

'We want a border between friends'

Barrister Chaudhry Aitzaz Ahsan, MNA, is a senior politician from the Pakistan People's Party. He led a delegation of Pakistani parliamentarians to celebrate Independence Day with Indian members of the Parliament and general public

By Zaman Khan

The News on Sunday: What did you hope to achieve from your visit to India and how successful were you in your endeavour?

Aitzaz Ahsan: The main purpose behind the visit to India was to strengthen the peace process and people to people contact. This was a continuation of a process started by people like Kuldip Nayar, a member of the Rajya Sabha in India and a senior politician and Asma Jahangir, the former head of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, and many of their friends on both sides. Even during times of great tension when the two armies were on a high alert on the borders, these people have lit candles on the Wagha checkpoint. The people of both countries, the more than a billion human

beings of South Asia want peace.

Under a Saarc treaty, signed in December 1988, parliamentarians of member countries are exempt from visa requirements while travelling to Saarc countries and so we took a delegation of parliamentarians to celebrate both Pakistan's and India's independence days together. The purpose was to strengthen the peace process and to increase the area of contact between the two peoples and I think we succeeded to a great extent.

TNS: What kind of a reception did you get in India?

AA: The reception in India was very warm. A delegation led by Kuldip Nayar and including members of Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha and the State Assembly and a large crowd of people greeted us as we crossed over on the afternoon of August 14. After

attending a dinner hosted by Dr. S P Singh, the vice-chancellor of the Guru Nanak Guru Dev University, Amritsar, we were taken back to the Wagha border where we were to light candles at midnight. We also took part in a public meeting that was attended by a 30,000 to 40,000 enthusiastic people. MNA Sardar Ayaz Sadiq, Senator Iqbal Haider and I addressed the crowd. We spoke of love, friendship, peace, progress and prosperity. I addressed the people in Punjabi and told them we did not want war. The message in our speeches was that both India and Pakistan must be inviolable and the borders between them should be sacred but it should be a border between friends and not enemies. We must live like friends, like the Europeans have done after years of war.

TNS: You were taken in a procession to Wagha. How would you describe popular



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mood? And are you the first Pakistani politician to address a public meeting in India?

AA: Yes I think it is for the first time that a Pakistani has addressed a public meeting in

India. As for the send off, it was truly warm. A cross section of people from Lahore were enthused by the fact that we were going on this peace mission and that is why they

came out to wish us well.

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message we carried. We should mutually try to reduce our defence expenditures, so that money can be spent on fighting poverty, illiteracy, health, for improving the people's living conditions. There was a consensus on these issues.

TNS: Are you optimistic that problems between India and Pakistan can be resolved peacefully?

AA: I think they can and this is a great opportunity. Particularly because the Pakistani establishment has a

do you suggest for confidence building?

AA: The most effective measure is the people to people contact. India has a stated position on Kashmir, Pakistan has its own stated position on Kashmir. I think neither side is going to rescind from that stated position in the foreseeable future. But without prejudice to the stated positions, if other confidence building measures cannot be worked out, at least border restrictions should be relaxed and people should be allowed to

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part for relations

conscientious realisation after the Kargil misadventure that the military option is no longer an option. We can't steal anything from a surprised Indian army. And the Indians have also realised after a massive mobilisation of their army at the border recently that the military option is no longer feasible.

TNS: What other measures

move across more freely. Trade, joint ventures and gas pipelines should be the ultimate goals. I think that would be a major dent in the cold war between India and Pakistan. People on both sides want peace but there are elements who thrive on mutual fears. When people meet they realise there is love and affection on both sides.