

Indira Gandhi in Washington, D.C.: a new opening

by Paul Zykofsky, New Delhi Bureau

India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi arrived in Washington on July 28 on an eight-day visit with one important purpose in mind: to hold face-to-face talks with President Ronald Reagan and thereby open a line of communication with the United States to improve badly damaged bilateral relations. The visit is Mrs. Gandhi's first trip to Washington in a decade and will be followed by a trip to the Soviet Union in September. The two visits jointly represent significant foreign policy initiatives undertaken by India at a time when regional and international tensions are running high.

Agreement on nuclear fuel

The cordial climate at the talks was reflected in announcements from spokesmen for both governments that one result of the Gandhi-Reagan meeting was an "agreement in principle" on the supply of enriched uranium fuel to the U.S.-built Tarapur power reactor in India. The fuel supply has been blocked for four years, by the Carter administration's anti-nuclear crusade. Now it is agreed that the United States will permit a third country—France—to supply enriched uranium, and that India will abide by the 1963 Indo-U.S. contract regarding reprocessing spent fuel. Both sides have agreed to keep talking to resolve differences.

There is no question that the Tarapur "agreement in principle" cleared the air, allowing Mrs. Gandhi and Ronald Reagan to have a broad-ranging exchange of views on international affairs, regional affairs, and economic developments. These discussions are particularly important because Mrs. Gandhi is viewed as an experienced leader of the developing nations and has friendly ties with both Western nations and the socialist countries. Gandhi-Reagan talks have a bearing on both North-South and East-West relations.

The tone for the Washington meetings was perhaps best set by Mrs. Gandhi herself in her remarks upon arrival at the White House. She neutralized the Anglo-American propaganda barrage characterizing her as "pro-Soviet," by expressing hope for friendship and cooperation with the United States. "One friendship does not come in the way of another," said Mrs. Gandhi. Communicating admiration for the United

States historically, she urged on the nation a sense of responsibility in world affairs: "It is difficult to imagine two nations more different than ours. As history goes, your country is a young one. Over the years it has held unparalleled attractions for the adventurous and daring, for the talented as well as the persecuted. It stood for opportunity and freedom. The endeavors of early pioneers, the struggle for human values, the coming together of different races, have enabled it to retain its elan and dynamism of youth. With dynamism and high ideals, it has grown into a great power. Today its role in world affairs is unmatched. Every word and action of your President is watched and weighed and has global repercussions," said the Indian Prime Minister.

The meeting at the White House

Mrs. Gandhi met with President Reagan privately for a half-hour and with aides for another hour. In the meeting, the two leaders discussed U.S.-Soviet relations, the Lebanon crisis and the Iran-Iraq war, U.S.-China relations, and U.S. policy toward South Asia, particularly the arming of Pakistan with sophisticated F-16 aircraft. The U.S. has argued that Pakistan has been provided arms to fight the Soviet presence in neighboring Afghanistan, but Mrs. Gandhi is said to have made clear in her talk with the President that India does not see the unstable Pakistani military junta fighting a war against the Soviet Union. The arms are aimed at India, she warned, indicating to Mr. Reagan that peace and withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan will only come when the region is freed of foreign subversion, including U.S. and Chinese support for Islamic fundamentalist rebels based in Pakistan.

Nation-building and economics were the other themes that permeated the Gandhi-Reagan meetings. Mrs. Gandhi was faced with the necessity of countering a carefully calculated media barrage describing her variously as "socialist" and "authoritarian" in an effort to poison President Reagan's understanding of India as a country with real developmental aims and problems.

The Indian Prime Minister is her own best spokesman. In the private meeting, she reportedly developed for Reagan the idea of democracy as a deep-rooted system in India with "strains and pressures on it." She stressed that the people require policies that tangibly benefit them, so they have a stake in the system. In public, she expressed it succinctly: "In India our preoccupation is with building and development. Our problem is not to influence others but to consolidate our political and economic independence. We believe in freedom with a passion that only those who have been denied it can understand. We believe in the worth of the human being, for that is the foundation of our democracy and our work for development. That is the framework of our national programs."