

Washington Declaration Opens Other Fronts

Syed Talat Hussain writes from Islamabad

CHAOS reigned in Pakistan's decision making corridors as different sections of the establishment tried to form a plausible response to a deepening impression that prime minister Nawaz Sharif's meeting with president Bill Clinton had led to a bad compromise on Kargil.

Chief of the Inter Services Public Relations, Brig Rashid Qureshi closed himself with the information minister Mushahid Hussain in long afternoon meetings and the Foreign Office officials took great pains to explain to journalists that there was no change in Pakistan's position after Washington talks.

But it was a flight against the wind.

A strange mixture of disbelief, anger, disappointment in the civilian and military segments of the establishment greeted the outcome of the Washington meeting, widely seen as a sign of Islamabad's backing down in Kargil.

A senior army officer who did not want to be named said that regardless of what happened in Washington the ground situation will not change. "How will it be do it there in the battlefield?", he said.

"We gained a great deal in Kargil, which was our finest hour, but we have thrown it all away in Washington," said Professor Alifuddin Turabi, Nibr Amir Jamaat-e-Islami, Kashmir who claimed that his par-

ty's trained men are still fighting in the slippery slopes of the Kargil sector.

This is a characterisation, which sums up the general perception about the Washington Declaration. It has not been lost on keen observers that the Joint Declaration is a total reversal of Pakistan's policy on Kargil.

The third paragraph puts the onus of Pakistan of taking the initiative for restoring the Line of Control to its original position. "President and prime Minister agreed that concrete steps will be taken for the restoration of the Line of Control in accordance with the Sino Agreement."

Mr Sharif by agreeing with President Clinton on this point in fact has admitted that not only the Kargil constitutes a violation of the Line of Control, but that it was in Pakistan's power to undo this violation.

What is more it is only "once these measures have been taken", says the Declaration that India will cease hostilities. This is precisely what the Indians have been saying it all along--that Pakistan has to first withdraw its forces and the so-called infiltrators for the

Indians to talk peace with Pakistan. Moreover, there is no mention of the Kashmir dispute in the Joint Declaration and the word "sanctity" is used for the Line of Control, which is normally reserved for permanent borders between countries.

"No what you look at it,

it is a climb down and a sal," says Lt General (retired) Hamid Gul, former Director General ISI. It was partly to make for the glaring shortcomings of the Joint Declaration that the press statement issued from Washington by Pakistan's spokesman goes to extra lengths to underline that the Kargil issue's solution is connected with a solution to the Kashmir issue, which is a dispute between India and Pakistan.

But that is too little too late. There is hardly a soul in Pakistan who does not read the Washington Declaration as a unilateral decision to surrender the strategic advantage that Pakistan had by grabbing the heights in the Kargil sector.

The question now is how Mr Sharif will soothe a seething discontent bred by this perception. Will he and his spin-doctors now harp the line that by restoration of the Line

of Control mentioned in the Washington Declaration mean another vindication of Pakistan's policy? Or will he come up front and declare in public that he has taken this decision to avoid war and to promote peace in the region?

Clearly the Army is not interested in commenting on what happened in Washington. The ISPR chief in his Monday evening briefing did not take questions on the Washington parleys. "With due apology I will abstain," was his response when he was asked how the end-result of Washington discussions changed the military situation in Kargil.

Let the prime minister come back and then we would know who said what and what was meant by which term," he added. Significantly, his entire briefing talked about the success of the Kargil operation for the Army that Kargil has been a brilliant tactical move and their media representatives have consistently maintained that it has cost India heavily. If the Washington Declaration now has to be followed up with what could mean losing these gains, the Army will not be a happy lot.

Part of the Kargil battle, it seems, will now be played on the domestic front.

He did give his interpretation of the phrase "restoration of the Line of Control" by saying that the Indians have violated the Line of Control repeatedly in the past and these violations should be remedied. But there are those who are less tactful in handling their first reactions to the Washington Declaration than the polished men in uniform.

"We lost him in the Kargil war and now there is talk of a pull out, of a withdrawal, of a compromise. It breaks our heart. Kargil carries the blood of our man," said a relative of a Major, who lost his life along with four others of the same rank. This kind of talk is commonplace, among those who have lost their kith and kins in the two-month long battle in Kargil.

Then there are the hardliners groups some of whom have already said that they reject the Washington Declaration. More important is the question of the Army's stand on the issue. There is a general consensus in the Army that Kargil has been a brilliant tactical move and their media representatives have consistently maintained that it has cost India heavily. If the Washington Declaration now has to be followed up with what could mean losing these gains, the Army will not be a happy lot.

The same questions were still being asked of Indian Army officers -- how far is the LoC now; how many intruders remain in Indian territory; and when will Indian troops push back the intruders to touch the LoC. The army officers find these

Fighting Goes on...

Sharif-Clinton deal has little effect in the battlefield, reports Binoo Joshi from Drass

questions irritating and refuse to answer. "We are making progress," Col. Avtar Singh keeps telling journalists, making a mention of several successes that have come the Indian Army's way in the past seven weeks.

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