

# Hastening slowly for talks

By M.H. Askari

Pak. F.R. - Jw  
Dawn 9.5.

WITH Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's offer of a resumption of talks with Islamabad and Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali's telephone call to him inviting him to visit Pakistan, the tensions between the two countries are beginning to decrease.

It would be a mistake, however, to believe that the task of normalization is going to be easy or rapid. There is no indication yet as to when, if at all, a visit to Pakistan by the Indian prime minister will take place. India's official statement about the possibility of Mr Vajpayee's visit to Pakistan, which, incidentally, has been due since the Agra summit (July 2001) is remarkably vague.

An Indian official spokesman has merely said that the idea of Prime Minister Vajpayee visiting Pakistan had figured "in a general sort of way" during the telephonic conversation between the two Prime Ministers but "the idea was not pursued by either side." If the implication is that a formal invitation has not been extended, yet, this, has since been delivered to the India's charge d'affairs in Islamabad.

In any case, the Indian prime minister's sudden decision to want to reopen talks with Pakistan, after a lapse of about 22 months since the Agra summit, is regarded by many with scepticism. They believe that the offer of talks may well be ploy — rather than a change in policy — armed at appeasing the Kashmiris who expect to be associated with any India-Pakistan talks on the future of their state.

Significantly, Mr Vajpayee made his initial offer of talks to Pakistan and the Kashmiri people while addressing a public rally in Srinagar on the 18th of last month. However, he followed it up with a formal statement in the Indian parliament in which he proposed the lifting of the ban on overflights and restoration of full diplomatic relations between the two countries.

In spite of the damper of an end to "cross-border terrorism" contained in Mr. Vajpayee's statement in the parliament as a condition in talks, there has been much progress since Mr Vajpayee's speech in Srinagar. A former Indian foreign secretary calls it a fast moving scenario. Prime Minister Jamali has responded by offering an unconditional dialogue with India and proposing a series of confidence-

building measures. This has been the deepening of prejudices arising out of religious and cultural differences. The rise of religious extremism on both sides has put a premium on fanaticism and political militancy in the name of religion. The so-called jihadis, who were involved in the civil war in Afghanistan and the unrest in places like Chechnya later tuned their attention to the disturbed territory of Indian occupied Kashmir. Whatever the extent of their involvement there, it has given a twist to the Kashmiri people's freedom struggle which in fact was never intended.

On the other hand, the Hindutva elements in India have been increasingly resorting to violence against Muslims and other religious minorities, rekindling the fires of communal hate and intolerance. Indeed, if the Hindutva fanatics have their way, they would see to it that India does not enter into any kind of dialogue or peace negotiations with Pakistan. The militant leaders of Shiv Sena and Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh have warned Mr Vajpayee not to go ahead with his peace initiative. However, so far both India and Pakistan have remained firm on their resolve to resume bilateral talks.

A tentative agenda for talks seems to be taking shape. In substance, Mr Vajpayee has not attached any pre-conditions to his proposal for the resumption of talks with Pakistan. Mr Jamali has also made it clear that he will not attach any conditions to his offer of a dialogue with India. He has indicated that Pakistan would want to resume talks with India at the point where they had been "left off at Agra."

At his press conference on Tuesday, Prime Minister Jamali made it clear that although Pakistan had by no means changed its position on the UN

---

It has to be realized that progress towards fuller normalization between India and Pakistan could be exasperatingly slow and halting. It will need to be preceded by a great deal of quiet, behind-the-scenes

restoration of an diplomatic relations between the two countries.

In spite of the damper of an end to "cross-border terrorism" contained in Mr. Vajpayee's statement in the parliament as a condition in talks, there has been much progress since Mr Vajpayee's speech in Srinagar. A former Indian foreign secretary calls it a fast moving scenario. Prime Minister Jamali has responded by offering an unconditional dialogue with India and proposing a series of confidence-building measures.

These include the release of a large number of Indian fishermen held in Pakistani prison and proposals for restoration of air, bus and train links, exchange of sports teams and full resumption of diplomatic relations. He has also stressed that the people of Pakistan and India are not at war with each other and they must be able to move freely between the two countries. Significantly, the agenda offered by Mr Jamali for bilateral talks was drawn up in consultation with all political parties, including the parliamentary opposition.

However, it has to be realized that progress towards fuller normalization between India and Pakistan could be exasperatingly slow and halting. It will need to be preceded by a great deal of quiet, behind-the-scene diplomatic moves and a whole lot of off-the-record exchanges and even perhaps, the undeclared involvement of some friendly countries doing the prodding and nudging needed to ensure progress. Deep distrust between the two sides remains among the major obstacles in the way of steady improvement of relations.

It will perhaps be a long time before anything like the relationship that existed before December 2001 (when there was a terrorist attack on the Indian parliament house in New Delhi) can be restored.

A matter of utmost concern

malization between India and Pakistan could be exasperatingly slow and halting. It will need to be preceded by a great deal of quiet, behind-the-scenes diplomatic moves.

---

resolutions on the Kashmir issue, he stressed that his side was prepared to show flexibility during the proposed talks with India..

This is a realistic approach to the matter. Flexibility can break the deadlock on Kashmir. The UN resolutions are not like holy scriptures; they did not become a hurdle in the six months long India-Pakistan negotiations on Kashmir in 1962-63.

It has also to be understood that the ground realities in Kashmir have undergone a sea change since the UN resolutions were adopted in 1948-49. The new realities have to be taken into account in any search for a way out of the Kashmir imbroglio. In any case, the social, economic and political progress of the people of South Asia should not be held hostage to a set of resolutions adopted more than four decades ago.

What is important is to work towards what President Musharraf outlined in an interview to a foreign TV representative the other day. He categorically said that once stability had been achieved in India-Pakistan relations, two countries could start thinking in terms of reduction in armed forces and a regime for denuclearization. These issues concern not only India and Pakistan but the whole region and rest of the world.