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Task before peacenicks

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With a potato in his hand, prominent Indian politician Laloo Prasad Yadav leisurely strolled through the bazaars of Islamabad and Rawalpindi last week to the great amusement of curious children and cheering shopkeepers and shoppers. He was leading a big delegation of Indian lawmakers from across the political spectrum to an Islamabad peace seminar. "I have come with a message of love and peace to Pakistan," he said. His delegation members echoed him. In a similar gesture, a group of Pakistani legislators travelled to Amritsar last week and joined the Indian peace activists in a candlelit vigil on the border on the August 14-15 night. The recent months have indeed witnessed several Indian and Pakistani delegations of parliamentarians, businessmen and traders exchanging goodwill visits. All this looks too good to believe, given the fact only a few months ago the two countries had mobilised some one million troops in a scary eyeball-to-eyeball border standoff, sending out waves of alarm far and wide. There is a visible change in the climate for the better. High-voltage tensions that were until recently threatening to plunge the two nuclear neighbours into an entirely undesirable conflagration have visibly lessened. Voices of peace are coming out increasingly from both sides while strident rhetoric has markedly declined. A better tomorrow in their relationship seems in coming. Yet, some are keeping their fingers crossed - and not so unreasonably. So dicey has been their relationship throughout that many would even hesitate to make a prediction about its future. Such climatic changes have also never been scarce in their relationship's chequered history. Many a time, they appeared well set on a course to tide over their difficulties and put their relations on an even keel. But every time that turned out to be a mirage. The two countries have displayed a marvelous propensity to slide back into a state of animosity and confrontation in a fraction of the time that they take in taking one step forward towards normality.

The problem is that the popular peace sentiment, never in short supply in both countries, has always got foundered on the official rock. Even at this time, while this sentiment is surging at the people's level, the state of affairs at the official level is not what it should be. After months of intense hostility, the two governments have, no doubt, stepped back and even reversed some of the negative developments triggered by the Vajpayee government's impulsive decisions. They have withdrawn their troops from the borders, reappointed high commissioners to their diplomatic missions and resumed the Lahore-Delhi bus service. Talks are on to restore their snapped rail link as well. But there is no news as yet about the resumption of their

terminated air connections and overflights. Even otherwise, the work on confidence-building measures is progressing at a painfully slow pace.

More crucially, the revival of their stalled peace dialogue is nowhere in sight. More than four months have passed since Mr. Vajpayee extended his much-extolled hand of friendship to Pakistan, yet there is no indication if he intends to start talking with it any time soon. Pakistan wants the dialogue to resume quickly, but he doesn't. His government remains riveted to its condition that Pakistan must first put an end to the so-called cross-border infiltration. On the other hand, Pakistan insists it has done all it was to do and that what is happening in Indian-held Kashmir is an indigenous phenomenon.

Clearly, for the peace process to move ahead, this knot must be untangled. But the Vajpayee government appears unwilling. Neither is it agreeable to Pakistan's proposal for deploying neutral monitors on the LoC to verify its infiltration charges. Nor is it amenable to Pakistan's proposal to strengthen the UN military observers group with the mandate to operate on the Indian side as well. It has even summarily

coming few months and the next year's general elections. Whatever it is, since Mr. Vajpayee and his government have given centrality to the end of so-called cross-border infiltration for the resumption of dialogue, this hitch has to be removed.

This is where the peace lobby can play a part. It must mobilise the public pressure on the Vajpayee government either to agree to a neutral verification of its allegations or resume talks with Pakistan where it can to bring up its infiltration charges for discussion. But there is a snag here. The peace lobby in the subcontinent is yet to put its own act together. Indeed, it is yet to understand its own role in mobilising the peoples of the two countries to become a formidable pressure for normality, peace and amity in the subcontinent.

The peace campaigners do not even seem to have understood the complex psyche of the subcontinent's peoples. One strand of this psyche is the great fund of goodwill the masses on both sides bear for each other. The other is their deep-seated suspicions and distrust of each other. The former recently manifested itself impressively in the torrent of prayers, good wishes and gifts the Indian citizens showered on Pakistani child Noor who went to Bangalore for heart surgery, and in the

release of the Pakistani shepherd boy, who had unwittingly strayed into the Indian territory, from incarceration due to the efforts of Indian human rights groups. The latter reflects itself poignantly in the common feeling in Pakistan that India is not yet reconciled to its creation, and in the general perception in India that Pakistan is behind its every affliction. This is complex psyche needs to be unravelled for full fructification of the popular peace sentiment in both countries.

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But the peace campaigners do not seem to have even tried to grasp this complexity, what to talk of dispelling the deep-seated suspicions and distrust from the minds of the two peoples. If they do mean business, they must change their course, comprehend the psyche of the two peoples in all its complexity and work on a meticulously evolved strategy to transform the popular peace sentiment into an irresistible peace movement. Junkets of the privileged groups in the name of peace seminars, candlelit border vigils and visit exchanges, are neither people-to-people contact nor of much avail.

brushed aside President Musharraf's offer of ceasefire on the LoC, which would have settled its claims that the Pakistan army resorts to firing to provide cover to infiltrators. Predictably, Mr. Vajpayee's government would also turn down the European Union's contemplated move for neutral aerial monitoring of the LoC on the usual pretext that it is averse to any third party intervention in its bilateral disputes with Pakistan.

This patently motivated persistent refusal of the Vajpayee government to subject its accusations to neutral verification goes to corroborate the view that it is using the ruse of cross-border infiltration to camouflage its ongoing savage military campaign to crush the Kashmiri resistance. It also lends greater credence to Indian political observers' conclusion that the Vajpayee government may not revive talks with Pakistan soon for some perceived gains in the crucial state assemblies' polls due in

complexity, what to talk of dispelling the deep-seated suspicions and distrust from the minds of the two peoples. If they do mean business, they must change their course, comprehend the psyche of the two peoples in all its complexity and work on a meticulously evolved strategy to transform the popular peace sentiment into an irresistible peace movement. Junkets of the privileged groups in the name of peace seminars, candlelit border vigils and visit exchanges, are neither people-to-people contact nor of much avail. And so goes with the Track II diplomacy of retired diplomats and generals, who on their watch had themselves contributed decisively to the spawning and nurturing of these suspicions and misunderstandings. People-to-people contacts and peace campaigns mean much more. They mean involving the masses actively and decisively in the peace process. This is what the campaigners must aim at and work for.