

India, Pakistan prime ministers' meeting promises a 'new beginning'

by Ramtanu Maitra

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif met on Feb. 21 in Lahore, Pakistan, to formulate ways to adopt confidence-building measures in the nuclear field, to avoid intervention and interference in each other's affairs, and to intensify efforts to resolve outstanding issues between the two, including Jammu and Kashmir. Subsequently, the two prime ministers signed a joint declaration, billed as the "Lahore Declaration," which reaffirmed their commitment to the goals and objectives of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). They expressed determination to expand efforts toward the realization of the SAARC vision for the year 2000 and beyond, to promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia, and to improve their quality of life through accelerated economic growth, social progress, and cultural development.

The tone of the meeting was set by the Indian Prime Minister, who had taken up an invitation from Nawaz Sharif to visit Pakistan, when he told hundreds of Pakistanis, including the Prime Minister, who were waiting to receive him on Feb. 20 at the India-Pakistan border post at Wagah: "Put aside the bitterness of the past. Together let us make a new beginning." Prime Minister Vajpayee was on the bus inaugurating the new service from New Delhi to Lahore, linking India and Pakistan by road.

Prime Minister Vajpayee made a 48-hour visit to Pakistan to hold "substantive discussions" with his Pakistani counterpart. Before he left for Pakistan, Vajpayee had told the Indian people that violence would not resolve any problem, and conveyed India's willingness to have "sustained discussions" on all issues including Jammu and Kashmir.

Emphasis on development

Speaking at a reception held by the Governor of Punjab in the provincial capital, Lahore, Prime Minister Vajpayee said, referring to the continuing poverty in the subcontinent, that excuses had been available as long as the area was under colonial rule, but today there are no excuses as to why the region is lagging behind the rest of the world. Reciting his own poem, he said: "*Bharose ki hawa ki zaroorat hai*" ("There is a need for an atmosphere of trust"). He also told the appreciative crowd that it was not for an Indian Prime Minister to put

his stamp of approval on the creation of Pakistan—Pakistan has its own identity as a separate nation.

The visit, which has been billed by some as a mere "gimmick," may turn out to be a trail-blazer in the near future. There are already signs that both sides at the highest level have come to realize that violence truly does not solve any problem, and that it is absolutely essential to develop a relationship from which both India and Pakistan can mutually benefit. Vajpayee told Sharif that India has tried to improve relations with all its neighbors, and referred to India's strong bilateral relations developed in recent years with Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. He said that India wants to expand trade relations with Pakistan as well.

"If you have excess electricity, we would like to buy it, provided the price is right," Vajpayee said with a smile. Pakistan, he pointed out, is buying wheat from countries far away, but India could deliver wheat to its doorstep.

From available reports, it seems that India and Pakistan will soon announce agreements on enhancing trade and commerce across their borders. Another crucial area on which discussions will soon be held at the official level, is restoration of the desert rail-link between India and Pakistan—the Munnabao-Khokraparkar railway, which has not been in use since the 1965 India-Pakistan war. Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot of the Indian state of Rajasthan publicly expressed his hope that the two prime ministers would initiate a process which will lead to the early restoration of this trade and passenger route.

A rail corridor

The thrust to open the desert link must be read in conjunction with the two-day meeting (Feb. 20-21) held in Tehran, the capital of Iran, where India, Pakistan, Iran, Bangladesh, and Kazakhstan met. The Indian representative, Dr. V.K. Agarwal, the chairman of the Indian Railway Board, participated in the meeting to formulate ways to develop a rail corridor between Kazakhstan and Bangladesh via Iran, Pakistan, and India. The Tehran meeting was organized under the aegis of the International Railway Union (IUC), a Paris-based organization.

IUC has identified the South Asia-Central Asia rail corridor as one of six that need to be developed to enhance rail

freight traffic. The other five corridors are: Korea-Japan-China-Europe, West Asia-Europe, Maghreb-Europe, East Africa-South Africa, and North America-Europe. Vipin Sharma, world director of the UIC, told reporters in Paris that as the production base of the world economy shifts increasingly away from the Western countries, and the traffic flow matrix changes significantly, these corridors will assure uniformities.

The opening up of the Munnabao-Khokraparkar line, the meeting in Tehran to develop a rail corridor between Kazakhstan and Bangladesh, and the two prime ministers' "substantive discussions," must be read in conjunction with the growing realization that it is imperative to integrate South Asia with Central Asia and beyond to Europe by rail, forming a part of the southern corridor of the Eurasian Land-Bridge.

It is certain that opposition to this proposed corridor, fuelled by externally instigated provocations, will increase significantly in the coming days. Terrorists killed at least 20 people in Kashmir on the very day that Prime Minister Vajpayee was riding the bus to Pakistan, which observers took as a warning. In Pakistan, extremist organizations, controlled from London and operating within Pakistan under the aegis of a number of terrorist organizations, demonstrated against Vajpayee's visit and the grand hospitality accorded the guest of honor arranged by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. A group of demonstrators in Lahore even threw stones at a billboard which showed the portrait of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the officially acclaimed father of Pakistan.

In addition, it must be remembered that Prime Minister Vajpayee heads a coalition government in New Delhi with the support of a gaggle of small parties. These parties, which each have an entirely different worldview, are bereft of all vision and have joined the government with the abject purpose of making petty political gains. In Pakistan, where Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif received a massive political mandate in the last general elections, the overall situation has become worse. The adoption of the International Monetary Fund-World Bank-led policies, and operations by externally controlled terrorist movements within the country, have significantly weakened Sharif's political base. As a journalist pointed out, any hint of weakness on Kashmir by the Prime Minister to accommodate New Delhi could trigger a no-holds-barred revolt within Sharif's party, which has grown out of hard-line orthodox Muslim groups.

Economic linkage

In India, the immediate reaction of political opposition groups will be guarded. The political parties, including the Congress Party, will do their best to underplay the event and seek to embarrass the Vajpayee-led government for its failure in other areas. In effect, little help will be coming from the political circles opposed to Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party.

At the same time, new initiatives undertaken by both Vaj-

payee and Sharif provide them with an opportunity to break free of these political shackles and make a "new beginning." In this context, positive responses issued by both Washington and Beijing to the historic meeting will go a long way in helping India and Pakistan to advance their relationship. In fact, Chinese Defense Minister Chi Haotian arrived in Pakistan the same day that Prime Minister Vajpayee arrived in Wagah. President Bill Clinton has commended both prime ministers "for demonstrating courage and leadership by coming together and addressing difficult issues" that have long divided them.

Speaking on Feb. 22, Clinton said, "South Asia, and indeed the entire world, will benefit if India and Pakistan promptly turn these commitments into concrete progress." He gave his assurances that the United States "will continue efforts to work with India and Pakistan to promote peace in the region." Also important to note is the on-the-spot acceptance by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of the invitation extended to him by Prime Minister Vajpayee to visit India.

Further important support was expressed by Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza-Asaefi, who said that his country hoped the summit-level talks between the two countries would lead to peace in the region. A Foreign Ministry spokesman in Bangladesh echoed these remarks, saying any improvement in advancing the Indo-Pakistani dialogue on contentious issues would be good news for the region.

An Indo-Pak Chamber of Commerce

For support within their countries, both prime ministers will have to depend on the business community and industrialists. For the first time in the history of these two nations, an Indo-Pak Chamber of Commerce has been set up. The contours of the new organization are being worked out and will be announced shortly.

Confederation of Indian Industry president Rajesh Shah and Lahore Chamber of Commerce chief Parvez Hanif have agreed to form a task force which will identify areas of cooperation. The two captains of industry met in Lahore during Vajpayee's visit and have identified cooperation between the small and medium-size enterprises of the two countries. The task force will also look at cooperation in various sectors, including quality control, technology, environment management, and human resource development. In a report to be submitted within 90 days, the joint task force will study government policy and procedures of both countries, with regard to improving infrastructure, communications, and transport facilities. It will identify areas for industrial cooperation, enhancing trade, technology transfer, and joint ventures.

Another major Indian chamber of commerce, Assocham, has identified the poor infrastructure of both countries as an impediment to large-scale growth in trade and commerce, and has articulated the need to strengthen the transport links, especially surface transport.