

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Talks move Indo-Pak relations forward

Slow but steady progress is being made to transform the bad blood between these two neighbors.

The second meeting of the Indo-Pakistani Joint Commission ended in New Delhi on July 4 with the signing of several agreements on cultural exchanges, travel, and agricultural research cooperation. In addition, one of the subcommissions discussed the problem of narcotics smuggling across the Indo-Pakistani border and identified organizations to cooperate in checking this traffic.

While by no means spectacular—an agreement on trade proved elusive, and highly contentious issues such as Kashmir, where skirmishing between Indian and Pakistani troops has increased in recent weeks, and Indian concern about alleged Pakistani efforts to manufacture a nuclear weapon remain unresolved—the results were heartening.

After the Joint Commission was formed in June 1983, it was virtually suspended for more than a year when India charged Pakistan with interference in the troubled state of Punjab.

The Rajiv Gandhi government, which has already made improved relations with neighbors a priority, has reopened the initiative at the top level.

The joint commission sessions were led by Pakistani Foreign Minister Yaqub Khan and his Indian counterpart, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Khurshid Alam Khan. Prior to the meetings Yaqub Khan met for 35 minutes with Prime Minister Gandhi.

Though no official comment was

available, one subject was reportedly the upcoming July 30 foreign secretary-level meeting which will take up once again the issue of a bilateral accord. Both sides have formulated draft treaties, but agreement has been stalled over India's insistence that it contain a mutual commitment to prohibit the granting of foreign bases.

Significantly, Mr. Gandhi is said to have briefed Mr. Yaqub Khan on the results of his five-nation tour—which included discussion of the Afghanistan problem with both Soviet and U.S. officials. The Soviet invasion and occupation of that non-aligned nation has vastly complicated efforts to improve relations between New Delhi and Islamabad, but Prime Minister Gandhi has given clear indication that he is cognizant of Pakistan's concerns in this regard and is anxious that a solution be found, a virtual precondition for improving ties with Islamabad.

Mr. Gandhi stated in a press conference in New Delhi on July 7 that he had also raised the issue of India's concern over Pakistani efforts to attain nuclear weapons capability, an issue he had raised with U.S. President Reagan in Washington.

It is also reported that Mr. Gandhi stressed the need to cooperate in joint efforts to curb the growing menace of terrorism in the region.

For India, which has fought three defensive wars against Pakistan over

the years, concrete proof that the words of reconciliation are matched by deeds is essential. Rajiv Gandhi will need this to deal with the powerful vested interests in India's anti-Pakistan lobby, boosted as it is by the Soviet Union.

Hopes for an agreement to expand trade and investment were unfulfilled. New Delhi reports are that Pakistan was reluctant to extend to India the privileges extended to some of their Western trading partners.

But the agreement for cooperation in agricultural research and development; described by Indian Minister of State Khan as "the most concrete agreement we have arrived at," is substantial. It calls for exchange of scientists and technologists, germplasm and breeding materials, scientific literature, information and methodologies, participation in seminars, and import-export of scientific equipment.

At the signing ceremony, Indian Agriculture Minister Buta Singh pointed out that India and Pakistan share climatic conditions, cropping systems, land-use patterns, and ecology, and for this reason it was most appropriate for India to share its experience and the benefits of its highly developed research system.

Mr. Yaqub Khan stated that Pakistan wanted to emulate India's example in increasing agricultural production, an example that was being admired the world over. The crop harvest forecasting and weather warning systems developed in India could be of great help to Pakistan, he said.

Agriculture has not accidentally set the precedent for Indo-Pakistani cooperation. The historic Indus Waters Treaty, signed in the early 1960s, provided for the sharing of the benefits of that mighty river system between the two countries. It was the fruit of long and intense deliberation at a time when the scars of partition were still raw.