

Letter from New Delhi

A blueprint on Down Kashmir

6/11/07 By Kuldeep Nayar *Kashmir*

WHETHER we like it or not, President General Pervez Musharraf has been able to retrieve the Kashmir problem from the backburner. Our satisfaction is that the military establishment he heads has realized that no solution is possible through hostilities.

This is a substantial gain because from the days of the Tashkent Agreement in 1966 New Delhi's endeavour has been to convince Islamabad to renounce the use of arms to end all disputes between the two.

Now when the talks look like throwing up a solution, we should not be seen flinching. The international community is watching the progress on Kashmir anxiously. We should not be found wanting. Moreover, this is an opportunity the two countries cannot afford to miss.

Musharraf has set the ball rolling. He first told two Indian journalists that the solution of Kashmir lies in identifying the area, demilitarizing it and giving it a status. Subsequently, he gave shape to his proposal by specifying seven areas: plains, including Jammu, foothills up to 7,000 feet, Pir Panjal, the valley, the Great Himalayan zone, upper Indus valley and the northern areas, the Karakoram, parts of which are with China.

For the first time, a Pakistan ruler has proposed independence for Kashmir, besides joint control or UN mandate. Musharraf must have done the rethinking after talking to the Indian journalists, including myself. At that time, when told that the Kashmiris wanted independence, he said that they would "step back" once concrete proposals were on the table. This might still happen. But independence is an option as of now.

New Delhi has not yet reacted to Musharraf's proposals in any significant manner. In the past there have been remarks like "the sky is the limit." Still India has been fiercely supporting and sustaining the status quo. That is the four corners of our policy on Kashmir.

The home ministry has a department on Kashmir which does not believe in having any input from outside. Politicians in power and bureaucrats in the department work out a strategy,

make any proposal on Kashmir so that I might one day help the process of negotiations. My profession of writing demanded me to react to the situation prevailing at a particular time. If that rules me out I cannot help.

The crux of the problem is the valley. The Indian parliament has also asked the government to take up "the other Kashmir under Pakistan's occupation." So there are two units: Kashmir and the Azad Kashmir. They have established their identity in the last 55 years — the first is Kashmiri-speaking and the second Punjabi-speaking. My suggestion is that both Kashmiris should be given autonomy. That is, the governments in these two regions should enjoy all subjects except defence, foreign affairs and communications.

The three subjects were the ones which the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir gave to New Delhi when he signed the Instrument of Accession to integrate his state with India. The Azad Kashmir is directly under Islamabad and enjoys only the crumbs of power thrown at it. My proposal gives it full autonomy like the one in Kashmir on the Indian side.

The border between the two Kashmiris should be made soft so that the citizens of the two Kashmiris travel freely, without any passport or papers, in both the parts. (I hope terrorism will be over by that time). The status for these areas is that of autonomous units. The three subjects, foreign affairs, defence and communications, will vest in the government in New Delhi as far as Kashmir is concerned and Islamabad regarding the Azad Kashmir.

Both the Kashmiris should be demilitarized, India withdrawing its forces from the valley and stationing them at the valley's border. Pakistan will do a similar thing regarding the Azad Kashmir. The UN and major powers should be individually or collectively involved to guaran-

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not policy, as and when the situation demands. A few former bureaucrats are thrown in as interlocutors every now and then to know the mind of leaders in the valley. The department often gets it wrong.

What Musharraf has proposed is re-division of Jammu and Kashmir. This is something to which none in the government — the opposition or even the experts — has applied the mind, at least not methodically or seriously. Even if they had, I do not think any government in New Delhi can sell to the country a proposal which suggests division on the basis of religion and throws out the status quo completely. True, a sterile policy is worth jettisoning but when the price demanded is a seven-tier state, the suspicion heightens.

I believe that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh proposed to discuss options when he met Musharraf at New York, putting two riders: one, no territorial adjustment, and two, no division on the basis of religion. Musharraf's proposals eschew the word, religion, but the geographical changes he suggests are primarily on that basis.

An unsteady secular polity like ours cannot accept this. Any division or even a hint of it may revive the horrors of partition. The defeated BJP is only looking for a semblance of chance to revive Hindutva which, at present, does not arouse any response.

Still Musharraf's seven-region proposal should not be rejected outright. It can be made the basis for riveting a setup which may ultimately overcome the objections voiced by India, Pakistan and the Kashmiris. Why not merge the seven regions into two units so that they are viable and, at the same time, can pass muster to be acceptable to the majority.

I have a proposal. Having been associated with leaders and people in the state for more than four decades, I consider myself competent as well as involved enough to suggest a way out. Once youthful Kashmiri leader Yasin Malik advised me not to

date. Musharraf must have done the rethinking after talking to Indian journalists.

tee the demilitarization of the areas if and when the final settlement is reached.

The settlement should be final. There will be no reopening. Both countries should withdraw their complaint from the UN and other international bodies.

All the 72 confidence-building measures — India has increased the number from eight to 72 — should be implemented straightaway so that people-to-people contact increases and trade gets going.

I know Musharraf is allergic to the Line of Control (LoC). But there has to be some line drawn to demarcate the border. The LoC can be straightened as prime minister Indira Gandhi had suggested to the then Pakistan prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto at Shimla. Islamabad knows it well that the international community is in favour of the LoC becoming a permanent border, with minimum changes.

Since communications is one of the subjects entrusted to the central government on either side, the autonomous areas will not feel that they are landlocked. Facilities available in both India and Pakistan will be at the disposal of two Kashmiris. With soft borders, they can trade between themselves, have a common currency if they so desire and receive tourists freely from all over the world.

Both Kashmiris can transfer more subjects to central governments, Azad Kashmir to Islamabad and the valley to New Delhi. It is up to their state assemblies to do so once the settlement is signed, sealed and delivered and fresh elections held.

The writer is a leading columnist based in New Delhi.

By Harold Meyerson

more political conversions the Democrats: The number of 2000 Gore voters crossover to vote for Bush this and 2000 Bush voters crossover to vote for Kerry seem equal. Rather, they boost totals in small towns mlets, among Protestant icals who don't often yond nearly everyone's tion but their own. Karl strategy — that Bush ttain a majority by a bilitation of the right — was vindicat-

ed and then some on Tuesday.

What Bush won on election night was a narrow "moral majority." The overwhelming support the president won among traditionalist churchgoers of modest means was rooted in an affinity of values. There's no evidence to suggest that Bush's "Medicare reform" — his term for a huge giveaway to the prescription drug industry — yielded him any votes at all.

Although Bush claims a mandate for his right-wing economics, that's clearly not what won him and other Bush Republicans the support of his evangelical base. — Dawn/Washington Post Service