

Fixation with the LoC

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PAKISTAN'S refusal to accept the Line of Control as an international border, as stated repeatedly by the foreign office, the president and now parliamentary sub-committee on Kashmir, is at best a case of jumping the gun. One says this because since the beginning of the composite dialogue now under way with India, the two sides have barely got down to discussing Kashmir, let alone started working on a resolution of the 57-year-old dispute.

Moreover, the LoC has hitherto not been part of the India-Pakistan broader disagreement on Kashmir. Instead, Pakistan has long had a principled stand on the issue, saying it is a matter of the Kashmiris' right of self-determination and not merely a territorial dispute with India, as opposed to the way New Delhi has seen the conflict.

For its part, India should realize that its long-held position on Kashmir that it is its 'atoot ang' (integral part) is untenable. It is all about laying a claim on a territory whose majority of native inhabitants does not wish to remain part of India. The challenge now is that while both Pakistan and India have agreed to discuss Kashmir as part of the on-going composite dialogue, it is unclear how the two sides plan to bridge the gap that exists in their respective perceptions of the conflict.

Earlier, Pakistan's stepping down from insisting that a UN-sponsored plebiscite be held in the disputed territory to ascertain its future was a pragmatic concession made with a view to set the tone for a constructive engagement with India. This should clear the way for the Indians to start a meaningful dialogue with the Kashmiris at their end. Simultaneously, India should stop evading a dialogue with Pakistan on the subject. In good time, the three parties to the dispute can meet and thrash out a final settlement.

Leaving the final status of the LoC and India's claim over all of Jammu and Kashmir aside, the truth is that Kashmir today is a neglected humanitarian tragedy. What is more disturbing is that the world has left it at the mercy of India and Pakistan to resolve between themselves. According to independent sources, the conflict has claimed over 100,000, mostly civilian, lives since the uprising began there in 1989 — a fact that has been conveniently shoved under the carpet.

An estimated half a million people, comprising both Muslims and Hindu Pandits, have been driven away from their homes in the Kashmir Valley and condemned to live as refugees. Thousands of men have been tortured by the Indian security forces, and a large number of them have 'disappeared' after secu-

rity forces took them into custody. Many more have been coerced by militants into taking up arms against repressive Indian rule. Women have been raped and children kidnapped. What more does the world need to acknowledge Kashmir as a seething humanitarian disaster?

A generation of Kashmiris has grown up away from home. While native Hindu residents of the Valley have sought refuge in Jammu and Delhi fearing threat to their lives, Muslims have trailed into Azad Kashmir by the thousands to escape persecution by the Indian security forces. The Valley has been under the worst kind of repression, with summary execution laws in place that do not give the accused the right to defend themselves. There is a paramilitary person to keep guard on every three Kashmiris. Tourism, once the economic lifeline of the Valley, has shrunk tremendously in the

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face of the violence that has been going on there for the last 13 years.

The Congress-led Indian government should own the fact that much of the mess created in Kashmir today has not been the handiwork of the outgoing BJP-led government. To be true to history, the BJP had inherited the Kashmir problem the two times it came to power in India but, toeing its hard-line on the issue, it offered no break from the past. Fraudulent elections held in the Valley under successive Congress governments in the past and installation of non-representative governments in the restive state were what resulted in the outbreak of the insurgency there in 1989 in the first place. If Dr Manmohan Singh's government can find the courage to own these facts as the starting point of his quest for a Kashmir solution today, there is every hope that a new beginning can be made.

The Kashmiris today are a paradox unto themselves. They are a largely divided people as far as their disparate groups' political thinking and agendas are concerned; yet the only unifying factor among them is their common refusal to be subjugated by New Delhi. India needs to ascertain the reasons behind this massive alienation among the people it insists on counting among its own. This cannot be achieved through use of force or coercive methods, but only through pursuing an honest and result-oriented dialogue.

For its part, Pakistan should stick to its original position, arguing for the Kashmiris to be given a chance to exercise their right of self-determination. The insistence on the LoC not being acceptable to Islamabad as an international border at this critical juncture is ill-timed, and it can be expected to have little positive bearing on the All Parties Hurriyat Conference leadership's decision to enter into a dialogue with New Delhi. Islamabad should instead find the courage to say that any solution acceptable to the Kashmiris will also be acceptable to Pakistan. This is necessary to disprove the impression that Islamabad may be pulling the strings for certain breakaway Hurriyat camps.

Pakistan stands to lose nothing by forcefully enunciating this principled stand, for it is after all the Kashmiris' long-usurped right of self-determination that has been Islamabad's rally-

ing cry on Kashmir. The public opinion back home is quite favourably disposed towards such a principled stance. The odd ones out there, the extremist elements, for one, who may seek to get political mileage out of this should not be a cause for holding the majority of moderate Pakistanis hostage to the Kashmir dispute — now that there is a hope of moving forward on this stickling issue.

To build on the emergence of this public opinion within Pakistan, and to ease up the pressure on the APMC leadership, India would do well to take a number of confidence-build-

ing measures. Withdrawal of Indian troops from the restive Valley should be expedited, and restrictions placed on the movement of Kashmiris within the state as well as across the LoC could go a long way in creating goodwill on all three sides.

The proposed bus service between Muzaffarabad and Srinagar can start right away if New Delhi stopped insisting on passports and visas being prerequisites for facilitating travel between the two sides. Leaving aside the final settlement of the dispute between India and Pakistan, this should be permitted on purely humanitarian grounds. Families living on both sides of the LoC have been separated by war and bad blood between the two countries for too long, and they can only respond positively to such a gesture, which will help further the cause of finding a lasting solution to the dispute.

Statesmanship, rather than political one-upmanship, is what is required in Islamabad and New Delhi to move forward on the road to reconciliation which both sides have verbally committed themselves to by promising to travel and meet up each other halfway.

General Musharraf is right when he says that Kashmir is ripe for a solution; India should take up the challenge and show the generosity and confidence expected of it as being the larger, more democratic and powerful country of the region.