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Pak-reference
20/07/04

Truth about Kargil

PRIME Minister Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain's categorical rejection of the suggestion for holding a judicial inquiry into the Kargil episode is in keeping with our record in hushing up unpleasant matters and avoiding fixing responsibility. Talking to reporters in Lahore on Sunday, he said an investigation into the Kargil affair would open a Pandora's box of controversy. Surprisingly, in rejecting the suggestion, the prime minister went on to deliver his own verdict. Kargil, he said, was a "collective responsibility", and the chief of army staff, Gen Pervez Musharraf, had kept Mr Nawaz Sharif, then prime minister, informed of the operations. He said that he could give the dates on which Gen Musharraf had met Mr Sharif. According to him, a judicial commission could not go beyond collecting evidence and that what he was saying was an eyewitness account of the meetings between Mr Sharif and the army chief. Mr Sharif insists he was not fully briefed.

Contrary to what happens here, we have the example of the Iraq war and the number of commissions set up by the victors to let their peoples know the truth. Two commissions have recently given their verdicts in Washington and London on the intelligence hoax preceding the war. There have also been inquiries into the intelligence leak involving Dr David Kelly and the BBC, and into Iraqi prisoner abuses. Recently, the Butler commission delivered a damning indictment of the Blair government on intelligence doctoring about Iraqi WMDs. The commissions' findings have done no harm to these nations. Our governments usually sweep such matters under the carpet in the

"national interest". We know, for instance, what happened in such cases as the assassination of Liaquat Ali Khan, the 1971 East Pakistan debacle, and the Ojhri camp inferno. These reports were never made public, with the exception of the Hamoodur Rahman Commission's findings, which were released decades later. In each case, publication was withheld to cover up misdeeds.

Kargil hit the headlines in the summer of 1999. Such was the intensity of fighting in that mountain outpost that the world became convinced that it would lead to an all-out war between Pakistan and India. Mr Sharif's subsequent rush to Washington, his fateful meeting with President Clinton, the decision to pull back — all this is part of Pakistan's recent history. The future generations must know who were the brains behind the Kargil adventure; did the army act on its own and keep the government of the day in the dark, or was the prime minister "on board" as often claimed by the military? Obviously, there are conflicting versions, Chaudhry Shujaat's being one of them. Why not let an independent judicial commission inquire into the affair and come up with its findings?

Heavens would not fall if the truth about Kargil is ascertained and made known. After all, the episode is more than five years old. We have lived with its consequences. So most certainly we can live with the truth too. In any case, those found responsible for the Kargil adventure need not have sleepless nights. The former prime minister is Saudi Arabia's guest while the army chief is today the president of Pakistan. The inquiry commission's findings will merely uncover the truth for history's sake.