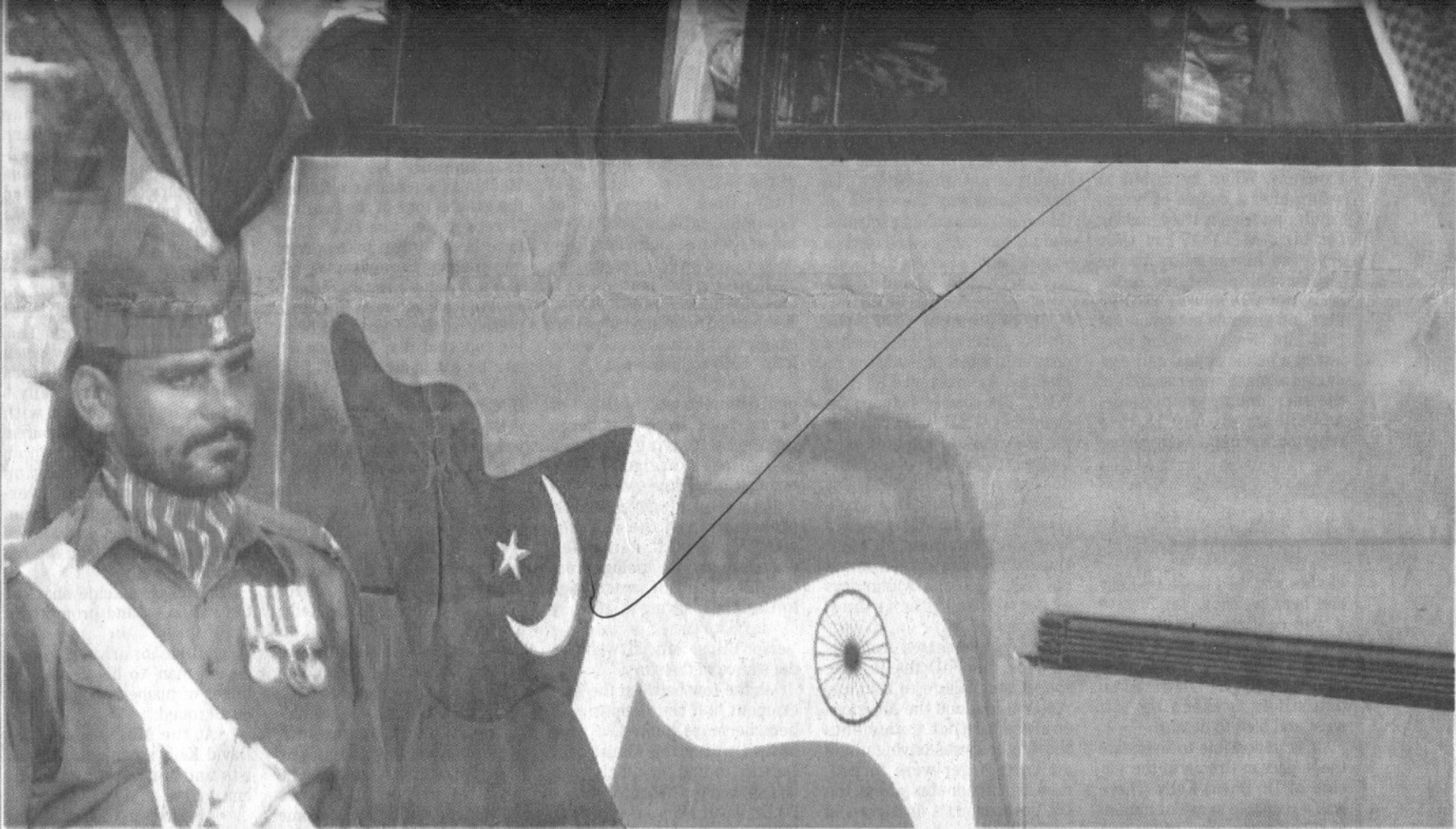


Indians and
Pakistanis
believe hopes
of peace
between their
countries hinge
on resuming
people-to-
people
contacts.
Lahore-Delhi
bus symbolises
the spirit

Bus breaks the barrier

फक-गुलज़ि देलहली २७७१ जुल १





Rolling on: The bus crosses over at Wagha.

By Ahmad Waleed

links

It was an ordinary bus on an historic journey that could help two nuclear rivals end hostilities and bring peace to one of the most volatile regions in the world. The number of passengers on the first Delhi-bound bus from Lahore was scant, for the Indian Embassy in Islamabad had issued only a few visas despite several applications. Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi similarly failed to issue more than a few visas to prospective Indian visitors. Both sides, as

is usual, cited shortage of staff as the main reason behind the issuance of fewer visas to the applicants whose number ran in hundreds.

The passengers were seen off

on visit to South Asia. "I was in Gujrat, my hometown in Pakistan, and was planning to travel to India to meet some friends there when I heard the news that the Lahore-Delhi bus service was being restored after a gap of 18 months. And I was overjoyed when I learnt that I was the first passenger to purchase a ticket for the bus to India," Tariq tells *TNS*.

A touch of fear and a sense of foreboding were also visible on some faces — which was nothing but natural for those taking a ride to a country that had only recently amassed hundreds of thousands of troops on the common borders. The passengers also fret over reports of protests by rightwing Hindu Shiv Sena activists against the resumption of the bus service. They were instead greeted warmly as the bus entered India by an

Sirhind Canal resort. Then came another but shorter stopover at Pipli and the bus headed for its destination — New Delhi.

On-board the bus was a child Noor Fatima traveling with her parents to Bangalore for an open heart surgery. Noor became the focus of media's attention as soon as the bus entered the Indian territory because the news of her arrival had already reached there. At the Indian immigration office, her family was the last to be cleared. Noor became the symbol of peace and love across the border as scores of families in India were seen praying for the success of her surgery. "Noor can build bridges between the two hostile nations," former Indian Prime Minister I K Gujral tells *TNS* at his New Delhi residence in Janpat area.

politicians on both sides should continue to be extra cautious when issuing statements that can derail peace initiatives. I am hopeful that the people of South Asia will see their leaders sit together and resolve their issues bilaterally," Gujral observes.

He calls the restoration of the bus service 'insufficient' as far as building confidence is concerned. "Besides restoring air and rail links, the two governments should go an extra mile to lift visa restrictions. Miserly Issuing of visas and putting conditions like police reporting show that confidence building measures are far from enough."

Referring to the close relationship he enjoyed as India's prime minister with his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif, Gujral says, "We were moving in the right

people contact between the two countries," says Kuldeep.

Noor's father Nadeem Sajjad believes peace is the only option for the two countries — a sentiment shared apparently by everyone who spoke on the subject at the Ambedkar bus terminal.

An official of the Egyptian Embassy in Islamabad was also among the travelers on the first Lahore-Delhi bus. He had also traveled in the bus before it was suspended after the December 13 attack on the Indian Parliament. He was all praise for people-to-people contacts between India and Pakistan as according to him this could ultimately force the politicians to sit around the negotiation table. All the three women traveling in the bus — mother of Noor Fatima and two Indian women married to Pakistani bus-

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The passengers were seen off by exuberant Pakistani officials amid hopes of peace.

A rare sense of pride pervaded the 27 travelers, including three women and six children, as the bus rolled out of Lahore's Faletti's hotel on its journey to New Delhi.

"I am proud of being one of the first passengers on this landmark bus journey," remarks Tariq Mahmood, a US-based Pakistani

on visit to South Asia. "I was in Gujrat, my hometown in Pakistan, and was planning to travel to India to meet some friends there when I heard the news that the Lahore-Delhi bus service was being restored after a gap of 18 months. And I was overjoyed when I learnt that I was the first passenger to purchase a ticket for the bus to India," Tariq tells *TNS*.

A touch of fear and a sense of foreboding were also visible on some faces — which was nothing but natural for those taking a ride to a country that had only recently amassed hundreds of thousands of troops on the common borders. The passengers also fret over reports of protests by rightwing Hindu Shiv Sena activists against the resumption of the bus service. They were instead greeted warmly as the bus entered India by an otherwise little known Global Movement for Peace and hordes of mediapersons. Two hours of immigration process later, the Indian authorities let the bus continue its journey towards New Delhi.

Heavy security presence escorted the bus on both sides of the border. Besides two security people permanently seated inside the bus, policemen could be seen at all the crossings on the road between Lahore and New Delhi throughout the 10-hour travel till the bus reached its destination — Ambedkar Bus Terminal in New Delhi. At many crossings, students and people had gathered along the road to greet the bus and its passengers.

The bus pulled up for the first time in Indian territory in Kartarpur with local residents welcoming the passengers showering rose petals on them and dancing to the tune of drum beats. The passengers were also treated with a lunch served at the beautiful

Sirhind Canal resort. Then came another but shorter stopover at Pipli and the bus headed for its destination — New Delhi.

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It was raining hard in New Delhi when the bus reached there at 8 pm — two hours behind schedule. Pakistan's Deputy High Commissioner Munawar Bhatti and other officials received the passengers at the bus terminal. The Indian media encircled Noor Fatima's father and mother asking them why they wanted their daughter to undergo an open heart surgery in India.

Other passengers could see that the official Indian response was lukewarm at best. Unlike in Pakistan where those who travelled on the first bus from New Delhi to Lahore were given warm receptions and dinners during their stay in Pakistan, authorities in India kept the visit a low key event arranging no functions for those coming from Lahore.

But the spirit of bonhomie soared as one moved out of the official circles. "The resumption of the bus service is a good step towards confidence-building between the two countries, but

politicians on both sides should continue to be extra cautious when issuing statements that can derail peace initiatives. I am hopeful that the people of South Asia will see their leaders sit together and resolve their issues bilaterally," Gujral observes.

He calls the restoration of the bus service 'insufficient' as far as building confidence is concerned. "Besides restoring air and rail links, the two governments should go an extra mile to lift visa restrictions. Miserly Issuing of visas and putting conditions like police reporting show that confidence building measures are far from enough."

Referring to the close relationship he enjoyed as India's prime minister with his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif, Gujral says, "We were moving in the right direction and to continue that process Vajpayee embarked upon a landmark visit to Lahore by bus. But, then came Kargil. I believe Kargil was not an attack on India. Rather it was an attack on that peace process," Gujral remarks. "No one in India is against peace talks."

Gujral is also critical of the impression that it is under foreign pressure that India and Pakistan are moving towards peace. "It is our dilemma that we listen to the foreigners and don't sit together to solve our bilateral issues as if we are still under their rule," he says.

Indian Parliamentarian Kuldeep Nayar believes, US or no, things are improving between the two neighbours. "More developments are going to take place in the coming months once air links are restored. A delegation of high court judges from India and a cultural troupe including Indian actress Tabu are planning a trip to Pakistan to increase the people-to-

people contact between the two countries," says Kuldeep.

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Most people in Delhi that *TNS* contacted place the blame of hostility between the two countries on politicians, claiming that people on both sides want friendly ties with each other. "It's only politicians, not the people, who favour an atmosphere of war," Ramesh, a student of first year at New Delhi's Diyal Singh College, tells *TNS*.

Junaid Malik, a trader in Delhi's Chandni Chowk area hopes the normalisation of relations between India and Pakistan "will result in a positive impact on business on both sides".

There were some notable exemptions to this general mood of optimism and friendship. Indian filmstar Shakti Kapoor, when asked if he had any comments to make on the resumption of the bus service, could only say: "I refuse to talk to Pakistanis".

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