrorists from across the border.

So long as the Kashmiri struggle continues and small bands of supporters keep crossing the LoC, which even 700,000 Indian troops deployed in Kashmir cannot prevent, New Delhi will keep accusing Pakistan of promoting "cross-border terrorism". However, the BJP government has not succeeded in getting Pakistan declared as a terrorist state. It is plain to any unbiased observer that Pakistan's front-line role in countering terrorism is not tailored to any external agenda, and that the country itself has a terrorism problem of its own.

While India is set on rejecting Pakistan's repeated offers of dialogue that could reduce tensions, the rest of the world in general, and the major powers in particular are not comfortable with the confrontation prevailing in South Asia. US Secretary of State Colin Powell stated, soon after the attack on Iraq, that the US would continue to give high priority to the solution of the problems between India and Pakistan. The tension is responsible diversion of resources needed