

Letter from New Delhi

Hands across the border

By Kuldip Nayar

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ONE top Indian foreign ministry official asked me the other day: "What has people-to-people contact achieved so far?" It is difficult to quantify its achievement but it has sustained hope that the two countries will one day normalize their relations because people on both sides want to live in peace. This is despite the negative attitude of their governments.

People-to-people contact means contact between ordinary men and women on both sides, the freedom to come and go, without police surveillance and without a visa — only an identity card should be required for entry.

Obviously, this will take time because the mistrust has to go first. But in the meanwhile, the so-called "elite" groups have surfaced again. They are the same old people, who, during their tenure, as military or civil servants, did their worst to spoil any attempt at conciliation. Blessed by the foreign office, they went over the same exercise for years. They will repeat the same observations when they meet again. Even their faces have become a cliché.

What I have in mind is a soft border which Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee advocated when he was foreign minister (1977-79). Then Prime Minister Morarji Desai shot down the proposal on the plea that it would be an open invitation to spies to come in hordes. He did not know that spies do not use the checkpoints to enter each other's territory. They have their own "checkpoints."

True, borders cannot be soft until cross-border terrorism stops. Islamabad has to be convinced about its futility. Certain quarters there believe a proxy war is the only way to make India bleed. The situation has to be normal to have normal relations. Guns, open or secret, do not make for peace.

However, we should hasten the process to restore the status quo, the state of relationship prevailing before the attack on the Indian parliament.

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shown. What it really means is that the natural reaction of the Indian people towards the people of Pakistan is that of closeness. They are sick and tired of the distance which has been growing for the last 55 years. People's attitude in Pakistan, which I visited three months ago, is no different.

When just a speech by Vajpayee and a telephone call from Pakistan Prime Minister Jamali can change the entire climate, it is obvious that the hostility is a forcibly contrived thing. People on both sides want to be friends. Their desire for proximity will force their governments to sit across the table soon.

Unfortunately, the BJP's spokesman has thrown cold water on all the optimism that Vajpayee has generated. The spokesman runs down those who arranged the visit of parliamentarians. He used the sneering phrase "pseudo secularists" about the organizers. It indicates that the party is far from happy over their visit.

In fact, a battle is raging within the party on making up with Pakistan. Both the "pseudo-secularists" and the PM are on one side furthering the cause of building relations with Pakistan. The criticism may well be the party's polite tick-off which the prime minister must have noted.

The BJP is the ruling party. It should not be seen taking conflicting postures in public. It cannot commend the PM's initiative on the one hand and criticize those who invited the parliamentarians over on the other. The effort is to strengthen the initiative. If the BJP's criticism is serious, the talks are doomed. How far is it willing to give up its anti-Pakistan stance which the party believes adds to its votes? Hindutva as a poll plank may sound the death-knell of rapprochement. Can the party afford to give up its fundamen-

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After having done so, New Delhi should take stock of cross-border terrorism which from all accounts is less than before. The Pakistan parliamentarians came to India a bit too soon. The government distanced itself from them, not because it was unwilling, but because it was unprepared. It wanted to let the fallout from Vajpayee's initiative settle down.

Indeed, a request was made to defer the visit by a few days. But some among the organizers on both sides did not agree to it. Their contention was that they wanted to utilize the presence of Indian parliamentarians in Delhi before the adjournment of the two houses on May 9. The Pakistani parliamentarians reached on the 8th night.

However, when the visit was mooted three months ago, the purpose was to create some movement in the otherwise static situation. Indian parliamentarians were to go to Pakistan first but this did not materialize.

From both countries can cross over through any checkpoint without permission and without a visa under the SAARC rules. None knew then that Vajpayee would say at Srinagar that he wanted to have a dialogue with Pakistan. His observation provided the much-needed momentum. By the time the parliamentarians arrived the PM had initiated the thaw. The general impression is that the parliamentarians came as a follow-up to Vajpayee's initiative. This is not factually correct. Theirs was an independent visit, planned much earlier. Nonetheless, it has further helped soften the rigid position the two sides had taken.

The response to the parliamentarians in Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata was electrifying. They were hard-pressed for time to attend the functions which people wanted to arrange in their honour. They themselves were moved by the love and affection

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talist stand before elections are over in four states this year and the general elections in 2004. That is the question.

Pakistan's problem is different: How far is the fauj (armed forces) prepared to give up the territory it has occupied in the political field?

Real power lies with General Pervez Musharraf. For more than four decades, the armed force have been an arbiter in Pakistan. Are they willing to vacate that position? The military faces another problem: if there is a settlement there will be demand for a drastic cut on defence spending. Is the fauj prepared for it?

Will the National Security Council which has the three service chiefs as its members be adequate for the military to safeguard its interests? It is difficult to imagine it at this point of time. Still this is the scenario which will take shape one day. The armed forces will have to go back to the barracks. The pressure of public opinion will make it happen.

India, too, is under pressure. There is increasing realization that the majority of its problems stem from its relations with Pakistan. The enthusiasm with which the parliamentarians were received shows how anxious the people are to bury the hatchet. In both countries, the people are ahead of their gov-

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Aversion to project dropped

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At last week's meeting, the water and power minister had asked the Indus Water Commissioner to seek a waiver on a Rs1.8 million payment to India for providing flood-related data as a goodwill gesture. "The proposed waiver sparked a string of arguments for and against the proposition, but Sheroao wanted the matter to go ahead," the official concluded.

Aversion to Baglihar project dropped

Pakistan hopes gesture will spur peace process with India

Syed Mudassir Ali Shah

PESHAWAR: In deference to the tenuous thaw in their long-frosty bilateral relations, Pakistan has dropped its aversion - at least for the time being - to a highly controversial power project New Delhi is executing in occupied Kashmir, a knowledgeable source told The Frontier Post on Thursday.

"Given the ongoing developments on the political front, Pakistan has opted for skipping (temporarily) all divisive issues, including the row over the 450-megawatt Baglihar hydropower project, at international forums," the source revealed, hoping that the spirit being demonstrated by Islamabad would evoke a positive response from New Delhi.

At the 38th annual meeting of the Federal Flood Commission (FFC), chaired by Minister for Water and Power Attab in Islamabad earlier in the week,

Commissioner for Indus Water Jumaat Ali Shah gave the participants a detailed briefing, which covered a number of tiffs between the estranged neighbours. The dam being constructed on River Chenab in IHK figured prominently in the presentation.

An official privy to the discussions quoted the Commissioner for Indus Water as informing the meeting that requisite arrangements had been made for approaching the World Bank for the appointment of neutral experts to sort out the controversy surrounding the Baglihar scheme. Undeterred by complaints from its neighbour, India is pushing ahead with the contentious scheme, forcing Pakistan to seek World Bank's intervention, he maintained.

The government, however, chose to delay approaching the World Bank, the official claimed, explaining that the measure was essentially aimed at fostering

confidence between the South Asian rivals. "At a time when the two sides appear all poised for resuming political negotiations, raking up tension-multiplying subjects will certainly vitiate the atmosphere," he argued, asserting that Pakistan was doing all it could to create the right ambience.

Water commissioners from the two countries are likely to hold a four-day meeting from May 28 in the Indian capital. The Baglihar question is certain to trigger a heated debate at the expected meeting, as the Pakistani delegation will insist on a visit to the disputed gateway structure of the dam and other sites.

It will be pertinent to recall that Indian officials, citing the military standoff and border tensions, had last year rejected a request from Pakistan to facilitate a visit of its officials to the sites in the restive occu-

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