

Scared of peace?

By Dr Mubashir Hasan

The partition of the subcontinent into Pakistan and India in 1947 was accompanied by a very large traumatic exchange of population and horrible massacres. That these events should cast long shadows over the attitudes of the peoples of the new countries towards each other was only natural. Not natural, however, was that the two governments should have confronted each other for more than a few years. Countries go to war but with signatures on a peace treaty, normal intercourse at government level is quickly resumed.

Today, over fifty-five years after independence, the governments of India and Pakistan can still be quite articulate in justifying the uninterrupted hard policy stand they adopt to confront each other. At times, each government's logic may seem unassailable, but considering the opportunities they have missed of ushering in peace and progress in their respective lands, their policies appear nothing short of tragic. They have gone to wars but peace has eluded them. They have remained in a state of no war, no peace.

After fourteen years of promoting peace and friendship between the two countries, I have come to conclude that both the ruling elites are genuinely scared of peace breaking out between them. They seem to recognize enormous dangers that peace in the subcontinent may bring to their political power and the flow of wealth that comes with power. Strong vested interests for the two elites have developed to maintain the status quo.

In India, politicians, the civil apparatus of the state, its army protectors, big traders and businessmen make up the elites. The Pakistani elites comprise the officers of the military and civil services, their client politicians and supporting feudal and business classes.

Internally, by using the authoritative administrative structure built by the British to deny democratic governance at the grassroots level, the elites have maintained their political hegemony. No social contract between the state and the people has emerged. Governance is based on arbitrary use of coercive power. The elites have legislated draconian laws giving wide powers to the police, paramilitary legions and armed forces in the name of maintaining law and order.

Externally, by adopting a policy of confrontation with the neighbouring country, the two elites have indulged in an open-ended arms race and recruited division after division of armed personnel. Large armies, paramilitary legions and huge intelligence apparatuses have immensely helped the elites to maintain their political power, simultaneously threatening their neighbour. They have built weapons of mass destruction along with delivery systems by spending vast amounts from national budgets.

By maintaining confrontation towards each other and building massive armed power and often violating the rule of law and

sanctity of basic human rights, both elites have done fabulously well for themselves during the last half a century. They have amassed riches through legal and illegal means which will be the envy of the Mughal princes should they come to life. Their vested interests have vastly grown in size, exacting an enormous amount of wealth from poor farmers, industrial workers and other labouring classes — all in the name of national security, irredentist ventures and a deliberately distorted view of history.

To maintain their hegemony and to secure the support of the masses, the two elites have stoked the fires of communal hatred and intolerance to intensify the gulf between communities and nations. They have failed to settle disputes such as that of the transfer of assets relating to partition, Kashmir and Siachen among others. They would do all they can to widen existing cleavages and to create new ones by reneging on settled

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issues such as that of the division of the Indus Basin waters. They have gone to wars and now claim the right to pre-emptive military action against their sovereign neighbour.

However, there are elements among the two elites who, time and again, have made unsuccessful efforts at bridging the gulf. Towards the end of the eighties, foreign secretaries — Rasgotra of India and Niaz Naik of Pakistan — had agreed on the draft of a peace deal. The Indian side blames Pakistan for going to sleep over it. India and Pakistan had come to an agreement on ending the confrontation over the Siachen glacier. Pakistan blames India for not solemnizing the agreement.

During his first term as prime minister, Nawaz Sharif desperately wanted to start negotiations but Prime Minister Narsimha Rao would not agree. As soon as Benazir took over as prime minister, Narsimha Rao greeted her assumption of office but she would have none of the talks that the Indian wanted. After a meeting with the Indian prime minister, when this writer approached Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto for an interview, she loudly said in the presence of press reporters and photographers: "Dr Sahib, come and talk to me on any issue but not about relations with India. They will think that I had sent you to India".

A mysterious unwritten understanding seems to exist between the permanent establishments of the two countries to discourage taking any measure that will bring the two nations nearer. I learnt on good authority that on one occasion Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif speaking to a high-level Indian diplomat, said that visa restrictions between India and Pakistan should be removed. The diplo-

mat politely responded that it was a good idea but also pointed out the difficulties in the way. When the Indian diplomat told a high-level Pakistani diplomat what was in the mind of the Pakistani prime minister, the Pakistani responded to the Indian, "I hope you tried to dissuade him".

At a Commonwealth Conference, prime ministers Nawaz Sharif and Chandrashekar had verbally agreed to do away with visa formalities for travel between the two countries. Pakistan is alleged to have gone back on the idea.

When they met in Edinburgh, Scotland, Prime Minister I K Gujral asked Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif about progress on the Pakistani proposal to sell electricity to India. Nawaz Sharif confirmed that Pakistan was agreeable. Right there, in the presence of the Indian prime minister, the senior Pakistani diplomat present there told the two prime ministers that the sale could not

take place. Mr Gujral was dumbfounded at the daring shown by the Pakistani bureaucrat in contradicting his prime minister.

It is a curious state of relations between the two countries. When India is ready to talk, Pakistan is not willing and when Pakistan is ready, it is India which refuses to talk and most of the time both sides indulge in confrontational rhetoric. On occasions the two sides seem to reach the brink of a deal or an agreement. However, at the last minute, as two senior Indian diplomats confided to me, something or the other happens to thwart the deal —

an act of sabotage, an armed incursion, a murderous attack, an artillery duel on the border, an irresponsible statement by a leader or an arms deal with another country.

These days it happens to be India's turn to close all doors and windows of negotiations between the two countries. Rail, road, and air communications have been suspended. Representation at ambassador level stands withdrawn. The high commissions' strength is badly denuded. They do not allow their citizens to read the newspapers of the other country.

It takes only one government to refuse to negotiate at a particular time but the refusal serves the traditional interests of both the elites. It serves to preserve the status quo. The severity of the present-day restrictions on normal intercourse is indicative of the severity of internal and external pressures on the government placing such restrictions. In the past, confrontation and a semblance of normality could exist simultaneously. For the moment, the Indian stance has allowed Pakistan to yield to the internal and external pressures on it and show its all-out readiness for unconditional negotiations.

The present situation cannot last long. Opportunities for genuine peace negotiations can arise sooner than later. The forces of confrontation are at their weakest in both countries. It is important that personages of high profile and peace activists in both the countries join together to mobilize their people for peace. The billion-plus peoples of the subcontinent are ready to learn and be convinced that confrontation only serves the interests of the two elites and is against the interests of the overwhelming majority.