

Uproar in India over U.S. pressure tactics

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan Maitra

The Indian parliament had to be adjourned briefly on April 27, following agitated demands by the opposition that the government of Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao come clean on its intent in the "secret" talks that took place in London between U.S. and Indian officials. At the center of the debate is the pressure from Washington on New Delhi to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

The talks, originally scheduled to last for two days, were cut short, perhaps as a result of the wide publicity they received. Concern among opposition parliamentarians was heightened because of two earlier developments: First, Rao had just accepted President Bill Clinton's invitation to visit Washington for a meeting on May 19; and second, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott had just visited the Indian subcontinent in April, making clear that the signing of the NPT by India and Pakistan is high on the agenda of Washington's foreign policy objectives vis-à-vis South Asia.

Added confusion

The speculative nature of the information that filtered in from the "secret" talks did little to calm the nerves of the parliamentarians. The government's efforts to clarify only created more confusion. In the upper house, Minister of State for External Affairs Salman Khursheed said that the talks were part of continuing bilateral discussion for the fulfillment of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's plan for a global, non-discriminatory non-nuclear order. "We have had several rounds of talks at a bilateral level within the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany. Several rounds have been held with U.S. officials, and the London talks were a continuation of this effort," the minister said. In the lower house, however, Minister for Parliamentary Affairs and senior party leader V.C. Shukla claimed that the talks were intended as a preparation for Prime Minister Rao's forthcoming U.S. visit.

The issue foremost in the minds of the opposition leaders concerned what stance the Rao government took in these talks regarding the NPT and other such strategic matters. News correspondents with suspected intelligence ties were reporting that the London talks were held to: 1) work out the interim steps to halt India's fissile nuclear material production; 2) maintain the cap on the Indian medium-range missile, Agni, which was undergoing tests and is now reportedly choked off from funds for the 1994-95 fiscal year; and 3)

to prevent the development of India's short-range missile, Prithvi, which is scheduled to be introduced into the security system in June.

Indian Ambassador to the United States S.S. Ray told newsmen that according to the State Department, the United States had not asked India to cap its nuclear plan, nor had it sought "to verify an end to the production of fissile materials." Such statements did little to allay fears that the Rao government is giving in to pressure from the Clinton administration with regard to signing the NPT and halting testing and deployment of indigenously developed ballistic missiles.

A speech by Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.), chairman of the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee, was given much play in the Indian press. Hamilton, who had recently supported the one-time sale of F-16 fighter aircraft to Pakistan in return for putting the lid on Pakistan's nuclear weapons program, was quoted saying that New Delhi would do well not to deploy the Prithvi missile, stating that this would provoke an escalation of tensions in South Asia. There were also some references in the newspapers that the United States would implement measures against India for violation of intellectual property rights as stipulated in the U.S. trade regulations under Super 301.

Overreactions

All this added to the reactions of agitated opposition members. There were articles criticizing the members of the Indian delegation. Even the well-respected retired government official N. Krishnan, who headed the delegation, was not spared. There were innuendos questioning Krishnan's commitment to defy the pressure to sign the NPT. There was also an attempt to portray even some of the middle-level American officials involved in the talks as mighty policymakers and supermen. In such a charged atmosphere, truth was a casualty.

What got lost in the shuffle is the fact that the talks were led by a deputy assistant secretary of state on the American side, an official of too low a level to make any kind of policy. Robert Einhorn can make a point, but cannot turn it into a policy decision. Real policy decisions, such as what measures the United States can take against India vis-à-vis the discriminatory NPT, can only come from the U.S. President, whom Rao will be seeing on May 19. It also should be remembered that Washington, like the Indian opposition, is fully aware of the political sensitivity involved in India's signing the NPT, and it also is aware of how little real leverage it has over India regarding this issue.

In fact, signing the NPT is an issue which is only good for point-making against India, but the United States cannot translate it into reality. The Indian opposition must also remember that the same holds true for Pakistan: It would be a real surprise if Washington could cap Pakistan's nuclear weapons program, unless Pakistan volunteered to do so in return for some other "goodies."