

What's the alternative?

By Kuldip Nayar

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MANY years ago, there was an earthquake in Mexico. Thousands of people died. The destruction was wide. One person was hawking anti-earthquake pills at the top of his voice. Some rehabilitation workers, upset and angry, wanted to beat him up. He said: 'Tell me the alternative'.

Both India and Pakistan have a large number of people who have pinned little hope on Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's initiative, the last in his life, as he puts it. "Nothing will come out of it," they say. But as the Mexican hawker said, what's the alternative?

Nothing came out of the three wars the two countries fought in which thousands of people were killed. Nor did peaceful exercise like the ones at Tashkent, Simla and Lahore restore normality. The stand-off has been there for years. Yet it is clear to everybody on both sides that there is no option other than rapprochement, no matter how long it takes.

That the common people on both sides want peace is clear from the wave of jubilation that spread in the two countries after Vajpayee's speech in Srinagar that India would like to have a dialogue with Pakistan. Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali would not have responded with a phone call if he had not been driven by the compulsions of peace. Both sides realize that another round of hostilities may be disastrous because both of them have nuclear weapons which kill in lakhs.

I do not think that Washington nudged New Delhi to have talks. It would be unfair to Vajpayee if America were to take the credit. There was a tinge of emotion in his voice when he spoke in the Rajya Sabha the other day: How long shall we play with the lives of people in India and Pakistan? He spoke from the heart and he honestly wanted to bury the hatchet. I was present at his impact-making speech at the Lahore civic reception. He was equally emotional then.

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their visit became secondary because the purpose was served by Vajpayee's speech in Srinagar.

The Indian prime minister's letter to Jamali, suggesting "a calibrated approach," is wise and realistic. Fanatics on both sides are trying to sabotage the process. At least New Delhi should not be seen as dragging its feet. This fear has already begun to be perceptible in Pakistan.

However, I have an uneasy feeling about New Delhi's officialdom. In the name of preparing "adequate ground" it has undone many agreements in the past. In fact, the bureaucracy in both countries has developed a vested interest in the status quo. It gives it an alibi to explain when anything goes wrong either in India or Pakistan. At the same time, the bureaucracy has come to acquire importance because of the confusion in the minds of leaders on both sides. They want to have their cake and eat it too. That can never happen when a government has to choose between war and peace, between jingoism and normality.

It would help if Vajpayee and President General Pervez Musharraf were to open an unofficial communication channel, away from the glare of publicity and the day-to-day drudgery of meeting a point with a counterpoint. This channel should be used to sound the top without bringing them in officially.

It is an open secret that the unofficial dialogue between R.K. Mishra from the information world in India and Niaz Naik from among the retired bureaucrats of Pakistan had almost reached an understanding before former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was ousted. Vajpayee regretfully said after the military coup: "We were almost there."

The crucial question is: How far is the military in Pakistan ready to go to reach an agreement? If its agenda is just to stay in power, as it seems to be, it will oppose any understanding that will weaken its hold in Pakistan. Once India is not the enemy, there may be a demand in Pakistan to cut the military's size. Its visibility in civil service will also go.

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The BJP, despite its electoral objective of having an anti-Pakistan stance, has supported his initiative as it did after Lahore. It is a welcome development that the BJP should be taking the initiative and settling matters with Pakistan. If any other political party in power had done so, the BJP would have dubbed it anti-national and blamed it for selling India to an Islamic country.

Yet Vajpayee faces a predicament: how to effect an agreement when there is anti-Pakistan pressure on him from within the party and when Islamabad is not unequivocal on cross-border terrorism. The only way to bring around and convince Pakistan is to tell it frankly how sincere India is in spite of the mistrust about India in Pakistan.

It should be clear to both countries that a settlement has to be evolved, taking care of every detail. The edifice needs to be built brick by brick. We failed so many times in the past probably because we wanted the India-Pakistan settlement to be a big show. Agreements were reached at the eleventh hour in a dramatic manner after early phases of reverses.

Lal Bahadur Shahstri and General Ayub Khan first announced their failure at Tashkent. But then suddenly they signed a many-clause agreement as if all was decided in the last few minutes. The exercise at Simla was no different. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had to send for his luggage which he had dispatched after the "failure." The official seal was in the luggage. It was retrieved and both Mrs Indira Gandhi and Bhutto put their signatures on the agreement.

Vajpayee believes in striking while the iron is hot. Some parliamentarians from Pakistan were coming to India for creating a thaw in the frozen relations between the two countries. But

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One suggestion coming from Islamabad is worth considering: trade before Kashmir. Whatever goods are manufactured in Pakistan should be allowed to enter the Indian markets without an impost. (This should also be applicable to Bangladesh which has already obtained some concessions on this count). Once Islamabad has trade ties with New Delhi, it will come to have a vested interest in the jobs and the earnings which are bound to accrue in their wake.

The idea of an economic common market may not mature for a long time to come because India is a developed country compared to Pakistan. Bhutto once told me: "We will have to see whether we can mutually benefit. But as far as a common market is concerned, I think we are not yet ready for such an arrangement."

However, trade among the three countries — India, Pakistan and Bangladesh — should grow. One estimate made a decade ago was that if India and Pakistan were to have even normal trade, there would be a turnover of Rs. 4,000 crore a year. But if distrust and suspicion continue to overtake the subcontinent and if the goodwill generated by Vajpayee's initiative and Jamali's positive response is allowed to be dissipated, events will meander to a situation where there is no escape from trading threats and counter-threats. We have covered the ground many a time before.

Those who are talking in terms of trade or people-to-people contact should build up opinion in their own country to put pressure on their government. There is no alternative to peace in the subcontinent. The Iraq war has driven the point home again.

The writer is a leading columnist based in New Delhi.