

The ball is in *Dawn Pak. F. Rel. India* Pervez's court

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By Kuldip Nayar

FOR some time one thing which has got crystallized is that all the three points — New Delhi, Islamabad and Srinagar — have to be tackled to sort out the Kashmir problem. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee seems to have appreciated this.

When he appointed N.N. Vohra as an interlocutor on Kashmir Vajpayee touched two points, New Delhi and Srinagar. Vohra may be a lightweight and New Delhi may not have yet decided how far it is willing to accommodate the aspirations of the Valley people.

Still Vajpayee has openly indicated his intention to span the distance between New Delhi and Srinagar. At the same time, he has underlined India's policy: it does not favour touching the three points simultaneously, something for which the All-Party Hurriyat Conference has been pressing for long.

Vajpayee has followed the same policy in trying to normalize relations with Pakistan. His willingness to have a dialogue with Islamabad also shows that he wants to touch only two points at one time, New Delhi and Islamabad. This should go home to all those who want to jumble up India, Pakistan and Kashmir together.

Vajpayee's initiative is bold and deserves praise. I wish General Pervez Musharraf's response had been quick and positive because he has been saying repeatedly that he is ready to talk to India any time and at any place. Pakistan Prime Minister Jamali and Foreign Minister Kasuri have welcomed Vajpayee's statement. There is also a feeling of jubilation in Pakistan on the possibility of talks. The Muttihada Majlis-i-Amal (MMA), a combination of six religious parties, has also hailed Vajpayee's move. The latest news is that Pakistan is trying to choose its representative for the talks.

My information is that Abdul Qayyum Khan, leader of Azad Kashmir, reportedly telephoned Jamali to agree to the talks even if one of the conditions put by India were to be to make the LoC the international border. For Qayyum, Vajpayee had given Pakistan an opportunity which might not come its way again. All this is welcome. But it does not go far enough. Musharraf has to say what is in

it off and say that there is no terrorism across the border. A US Congress committee has said in its report that the infiltration went up last year and looks like increasing this year. Musharraf's solution of Kashmir is still a third country's mediation.

After seeing the fate of the UN, where 13 out of 15 Security Council members opposed the invasion on Iraq, he should have been a disillusioned person. Apparently, he is not.

Musharraf should know that no country can escape the long arms of America. He is mistaken if he believes that President Bush is on his side. America is only using him. He should recall his own statement: Pakistan may be the next after Iraq. Vajpayee said more or less the same thing when he warned the third world countries to learn a lesson from the fate of Iraq.

In this context, the resignation of Robert Blackwell from American ambassadorship in India is significant. It looks as if he was not able to prevail upon the Bush administration to leave the region alone. Probably, he differed from what the US administration has planned for India and Pakistan. He said, "The fight against international terrorism will not be won unless terrorism against India ends permanently." Islamabad should not consider Blackwell's exit as an advantage. President Bush may charge a price which no self-respecting country can pay.

What is increasingly becoming clear day by day is that normalizing relations between New Delhi and Islamabad is not on the agenda of the Pakistan military. Conciliation does not suit it because it then loses its dominant role in Pakistan. At present, the real power is in the hands of the military. It does not

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LoC the international border. For Qayyum, Vajpayee had given Pakistan an opportunity which might not come its way again. All this is welcome. But it does not go far enough. Musharraf has to say what is in his mind. Ultimately, his word alone will count because he is Jamali's boss.

The official reaction is a bit disappointing. Vajpayee is being blamed for putting conditions. All that he has said is that Pakistan should come clean on cross-border terrorism. Musharraf has himself admitted cross-border terrorism when he assured Washington that he was trying to curb infiltration and dismantle the training centres.

The Lashkar-e-Taiba's response to Vajpayee's offer for talks is that it has renewed its vow to continue jihad in Kashmir and to have "more" suicide-bomb attacks. How should India interpret the threat against the offer of talks when the Lashkar's headquarters is in Pakistan and when it operates from that country?

Pakistan Information Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed is now on a propaganda trip. He has said that his government has proof that India is developing weapons of mass destruction (WMD). His source of information is America which has not found WMD in Iraq even after the war it waged on that count. Surely, Rashid is not making a case for America's intervention in India. Even if he does, India is no Iraq.

New Delhi is aware of the fact that the US is trying to establish its presence in neighbouring countries. Nepal recently held joint military exercises with the US. Washington plays a big role as a donor in Bangladesh, the country which is pathetically dependent on foreign aid.

Negotiations between Sri Lanka and the LTTE have the involvement of America. As for Pakistan, the less said the better. There are some 20,000 American soldiers operating in the name of "destroying" the remnants of the Al Qaeda.

Musharraf just cannot shrug

not chosen to take over Vajpayee's initiative. All these matters are political. And they require a sense of accommodation which bureaucrats do not have, particularly retired ones.

want to lose it. The greater the hostility with India, the more indispensable it becomes. Wrong noises against Vajpayee's initiative may only confirm that those in khaki are a reluctant party.

The Pakistan president should reciprocate Vajpayee's offer. To prove that he really means it, Musharraf should order the ISI and other special agencies to stop "interfering" in Kashmir and in the north-east. The understanding between India and Pakistan may stop America from carrying out its plans in the region. It may bring the entire South Asia together for a new identity as South Asians, transcending religions and borders, without disturbing the sovereignty of individual countries.

I am not too hopeful of such a development in the near future. But there is no other way out. In the world of tomorrow, regional combinations, not the UN, would count. The European Union will gain strength. Why not Saarc? For this, the nations in the region will have to show all the resilience and accommodation they can muster.

Vajpayee had shown the same courage in touching the two points: New Delhi and Srinagar. He is cautious. Vohra is not G Parthasarathi, who was Mrs Indira Gandhi's emissary. GP was able to reach an agreement with Sheikh Abdullah, Kashmir's popular leader. The Sheikh accepted the say of New Delhi - beyond the 1952 agreement between himself and Nehru - because he and GP had confidence in each other. GP was a bureaucrat in the sense that he was a top official in the government of India. But he had his own standing. Too much dependence on bureaucrats is the Vajpayee government's Achilles' heel.

I only hope that if and when the dialogue between India and Pakistan is finalized, some top bureaucrat is not chosen to take over Vajpayee's initiative. All these matters are political. And they require finesse and a sense of accommodation which bureaucrats do not have, particularly retired ones.

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