

Highest-Level Efforts Launched To Resolve Kashmir Conflict

by Ramtanu Maitra

On May 17, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee called off the six-month-old unilateral cease-fire in the Indian part of Kashmir, and simultaneously extended invitation to Pakistan's Chief Executive, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, to visit Delhi for talks to resolve outstanding disputes between the two countries. General Musharraf has accepted the invitation, and a tentative date in early July has been set up for the talks. The agreement to talk has opened up new possibilities to resolve the 53-year-long Kashmir dispute.

The decision of New Delhi, although apparently sudden, was in the process for a while. To begin with, the cease-fire of last Winter was not an end by itself, but was imposed to set the ground conditions for a comprehensive resolution of the Kashmir dispute. Although Pakistan responded positively by withdrawing some of its troops from the border areas and reducing its shelling across the borders, the extremists—neither those who are Indian Kashmiris, nor the others who infiltrate into India to commit terrorist acts—did not respect the unilateral cease-fire agreement. It has been evident for a while that both New Delhi and Islamabad would require a higher level of intervention.

Under such a premise, neither the announcement of the Indian Prime Minister, and the response drawn from General Musharraf, were sudden surprises. What is noteworthy, nonetheless, is the political courage that both sides have shown in disregarding extremist threats and political pressures exerted from within and without.

How Delhi Laid the Groundwork

The first indication that New Delhi was preparing for a major policy turnaround came in early April, when the Indian Planning Commission chairman and a veteran politician, K.C. Pant, was deputed by Prime Minister Vajpayee to negotiate the Kashmir situation with the Indian Kashmiris. Mr. Pant went about trying to bring the militant-political group, the All-Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC), to hold talks with the Indian government. It became clear that the APHC does not call the shots and has become overly dependent on the extremists from the Pakistani side of the border. APHC continued to dilly-dally, unwilling to give up its vantage position, but unable to clear the air and start talks; it de-

manded that Pakistan be included.

India rejected the APHC proposal, while being fully aware that no solution to the complex Kashmir issue can be reached without bringing in Pakistan to the discussion table. Delhi, on the other hand, wanted to hear the voices of the Indian Kashmiris through the APHC. Since the APHC failed to deliver, it was time for India to talk directly to Pakistan and bring in the Kashmiri groups later. A positive response from Islamabad shows that the process is moving, but both leaders will face innumerable roadblocks once the discussions start. Both have done their basic homework. China's Prime Minister Zhu Rongji was on a four-day visit to Pakistan a few days prior to Mr. Vajpayee's call for talks. India also received a high-level Chinese military delegation from the National Defence University soon after. Beijing, therefore, was surely kept aware of the upcoming efforts, and this became evident when China quickly endorsed the new initiatives.

Washington was also active. President George Bush's personal emissary, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Richard Armitage, was in New Delhi in early May, ostensibly to discuss Washington's National Missile Defense proposal with the Indian authorities. It is reported in the Indian media that Armitage had also proposed a direct talk between India and Pakistan.

Roadblocks from Extremists

In Islamabad, there were a number of visitors. A U.S. Congressional delegation, which also visited India, came to Pakistan in February, urging General Musharraf to bring about an end to the extremist infiltration into Kashmir, among a few other sticky items. The CIA chief, George Tenet, who is reportedly close to General Musharraf's close confidant and former Pakistan Intelligence-Service (ISI) chief, M. Durrani, was in Islamabad talking to General Musharraf on a number of security issues, including Kashmir. Since then, both Washington and Moscow have endorsed the talks and welcomed the efforts to resolve the Kashmir conflict.

The extremists and militants will not easily give up the turf for which they have fought for more than a decade. More

importantly, the militants are not under the control of Pakistan, and have very many international connections. They get their political, and some financial, support in Britain and elsewhere. Their major sources of finance are the drug traffic, and generous sheikhs of Arabia. The Pakistan ISI, which is a mish-mash of intelligence personnel and outright terrorists, has long been infiltrated by many international intelligence agencies, notably the British.

Also not to be underestimated is the interest of the Islamic *ihadis*, who are working in tandem with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan on Kashmir matters. To these *ihadis*, Kashmir is important not only because it enhances their area of influence, but also because it is the gateway to western China, where some of the Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang province have been trained and armed by the Taliban. These Uighurs oppose Beijing and promote secessionism. The *ihadis* and the ISI work closely on this issue. In fact, the invasion of Kargil, in Indian Kashmir, by extremists and some Pakistani regulars in the Summer of 1999, which soured India-Pakistan relations significantly, was an attempt to establish a bulwark that would cut off India from the northernmost Kashmiri district of Ladakh, and provide to the extremists a passage to Tibet and Xinjiang in China.

Problem in Pakistan's Army

In Islamabad, there exist other forces who would oppose vehemently any attempt to work out a non-military solution to the Kashmir conflict. These forces include a very powerful faction within the Pakistani Army, pro-*jihadi* and belonging to orthodox Islam. They were brought into powerful positions by the late Pakistan President Gen. Mohammad Zia ul-Huq during the heyday of "Islamic revivalism" in reaction to the invasion of Afghanistan by the erstwhile Soviet Union in 1979.

This faction's opposition has already been articulated through some statements issued recently by Pakistan Foreign Minister Abdus Sattar. In Islamabad, at a press conference, Sattar made it clear that Pakistan still abides by the 1948 UN resolution which calls for a plebiscite in Kashmir to resolve the dispute. The Indian position had all along been to resolve the differences through bilateral negotiations and non-involvement of any foreign power.

In essence, Sattar not only disregarded what his Chief Executive had said while accepting the invitation, but also overruled the 1972 Shimla Agreement. General Musharraf had said clearly that he would go to Delhi with an "open mind," which means he will not set any precondition for the talks. The 1972 Shimla Agreement, signed by the late Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his Indian counterpart, the late Shrimati Indira Gandhi, said all outstanding issues between India and Pakistan would be resolved through negotiations. Particularly since both nations have developed nuclear weapons and delivery systems, the Kashmir issue cannot be resolved militarily.

The separatist extremist groups, which are backed by forces within Britain and other colonial forces, will up the ante in an opportune time to sabotage the talks. It will be important for the international community—particularly China, Russia, European Union, and the United States—to play a positive role to neutralize vicious attacks from the extremist groups in Kashmir and elsewhere.

Recent events in Nepal may have an indirect effect on the Kashmir talks.

In India, the right-wing Hindu chauvinist factions who dwell within the coalition government, are yet another threat. They already have made some noises, but it is encouraging that Home Minister Lal Krishan Advani, who is often identified as a torch-bearer of this faction, has endorsed the proposal and expressed satisfaction that India and Pakistan are heading toward achieving peace.

Economic Leverage for Peace

That is not to say that Delhi and Islamabad do not have maneuvering room. There is plenty of it and they should make use of it quickly. For instance, it is a good sign that New Delhi and Tehran are sitting down for the first time to evaluate the feasibility of laying a multibillion-dollar gas pipeline from Iran to India through Pakistan. For years, India had rejected the proposal, citing the security threat posed by Pakistan. Pakistan, on the other hand, would benefit enormously from the pipeline, and one estimate shows that it would gain a royalty of about \$800 million annually. As a result, Pakistan agreed to provide adequate security. But New Delhi was holding back. It seems things have finally begun to change for better.

In addition, both India and Pakistan have come to realize that the economic development of the subcontinent would require regional and beyond-the-region cooperations. India has begun to seek new economic partnership with Southeast Asia and the Middle East. In Southeast Asia, India has been told categorically that New Delhi must resolve the South Asian (i.e., India-Pakistan) situation first, and bring about a closer economic relationship in the region.

Pakistan, on the other hand, is in a desperate economic state. Its economic policies are dictated by the International Monetary Fund, and the nation is living from day-to-day on handouts from international donors and financial institutions to meet their debt obligations.

As a result, Pakistan's development has slowed down to a trickle and the country has become almost ungovernable.

Under the circumstances, the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has remained a moribund institution.

If Pakistan and India can resolve their disputes and join hands for a regional cooperation, the SAARC provides ample opportunities to turn around the economic situation in South Asia. This is not only going to help India and Pakistan, but also other South Asian nations.