

# As youth talk of ending conflict

Dawn

13.8.43

By Aqil Shah Pak. F. Belahi

A MOTLEY group of some 40 South Asian journalists, academics, parliamentarians and NGO representatives recently congregated at the Wilton Park Conference centre, a renovated 16th century English country house in West Sussex, for the Annual South Asia Forum on Strategies of Conflict Prevention and Reduction.

A breath of fresh air for many of us accustomed to the usual Islamabad-Delhi suspects in such forums was the presence of two Kashmiri Muslims from across the LoC — a prominent journalist from the daily *Indian Express* and a lawyer now based at Berkeley University. Their perceptions of the unending violence in Kashmir was an eye opener for many fed on state propaganda.

The four-day forum covered a wide array of formal and informal discussions; theoretical models on the causes of international conflict, their prevention and management were mixed with lessons from experience of post-conflict reconstruction in Afghanistan and the conflict in Northern Ireland. In parallel working groups, participants explored strategies to prevent conflict, the role of non-state actors and international and regional organizations.

Besides, Wilton Park's serene isolation provided an ideal locale for a curious look into recent developments in the sub-continent. One could not resist the temptation of nudging the Indians on the real reasons behind Prime Minister Vajpayee's "final and decisive" attempt to seek friendship. Not the least because it came against the backdrop of one of the heaviest military mobilizations in the recent past that could culminate into a bilateral conflict. In a post 9/11 world, when India had isolated Pakistan by convincing the international community that the militancy in Kashmir was no different from other forms of terrorism, why did Vajpayee decide to go out on a limb?

The typical answer: the Prime Minister's desire to go down in history as the leader who buried the hatchet. Unconvinced by the logic of the "Vajpayee wants the noble peace prize" theory, many of us wondered whether the

there be any viable peace between the two sides with the generals holding sway over political and civil affairs in Pakistan? Or without them? The Indians say they understand that without the army's involvement in any dialogue, it will remain inconclusive. But there are also legitimate fears that the army is likely to be the ghost at the banquet. What does all this mean?

Pragmatism dictates that you engage whoever is in power but also included must be the civil and democratic forces that are inherently pro-peace. What about hardliners in India? Talking to them alone, or the Pakistan army, will only reinforce the dangerous perception that they are the only parties with the competence to sue for peace. As the beneficiaries of conflict retain the ability to scuttle dialogue whenever it suits their interests, peace will remain ever more distant.

As we discussed these contentious issues, the need to put up a strong face before the "enemy" was also palpable at times. It was no surprise that most of us came wrapped in national flags. Some were even quick to remind their compatriots of the irrelevance of "liberal" ideas before the "national" cause. No less intriguing, however, was the lack of group 'shaming and blaming' over the K word.

Perhaps the presence of Kashmiris made many of us sensitive to the customary condescension Indians and Pakistanis display when they discuss this thorny issue. But there was much more to it. The fact that most of the participants belonged to the post-1971 generation of Indians and Pakistanis must count for something. They have not personally witnessed the horrors of partition or the India-Pakistan wars.

Unencumbered by the burden of the bitter past, they are opti-

---

Only time will tell whether the professional youth of today can make a difference when it is their turn to shape policy. One can only hope that

ing did not help either but the Indian establishment now feels that hanging someone for the crimes of the others can be counter-productive. Besides, by consistently refusing to talk to Musharraf, New Delhi has irked many in the international community including Washington.

And as much as Washington's preventive diplomacy has now become the norm in the region, any talk of the not-so-invisible American hand still produces instant denials from the Indian side. But while New Delhi hates to admit it, the fact remains that General Musharraf had agreed to turn off the infiltration tap back only after reassurances from the Americans that Washington will deliver India on dialogue. It did not happen overnight but intense, behind-the-door American efforts were an important catalyst in bringing the two sides closer to the negotiating table.

Surely, American pressure alone or Vajpayee's peace moves do not constitute the basis for a viable peace process. My Indian friends assure me there are other institutional and structural factors at play. Since the opening of the Indian economy in 1991, the dynamics of market liberalism have slowly pushed the goal of achieving a robust economy to the top of the national priority ladder, come Congress or BJP. Besides, India's global ambitions are likely to come to a naught unless regional irritants are weeded out.

The conflict with Pakistan, or China for that matter, bogs India down. Thus it is time to break out of the vicious cycle of cold-again, hot-again regional conflicts. The Indian government's "mature" reaction to last month's attacks on the Indian army camp in Kashmir, say Indian analysts, is one indication that New Delhi is serious about giving peace a real chance.

Was Delhi's red carpet reception to Maulana Fazlur Rehman, the latest rage on the subcontinental peace circuit, also inspired by this policy shift? Some say the bonhomie was facilitated no less by one fundamentalist's affinity with another. Moreover, the Indian government believes that the Maulana has been quite pragmatic in his stance towards India even in the past and since he enjoys the support of a considerable political constituency inside Pakistan, there is no harm in talking to him. Besides, if you can't reach the generals directly, you are better off testing the waters with their most trusted ally.

Talk of the Pakistan military invariably brought us all to the 'with or without' quandary. Can

in the future, opening the doors for a sustained regional peace process.

---

mistic that they can break through the psychological and political barriers erected over fifty years of conflict. For them, the 'other side' is not the source of all evil. They realize that the bitterness of the past need not ruin the prospects of better relations in the future. Put simply, the young generation is forward-looking, less suspicious of the "enemy" and more willing to break the deadlock.

This is not to say that the new generation is a homogeneous social group essentially wedded to the idea of peace. Widespread differences in upbringing, education, social mobility, and regional and ethnic identities separate them to a great degree from peers even in their own countries. Besides, they may also have internalized the hostile perceptions of the older generation.

A majority of this generation is also exposed mainly to state-produced texts which typically incite hostility and intolerance. The rising tide of religious and sectarian extremism in both countries is another countervailing factor. The young political cadre of right-wing parties in Pakistan and the pro-BJP/RSS youth in India stand in sharp contrast to the presumably pro-peace sections of the youth. Cooptation through recruitment in the large civil and military bureaucracies can also blunt the potential influence of leaders in other non-state professions.

Only time will tell whether the professional youth of today can make a difference when it is their turn to shape policy. One can only hope that more democracy, economic reforms, greater press freedoms and the privatization of electronic media in the region will allow more pluralism and tolerance in the future, opening the doors for a sustained regional peace process. In the meantime, more contacts and interaction cannot hurt.

While external facilitation can often raise suspicions about 'hidden agendas', the Wilton Park type forums can play crucial role to enable younger South Asians see beyond stereotypes and forge meaningful cross-border links. In the context of perennially hostile India Pakistan relations, even such small incremental steps are big.