

Holding a debate on Kashmir

By M.H. Askari

PRESIDENT Pervez Musharraf's call for a national debate on various options to resolve the Kashmir issue has been followed by several official clarifications and explanations.

The president himself, talking to a group of intellectuals the other day, said that there was no specific proposal in respect of which the debate has been suggested, nor did any specific proposal figure in the agenda of his meeting with the Indian prime minister in New York. Perhaps there was no formal agenda for the meeting.

What the president has perhaps in mind is that since there are several districts or regions in the disputed state and the same resolution may not be valid for all the various regions, a possible solution should be evolved for each region separately. As a beginning, the entire state territory should also be demilitarized.

Demilitarization would apply to both Azad Kashmir and Indian-held Kashmir. Each region should be treated as an entity for the purpose of ascertaining the wishes of its people. This would not mean a departure from Pakistan's principled position on the question, and would be in consonance with what Pakistan has been suggesting all along.

The basis suggested by President Pervez Musharraf would be close to what Sir Owen Dixon, who was UN representative in Kashmir, suggested in September 1950, long before the issue was the focus of so much acrimony. No plan for a permanent division of the state had at the time been visualized nor an omnibus solution which could apply to the state. Dixon apparently had a piecemeal solution in mind. It has been said that Dixon's formula was intended to unravel the complex nature of the central part of Kashmir i.e. the Valley.

A well known expert on Kashmir, Robert Wirsing, has expressed the view that the basis of the partition of the state proposed by Dixon "would largely have rid India of at least one — ethnic Kashmiri — minority problem, at the same time eliminating the core of the grievance that Pakistan has been

to Hamas, Hezbollah, etc as among those who were allegedly active in Indian-held Kashmir.

According to the Turkish scholar, Turkkaya Ataov, author of *Kashmir and Neighbours*, these activists believed that "the only solution" of Kashmir lay in jihad. He also maintained that "evidence accumulated indicating that Afghan training camps produced insurgents who infiltrated into Kashmir." Today, there is every reason to believe that there is no infiltration across the LoC and that Pakistan has effectively checked the movement of the insurgents across the border.

Reports attributed to the Indian security sources in Srinagar have admitted that with the composite dialogue in progress, violence has abated in Indian-held Kashmir. The number of militancy-related incidents in the Indian-held state has reportedly come down. Mirwaiz Omar Farooq, head of the APHC, has endorsed President Musharraf's proposal, claiming that he had a meeting with the general when he was recently in Holland, on his way back from New York.

The prospects of peace in Kashmir should also improve with New Delhi's initiative to extend an invitation for talks to the APHC. The Indian officials, who are likely to meet their counterpart from amongst the Kashmiri freedom fighters, could include the Indian Home Minister Shivraj Patil. Mr Patil as well as the Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh are likely to visit Srinagar shortly. Mr Singh would have met his Pakistani counterpart, Shaukat Aziz, before he goes to Indian-held Kashmir.

A former APHC chairman, Prof Abdul Ghani Bhatt, has

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nursing since the state's manipulated 'accession' to India in 1947."

It appears that before formally accepting the Dixon plan, India insisted upon a condemnation of Pakistan by the UN for what New Delhi believed to be its aggression (in 1948) and the dispute remained unresolved, and Dixon went home believing that he had "nothing more to do." President Musharraf has all along maintained that Pakistan will never give up its principled stand on Kashmir but that it has an open mind with regard to possible alternative ways of resolving the Kashmir dispute. However, as he pointed out while talking to a group of intellectuals the other day, a solution to the dispute could only be found when both India and Pakistan agreed to move beyond their stated positions which would mean a significant measure of flexibility of approach on the part of both. Any proposed solution, however, had to be acceptable to the Kashmiri people as well.

Since in a subsequent statement the president also said that he "saw light at the end of the tunnel," it seems that he perceives a growing realization in both India and Pakistan that a peaceful resolution of the dispute would lead to "tremendous development." One would tend to believe that he had reason to feel encouraged by the trend of the discussion in his meeting with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in New York.

The flexibility of approach that the president often refers to has to be equally evident in the attitude of the representatives of the people of Kashmir, including the freedom-fighters and those adhering to the All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC). Significantly, the APHC leaders have reportedly found the idea "floated" by President Musharraf as "positive" and "pathbreaking." There have also been reports from across the border suggesting that violence has abated in Indian-held Kashmir "with fewer militants crossing over into the revolt-torn region."

Only three years ago international observers were of the view that the jihadis at the end of the war in Afghanistan, who had been rendered "jobless", found their opportunity in crossing over into Kashmir apparently to launch a fresh jihad. This view was apparently shared by American policymakers since the US secretary of state included the so-called Pakistan-based "jihadis" along with others belonging

Kashmir. This would not mean a departure from Pakistan's principled position.

been quoted as saying that "a positive outcome to the Kashmir issue is in the air." APHC leaders were among the guests at an iftar party hosted by the Pakistan high commissioner in India this week.

The problems in the way of the Kashmiri leaders taking a united stand on their response to a possible solution of the Kashmir dispute should not be minimized. The sheer number — more than two dozen or so — of the freedom fighters' parties cannot but be regarded as a hurdle. Moreover, the fact that some of them have been involved in militant activities will also add to the difficulties.

The *Dawn* correspondent, who was at the Pakistan High Commissioner's iftar party, noted that the hardline Kashmiri leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani stayed away from the other Kashmiri leaders, including Bilal Lone, Javed Ahmad, Mir Shabbir Ahmad Shah and Yasin Malik — all front-ranking freedom fighters. That cannot be regarded as a good omen.

However, it is important that peace must prevail not only between India and Pakistan but also between the two subcontinental powers and the state of Kashmir. Of the Kashmir freedom fighters, Bilal Lone is said to be optimistic about being able to unite the fractious leadership of the freedom fighters. According to reports, he is being tipped as a member of the group in Kashmir planning to travel to Pakistan for what have been called "political talks."

The Pakistan high commissioner's statement at his iftar party as reported by *Dawn's* New Delhi correspondent, is very thought-provoking and deserves to be quoted verbatim. The high commissioner, Aziz Ahmad Khan said: "The nuclear arsenals of India and Pakistan are proving to be too weak because of the forces of history. Momentous days are ahead and I am very hopeful."

Obviously, General Musharraf's call for a national debate for a possible solution of the Kashmir dispute must not be allowed to go unheeded. In fact, hopefully it should evoke a positive response and ultimately lead to a positive outcome.