

From New Delhi by Ramtanu Maitra

Inderfurth makes a cautious beginning . . .

The new U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia makes a quiet "get-to-know-the-turf" visit to the subcontinent.

Karl F. Inderfurth, the new U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, seems, at first glimpse, to be a man who treads carefully. This is no little mercy, when one compares his quiet composure to the high profile and abrasive style of his predecessor, Robin Raphel.

Inderfurth was in India on Sept. 2-3 (he also visited Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka). A former TV journalist, he is very much a part of the team within the State Department that leads off with Secretary Madeleine Albright and is followed by Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Thomas Pickering. This was not Inderfurth's first visit at an official level: He was part of the delegation on the last U.S. Presidential visit to India, that of President Carter in 1976.

One of the major objectives discussed prior to his visit, was the possibility of cooperation between the South Asian nations and the United States to combat terrorism. During his visit, though, not much was heard about this important subject.

Inderfurth's visit to India and Pakistan aroused interest in both countries. He arrived at a time when their prime ministers were in the process of setting up a one-to-one meeting with President Clinton in Washington, D.C., before the new session of the United Nations General Assembly begins in New York City. Both prime ministers, Inder Gujral of India and Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan, are slated to address the General Assembly at the end of September.

There are clear indications that the U.S. President is keen to see an easing of hostilities between the two warring nations, particularly on the 50th anniversary of both these countries.

But, Inderfurth also had to face the speculative media of both countries. Just before the visit, the border forces of both countries were involved in deadly exchanges of heavy artillery fire across the line of control that separates the two countries in the disputed former kingdom of Jammu and Kashmir. The ferocious intensity of firing, which continued for more than a week, led many observers to conclude that the peace talks between India and Pakistan have come to a dead end. Both governments issued statements blaming the other side for the artillery blasts, but continued to express faith in continuing with the dialogue, in an effort to sort out the unsolved issues. Inderfurth's visit took place in the middle of all this.

Prompted by a statement allegedly issued by the U.S. ambassador to Pakistan, indicating that the United States is eager to mediate in the Kashmir dispute, Kashmir experts and others came to the conclusion that Inderfurth's visit is for the purpose of setting up the ground rules, before the respective prime ministers meet the U.S. President. The fact remains that, contrary to media reports, the U.S. ambassador to Pakistan never mentioned the dreaded word, "mediation." What was reported is untrue, and then it was blown sky high in an attempt to torpedo Inderfurth's get-to-know-the-turf visit.

In India, Inderfurth was asked about this by at least a dozen reporters. Unlike Robin Raphel, who would feed the frenzied reporters with a concocted potion of facts and her own opinions, Inderfurth handled the reporters well and kept them calm. He made it clear that he did not come to the subcontinent to make "new pronouncements," but only to point out that in the Clinton administration's second term, a new emphasis will be laid on South Asia, and on India, in particular.

Reminding observers for the umpteenth time that the United States has no intention of mediating or injecting itself into the India-Pakistan dialogue, Inderfurth said that it "would be helpful, if both sides" asked for assistance. "We talked with Pakistani leaders about our strong support for the dialogue that has been resumed between Pakistan and India. . . . We are simply indicating our strong support for the leadership of Prime Minister Sharif and Prime Minister Gujral," Inderfurth said in Islamabad, Pakistan.

According to the daily *Asian Age*, Inderfurth also held wide-ranging discussions with Indian Foreign Office officials, covering South Asia, Central Asia, Afghanistan, the Middle East, China, and the role of Japan in the region.

Inderfurth continued with the late Ron Brown's doctrine of mixing diplomacy with business. He met with Mrs. Jayanthi Natarajan, India's civil aviation minister, to plug for Boeing's medium-capacity long-range (MCLR) aircraft. India's national carrier, Air India, has decided to buy 23 MCLR planes, at a cost of \$200 million over ten years. Boeing Corp. is locked in a tough battle for the contract with the European consortium Airbus Industrie, and the issue has been hanging fire for the last two years.