

The Elusive Peace: Hopes and Fears in Kashmir

CAN there be a negotiated peace in Kashmir? Such a question has been more than intriguing to the millions of South Asians wry of continued hostility between the two core regional countries India and Pakistan over the Kashmir imbroglio. Until now no one has bothered to raise a query like this as both India and Pakistan, especially since the uprising of the Kashmiris in 1989, remained adamant in pursuing military solutions to the problem. Both collectively spend half a billion dollars each year to support their militaries in Kashmir. And both have deployed a quarter of their respective total military strength in a show of might and to control the situation in favor of their respective viewpoint. Both also allegedly toyed with the idea of the use of their recently acquired nuclear arsenal during the Kargil conflict. Despite these recent humdrum of militaristic approach neither Pakistan nor India have been able to achieve any significant strategic gain in Kashmir. Kashmir has remained beyond the reach of both New Delhi and Islamabad.

However, after eleven years of bloodletting and no signs of a probable military solution in sight, India and Pakistan seem to have gauged that it is now time for them to start showing political gestures and pursue a negotiated peace with dignity. Keeping in line with the ground realities both countries have taken steps to reduce tension in Kashmir. First came the visit of retired Indian General Chibber who brought a personal message of peace from Prime Minister Vajpayee to Pakistani Chief Executive General Musharraf that was followed by Hizbul Mujahideen's unconditional cease-fire offer in July. Finally, in early December 2000, India launched the peace process by declaring unilateral cease-fire offer on its territory and Pakistan reciprocated by a truce offer along the LoC. Since then India has extended its cease-fire and Pakistan begun withdrawing its troops from the borders. These are bold initiatives that have raised the hopes of the Kashmiris, if not of the entire

A point to ponder is that there is no easy way out to a protracted conflict like Kashmir. The actors of this saga must remain aware about the numerous breakdowns they would encounter and they must not lose their hearts. The fact that all parties -- India, Pakistan and the Kashmiris themselves -- realize the need for a negotiated peace by denouncing the militaristic solution is heartening and holds the hope that the elusive peace in Kashmir, after all, may not be beyond reach.

region, that the peace that eluded the generations of Kashmiris and South Asia at large, is perhaps in the offing. But along with the resurgent hopes there are apprehensions and fears about its final outcome.

However, achieving lasting peace is always difficult and complicated. As they say it is easier to wage a war than building peace. So there are reasons to be apprehensive, especially in case of Kashmir where the policies pursued by India and Pakistan, since their independence in 1947, have created a complex and seemingly intractable situation. Achieving peace is, thus, a gargantuan task that calls for concerted efforts by the Indian and Pakistani leadership. As of now they have taken right steps in the right direction. But will they be able to bring all concerned parties to the negotiating table in order to build a lasting peace, which the Kashmiris more than any one else deserve so badly? What are the chances of its success? And what are the impediments that might subvert such ground breaking initiative? Speaking of the hindrances the following come to the mind. First, South Asia has been unfortunate, to say the least, in having a kind of leadership who instead of sincerely trying to resolve this thorny issue that have bled both countries white, used it in their internal politics. Time and again the people were badly let down because of the leadership's inability to rise above the narrow politics and confront the problem with committed political will. On the contrary, instead of demonstrating sagacity and wisdom in their actions the leadership remained hostage to the disrupting elements like the RSS, Shiva Sena and philosophy of Hindutva in case of Vajpayee, and Islamists/fundamentalists as far as Pakistan is concerned. Time and again the leadership has given way

to their mischievous game. This has been evidenced when Hizbul Mujahideen's (which is the most important, largest and most indigenous militant group in Kashmir), unconditional cease-fire offer in July was short-lived due to its quick rescindment under Pakistani pressure and derogatory statements by Indian officials. Second, the military and its intelligence of both India and Pakistan routinely reinforce these internal political dynamics.

not on speaking terms with its neighbour for last one year, has lost much of its credibility in asking for rights of self-determination for the Kashmiris since the military take over in that country. Islamabad, like India, is also under intense pressure from the international community to begin dialogue with New Delhi in order to resolve this tricky problem that might trigger a nuclear confrontation between the two. So there seems to be a conducive

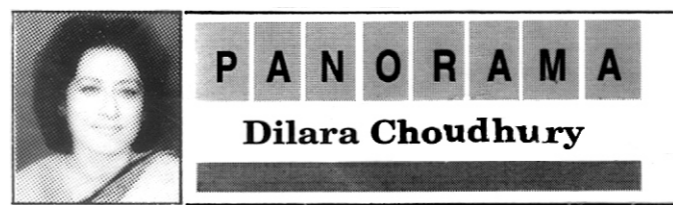
pro-Pakistani smacks of doubt about its credibility. In order to demonstrate its sincerity it will have to allow leaders of both factions of APHC to go to Islamabad and hold talks with the Pakistani officials and the *jihadi* groups based in that country. Otherwise it would be looked upon by the militant groups like Harkat-ul Mujahedden and Hizbul Mujahedden as a ploy to divide their movement itself.

Second, years of absence of electoral politics in Kashmir have resulted in the disaffection and alienation of its people and have given rise to multitude of voices and opinions about the possible solution of Kashmir issue ranging from an independent or protectorate Kashmir to a divided, or internationally observed Kashmir. Moreover APHC's factional divide, militant groups like Hizbul Mujahedden, doubts about its possible mediating role between India and Pakistan, the demographic dispensation of the entire State of Jammu and Kashmir pose serious questions about APHC's claim as the sole representative of the Kashmiri people. Lastly, APHC's *modus vivendi*, which would set the parameters of the negotiation does not stress on how three different trends like Pakistan and several Kashmiri groups wanting to hold tripartite talks, India wanting nothing but bilateral talks and the militants favouring three-way talks can be accommodated.

Having highlighting all the pitfalls that may impede the peace initiative and various pessimistic observations of the pundits on its final outcome one does have to admit that the resolution of Kashmir problem and search for peace there has indeed come a long way. Attempts to resolve it through wars and multilateral talks gave way to bilateral talks between India and Pakistan. None have worked. Now

there is new thinking. This is where the hope lies. Several factors need to be considered if the peace process is to be seriously pursued. India needs to maintain cease-fire even in the face of 'provocation' from militants like Harkat-ul Mujahedden who by the way also have welcomed Kashmiri leaders' visit to Pakistan, and remain committed to allow disaffected Kashmiris to reenter Kashmiri politics. Whereas Pakistan must reassess its Kashmir policy. Most important of all, the Kashmiris, including women, must speak in one voice and present their case from a centralized viewpoint of peace.

Human dimension of the crisis must be brought to the fore. It must be told over and again about the untold sufferings of ordinary Kashmiri men and women. It must be told how an old man caresses the graves of his six sons at the edge of a purple coloured saffron field with loving tenderness and hopes that his sons have not died in vain. It must be told how the multitude of women's lives have forever changed with no faults of their own. And lastly, there must be institutionalization of a durable peace process possibly by initiating three strands of dialogue so that all parties can communicate with each other without actually sitting around the same table. A point to ponder is that there is no easy way out to a protracted conflict like Kashmir. The actors of this saga must remain aware about the numerous breakdowns they would encounter and they must not lose their hearts. The fact that all parties-- India, Pakistan and the Kashmiris themselves realize the need for a negotiated peace by denouncing the militaristic solution is heartening and holds the hope that the elusive peace in Kashmir, after all, may not be beyond reach.



Dilara Choudhury

Indeed, there is no dearth of warmongers on both sides of LoC. Their alleged covert activities such the Red Fort incident, bombing in several places in Pakistan, and killings of 35 Sikhs in Chittisinghpura in March 2000, allegedly committed by now defunct militant group Ikhwanis with links to the security forces (Praful Bidwai: The Daily Star) are a few examples whose ramifications can easily turn any peace initiative upside down.

But despite these pitfalls there are hopeful signs. First, New Delhi realizes that its decade old policy to seek a military solution to the problem has not worked as evidenced by Army Chief Padmanabhan's remark that the army can control the militancy but cannot eradicate it. Whereas the militants also discern that they cannot throw the military out. As such there is some kind of internalization by both sides that political solution is the only course open. Second, Pakistan, which is

environment to begin a peace process. And as India is still refusing to engage in direct dialogue with Pakistan over Kashmir, the All-Party Hurriyat (freedom) Conference (APHC), an alliance of 23 Kashmiri secessionist groups, has emerged as a possible go-between. New Delhi has agreed to allow the leaders of APHC to visit Pakistan for talks on how to organize a dialogue involving India, Pakistan and the Kashmiri leadership.

These are heartening and praiseworthy developments. These could provide the nascent peace process a structure as well as channels of communications among the concerned parties. But here again there are several factors within the peace initiative that can impede its further progress. First, although New Delhi has agreed to allow the APHC leaders to travel to Islamabad, but its half-hearted approach like agreeing to issue visa only to pro-independence faction of APHC while denying the same to

LETTER FROM AMERICA

The Question Lingers in the Aftermath of the Election, Why did Al Gore Lose?

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

If Gore was smart enough to swallow his pride momentarily and had requested Bill Clinton to campaign for him in Arkansas, Gore not Bush, would now be preparing to take office as the next President of the United States. There is a silver lining for Al Gore in all these comedy of campaign errors. In the 1888 Presidential election although Grover Cleveland won the popular vote, he lost the Presidency to the electoral vote winner Benjamin Harrison. Four years later, in the rematch, Cleveland annihilated Harrison!

FOR the second time in twelve years, Yale beat Harvard in the US Presidential elections. In 1988, Yale's senior George Bush clobbered Harvard's Michael Dukakis. In 2000, in an election he should have easily won, Harvard's Al Gore somehow managed to "lose" to Yale's George W. Bush, the senior Bush's son. In the same time period, Yale is three for three. In a contest between Yale undergraduate senior Bush and Yale law graduate Bill Clinton in 1992, Yale naturally was victorious. Yale can now boast of more history. It has the first ever First Lady who is also a Senator at the same time, in the person of Hillary Rodham Clinton. Bill and Hillary met at Yale Law School library in 1973. After a courtship that started with Bill explaining to Hillary the merits of the gorgeous Arkansas watermelon, they married in 1975.

For those keeping counts, Al Gore has beaten George W. Bush by 500,000 popular votes in the 2000 American Presidential election. President John F. Kennedy used to keep a piece of paper in his pocket with the number 100,000 written on it. That was a humbling reminder of his narrow margin of victory over Richard Nixon in the 1960 Presidential election. Judging by a few of his nominees for higher office, it is doubtful that President-elect Bush has negative 500,000 written anywhere on his torso.

President-elect Bush has nominated an extremely diverse cabinet. Although only 8 per cent of the African-Americans voted for Bush, the President-elect awarded three top posts to African Americans General Colin Powell (Secretary of State), Stanford University Provost Ms. Condoleezza Rice (National Security Advisor) and Rod Paige (Education Secretary) prompting late night comedian Jay Leno to joke: "Bush has nominated all the blacks who voted for him!" Bush has designated two Hispanics and one Japanese American (Norman Mineta) for cabinet posts as well.

Bush has also nominated former US Senator and Attorney General of

Missouri John Ashcroft for Attorney General of the United States. Civil rights groups are up in arms over this nomination. Ashcroft single-handedly prevented the promotion of a Missouri black judge to the federal courts by labeling him "pro-criminal," which naturally was preposterous. Overt racism being unacceptable these days, bigots like Ashcroft employ covert methods. In his opposition to the black judge, Ashcroft could never admit that the judge's race is what bothered him. Instead, he sent out coded messages to his white conservative constituency, who easily decoded the prejudicial message and voted, overwhelming for Ashcroft last November. Unfortunately for Ashcroft, African Americans too turned out in unprecedented numbers and voted against him. Consequently, Ashcroft became the first man to lose to a dead man (Ashcroft's opponent Governor Mel Carnahan of Missouri died two weeks before the election; his seat has been filled by his wife). In a Senate split 50-50 between Republicans and Democrats, Ashcroft's confirmation remains very much in doubt.

Bush's cabinet is a throwback to the seventies and eighties. Vice President-elect Dick Cheney, Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice had served under President Bush Sr. as Defense Secretary, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Security Staff, respectively. Secretary of Defence-designate Donald Rumsfeld held the same position under President Gerald Ford. Bush Sr.'s Secretary of State, James Baker, viciously prosecuted the court fight to stop the Florida recount that led to junior Bush's election. There is a growing feeling that the senior Bush will be running

the show for his not-so-smart son and will vicariously act as the President, an office he so despondently relinquished to Bill Clinton in 1992.

An American friend once told me that the Democrats are one step away from socialism and the Republicans are once removed from dictatorship. I have seen a little example of the latter. The ferocity with which the Republicans conducted themselves during the Florida recount was frightening. They were not going to accept anything other than a Bush victory, no matter what. Had Gore won, it appeared as though the Republicans were ready for a coup d'etat.

The Republicans had around their operatives flown in from around the country to Florida to intimidate and threaten Florida officials into stopping the recount. They linked up with those adorable Cuban Americans of Miami (who have not forgiven the Democrats for Elian Gonzalez's return to Cuba, although Al Gore had shamelessly supported them), burst into a counting station, and had the ongoing recounting stopped at Miami's Dade county. How can a party professing democracy go to such extraordinary lengths to stop the counting of legally cast votes? Only if the party believes it lost. (Miami Herald newspaper is recounting the votes unofficially; Republicans will find a way to stop that too!) Of course, whenever the Florida Supreme Court authorized recounts, the Republicans, supposedly promoters of state's rights, repeatedly appealed to the US Supreme Court to thwart the wishes of Floridians as expressed through their highest court.

The US Supreme Court is supposed to be above politics. It proved

to be anything but. These nine men and women have extraordinary power. Once confirmed by the US Senate, they have a job for life. Although five of the justices are guilty of blatant partisanship, they can be removed only through impeachment. And the Republicans are going to impeach them? They would like to put them up on pedestals for worship! There was a cartoon in a newspaper showing President-elect Bush rushing towards Chief Justice Rehnquist on sighting him during his inauguration and hugging him! Bush was not elected; he was selected by the right-wingers in the US Supreme Court. That makes Bush not President-elect, but President-select!

It is so important to put honourable persons on the Supreme Court. In 1962, the current Chief Justice William Rehnquist was seen questioning the qualifications of blacks who had lined up to vote. Add to that the woman-harassing, pornography-loving, self-hating black Clarence Thomas, and you have the makings of a kangaroo court!

There were hilarious aspects to the Florida recount. So much fuss was created over the chads in the punch cards that the President of the African Republic of Chad, H. E. Idriss Deby, demanded royalty every time his country's name was mentioned. He complained about the unflattering prefixes that were being used to characterize his nation hanging chad, dimple chad (sounds like the name of a Mumbai film actress) and most objectionable, "pregnant chad!"

Green Party Presidential candidate Ralph Nader was blasted by the Democrats for costing Gore the Presidency by siphoning away votes that would otherwise have gone to

Gore. "With the economy being so good, if Al Gore cannot get elected, he has only himself to blame," retorted the Lebanese American and Princeton graduate. Nader has a point.

Comedians have a way of cutting through all the crap and capturing the essence of the person. By their assessment, Bill Clinton will be known not as an ex-President but as a sex-President. George W. Bush is portrayed as a moron who gets scared every time he has to attend an "intelligence briefing!" Al Gore is portrayed as an intelligent but stiff person, stiff physically and mentally. How true!

Right off the bat Gore told everyone that he was going to be his own man; meaning he was going to disassociate himself from Clinton. Someone should have reminded Gore of an immortal saying of the pugilist genius Muhammad Ali. "He was a nobody before I picked him to fight me," said the prince of heavy-weight boxing of an opponent, "I will make him a nobody again once I am through with him."

Gore was a nobody before Clinton picked him to be his Vice President. By dissociating himself from Clinton, Gore dissociated himself from the unprecedented prosperity of the Clinton Presidency had ushered in for America. Since Gore refused to take credit for America's prosperity, Bush had a far easier time attacking Gore's abstract "ideas," and claims, among which was the absurd "I invented the Internet!"

Bill Clinton has been the most successful campaigner in the history of American politics. Republican politicians of all shades, from our Governor Christine Todd Whitman (soon to be the head of the Environmental Protection Agency under President Bush) to 1996

Republican Presidential candidate Bob Dole, all emulated Clinton's campaign style of riding a bus to popular locations and pumping flesh. In the final days before November 6 election as Bill Clinton campaigned in New York, turning a close Senate race into a rout for Hillary, someone shouted a question at Bill Clinton: "Why are you not campaigning for Al Gore?" Clinton shot back: "Ask Gore!"

False pride had almost cost Ronald Reagan's Vice President George Bush Sr. the Presidency in 1988. Initially, he too refused to enlist the assistance of another immensely successful and popular two-term President, Ronald Reagan. Bush realized his mistake in time, ate his words, requested Reagan to campaign for him. That made the difference. Reagan was able to deliver key states to Bush.

In last November's election, Gore failed to carry either his home state of Tennessee or Bill Clinton's home state of Arkansas. Bill Clinton had won both of these states easily in 1996. If Gore was smart enough to swallow his pride momentarily and had requested Bill Clinton to campaign for him in Arkansas, Gore not Bush, would now be preparing to take office as the next President of the United States.

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To the Editor ...

Winds of change in the RMG factories

Sir, The Daily Star of Dec 24 contained two news items of importance to the policymakers, to address the current inhuman plight of the RMG factory workers in Bangladesh. One was the Odhikar's probe report on the factory fire in the Narsingdi factory, and the other is the emergence of a progressive group inside the BGMEA organization, who wish to break away from the traditional and outmoded handling of the HR issues in the garment factories, and go in for new factory zones outside the city areas to work under modern and enhanced environmental conditions.

Once the modern base is established, the garment industry will perform more efficiently (a ten per cent rise in efficiency is a huge gain), and under better safety conditions. Minimum standards of working conditions would be introduced progressively, which could be replicated quickly (as standardised methods do not take long to copy).

The factory culture has to change in respect of human rights and safety conditions, after which the system losses would automatically reduce.

In view of the accelerated exports of RMG, the government had so long been rather coddling the industry. Now it has to be firm in the implementation of the regulations-- the image of 200 plus deaths due to fires is just unacceptable.

The spirit of change has to be accepted in principle. Workers are human resources, and their welfare cannot be handled in a step-motherly manner. The earlier the reforms are carried out, the better for the industry. The relocation away from the cities would greatly reduce the pressure in the urban areas due to migration. This should become an election issue, as the political leaders cannot afford to shirk their direct and indirect responsibilities.

A Citizen
Dhaka

Dreadful experience

Sir, It was a lovely country full of jovial children, bleating sheep, mooing cows and working adults. Every place looked like a flower garden. Butterflies fluttered and birds chirped. Until it happened. Until the deadly bomb burst.

A war was going on between the Israelis and the Palestinians. I had gone there as a journalist from a Bangladeshi daily. The war was perilous but nobody expected it to be so bad. Nobody expected the Palestinians to blast a bomb in a crowded area. The whole place rumbled and shook. It was like a huge earthquake. In the distance I had seen a huge, massive explosion. Massive piles of dust and rocks rose from the heart of the earth and veiled the sky. It seemed like doomsday.

I ran miles non-stop. I ran for my life. Ran until my legs gave out. I had taken pictures to take back home. When I thought I was safe I stopped.

I thought it was over. But how wrong I was! It was the beginning of the end.

The consequences were dreadful. It turned out that I was one of the few survivors. The whole beautiful place had turned into a shabby, ugly, smelly place. No children laughed. No babies played. When I went back to the place I saw bits and pieces of animal and human bones everywhere. When I touched them they broke into dust.

All alone there I stood on my knees and cried. I cried until my eyes stung. It felt so horrible. One small object destroying so many blissful lives.

When I came back to Bangladesh, I was said to be a hero. People cheered me for my bravery. But I was not proud, nor happy. Instead, I was full of melancholy, as my heart kept on recalling the helpless cries of the victims crying for help.

Anika Mariam Ahmed
Mymensingh Road, Dhaka