

PAKISTAN

Powell in Islamabad

M B NAQVI writes from Pakistan

THE upshot of US Secretary of State Colin Powell's visit to Pakistan on Monday and Tuesday was a 'strengthened bilateral relationship' between the US and Pakistan and which is to be of long term nature. Mr. Powell had laid down the stiff conditions outside which the US policy would not go during and after his talks in Islamabad and New Delhi through a well timed press briefing to correspondents who were travelling with him in the plane that brought him to Islamabad Monday evening. Nothing that Secretary Powell said in Islamabad departed from that matrix. It does look as if that some of Powell's words warmed the cockles of President Musharraf's heart. They were about re-establishing US-Pakistan ties on a more permanent bases and to strengthen them. There was some meat for Pakistan's military in the restoration of military-to-military ties between the two countries. It ranges from training of Pakistani personnel in America's military schools to actual military supplies.

The US traditionally values foreigners' military training in America: many of them go on to play a big role in the governance of their own countries. In the military-to-military ties, the cynics see, a supply line of recruits to America's under-cover agencies. Powell also dwelt on the much desired and frequently predicted aid for Pakistan. He showed a particular concern about Pakistan economy's need for support. He was appreciative of the new burdens on it in the shape of an unending series of Afghan refugees, as also of its fragility. He mentioned the specific aid of \$ 393 million. But the real promise was that when he goes back he would recommend to the concerned officials to look into the matter of affording Pakistan the much needed relief from the debt burden that most Pakistanis think is back breaking, though there was no promise of debt write offs.

In other words, the earlier speculation that Secretary Powell will unfold an attractive aid package in Islamabad was wide off the mark. It is probably as a result of satisfactory outcome of his talks with President Musharraf that an aid package will be drawn up. Was Mr. Powell satisfied? The vibes are that the strengthening of Pak-American ties that both Musharraf and Powell

dwell on needs with the requirements of both sides.

Pakistan President's indication that his commitment to the cause of war against terrorism and its specific shape of military campaign in Afghanistan is unflinching one and he is prepared to pay the political price for it has won the day for him. But that is in terms of aid quantum plus one vital concession that can only be inferred rather than was spelled out. It is over Kashmir. That the US President asked both countries to "stand down" and not create complications for America's more important "activities" in Afghanistan can be read both ways. It can satisfy the mediation-hungry Pakistanis, reinforced by Powell's diplomatise in Islamabad, while it might be just no more significant than a dismissive reflex reaction of a man preoccupied with something more serious.

By and by, the Americans have come to occupy a position of significance vis-à-vis the Kashmir dispute. While India goes on declaring non-acceptance of any third party mediation and Americans go on repeating that they are not mediating, both sides tend to invoke Washington whenever a crisis erupts which is frequent. Indeed India depends on the US to 'restrain' Pakistan while the latter loves to hear American officials making their de rigeur declarations that a resolution of Kashmir problem that satisfies Kashmiris and their urging all sides to respect human rights of Kashmiris is music to Pakistani ears. The US has gradually become a key player in South Asia and both Islamabad and New Delhi are happy enough. That Powell is likely to tactfully urge on India's government to resume dialogue with Pakistan has already won him Pakistanis support on other, and more material matters. What has been gained by America from this visit is Pakistan's more willing membership of the western alliance against Taliban. Its cooperation will be more unreserved and whole hearted, though Musharraf stuck to his three limits of cooperation: exchange of intelligence, use of its air space and logistic support use of two airports-bases of Panni and Jacobabad. The US for its part did not go out of the four walls he had verbally erected for American policies on Afghanistan.

America is not giving any veto to India or Pakistan over what kind of

government should replace the Taliban regime or how the military campaign against Afghanistan is to be conducted or when to terminate it. Indeed he had thus warned Musharraf what not to expect in the talks. In the event, US Secretary of State seem to have withdrawn the concession that the British PM Tony Blair seemed to have made when he said the west recognised that Pakistan has 'valid concerns' about the formation of a new government in Afghanistan when and if the Taliban regime collapses.

Originally Pakistan had warned of dire consequences of replacing Taliban with the Northern Alliance and how barbaric it was. Powell sweetly agreed with it and repeated banalities of what a broad-based Afghan government has to be, without committing whether even 'moderate' Taliban would or should be included in it or whether Northern Alliance will be or will not be supported militarily. For a general to waffle on with clichés, without being pinned down to any specific commitment, Powell showed himself to be a more adept diplomat. The US is

encouraging Pakistan to come closer and do more for the war and US purposes if it wants more aid and support. Apparently Musharraf's three boundary walls on cooperation do not make the US enthusiastic; it has to do more.

Naqvi is a noted Pakistan columnist.



INDIA

Powell visit stirs a hornet's nest

RAMAN SWAMY

US Secretary of State Colin Powell's trip to South Asia, instead of improving relations between the two neighbours, has actually heightened tensions between Pakistan and India.

A war of words has erupted between New Delhi and Islamabad.

While Pakistan has hit out at what it calls "unprovoked firing by Indian troops on civilians in Azad Kashmir" and placed its Army on high alert, India has rejected any proposal for talks with the Musharraf regime unless cross-border terrorism is on the agenda.

In a fitting rebuff to Powell's attempt to lay stress on the need to resume Indo-Pak dialogue on the Kashmir issue and his offer to "help" the process, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said there could be no discussion with Pakistan till Islamabad understands that cross-border terrorism is the core issue and not Kashmir.

India's interpretation is that the visiting US Secretary of State, while seeking to insist on a resumption of dialogue between New Delhi and Islamabad to resolve the Kashmir issue - which the Bush Administration sees as central to relations between India and Pakistan - has clearly indicated a new "tilt" towards Pakistan's perception on the issue.

India is clearly ready to show

some muscle and convey to the US that the stage for peaceful dialogue with Pakistan has passed. Just as the US refuses to have dialogue with the Taliban, India scorn Musharraf's Pakistan as a "harbourer of terrorists".

After having stirred up a hornet's nest by his controversial comments on the "centrality" of Kashmir in Indo-Pak relations, Powell on Wednesday morning "clarified" that he had been misquoted.

However, India has noted that he made no attempt to dilute his references to the "aspirations of the Kashmiri people". Moreover, beyond referring to the October 1 terrorist outrage in Srinagar, he did not specifically condemn the spate of killings in Jammu and Kashmir by Pakistan-sponsored militant outfits.

Powell claimed he had never said Kashmir was "the" central issue. He had merely emphasised that the importance of resolving the Kashmir issue by saying it (Kashmir) was central to the relationship between India and Pakistan. "Somehow, an article 'the' slipped in front of it".

During his joint news conference with External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh in New Delhi, Powell maintained that his reference to Kashmir in Islamabad was a "sound statement" which should be viewed in totality. "Read the rest of my statement", he urged, "You need to focus more on the rest of my statement" (that India and Pakistan should resolve their differences).

Seeking to wriggle out of the controversy he had triggered off during his joint press briefing with President Musharraf in Islamabad on Tuesday, Powell sought to downplay the issue by stressing on the importance of resuming the dialogue between India and Pakistan.

The US, he said, was a "friend of both countries" and was keen that the two neighbours resolved their differences by getting back on the track of dialogue and discussions.

If Powell was able to defuse the controversy, his task was made easier by Jaswant Singh, who described his clarification as "more than adequate". Singh, however, made it apparent that India did not agree with his viewpoint. He said that even if there were differing

perceptions, there was no need to be "disagreeable about disagreement".

At the outset of the joint press conference, the External Affairs Minister set the tone by describing Colin Powell's brief visit to New Delhi as an "informal" visit, not by a US Secretary of State, but by his "friend" Colin Powell. He said that he had held "cordial, frank and fruitful discussions" with Powell and had exchanged views on the "entire range of issues" between India and the US during "supper".

Observers view the Indian stance as a deliberate bid to publicly underplay what is being seen as a distinct new "tilt" towards Pakistan by the Bush Administration. New Delhi evidently did not want to show any "discourtesy" to the visiting dignitary while he was on Indian soil.

However, the Prime Minister's categorical rejection of the Powell peace talks proposal later in the day set at rest any doubts about whether there would be any "meek acceptance of American dictates" (as alleged by Opposition party spokesmen).

The Vajpayee government has sent out clear signals that it was in no mood for any reconciliation on the issue of terrorism. The message being sent out is that New Delhi's "patience has run out" and India would not hesitate to "use a thorn to remove a thorn", as Prime Minister Vajpayee himself evocatively described it.

That New Delhi is not happy with Washington's constant harping on Kashmir was made evident in the morning press conference itself when Jaswant Singh made it a point to underline the Indian view that the state of Jammu and Kashmir is an integral part of the secular character of India and there was no scope for "re-inventing the two nation theory". Powell was present when this statement was made.

India is also of the view that it has made more than adequate overtures to Pakistan as evidenced by the Lahore bus yatra by Vajpayee and the more recent hosting of the Agra summit, which General Musharraf broke off.

Courtesy: www.tehelka.com

SRI LANKA

New challenge ahead

EKRAM KABIR

FRESH SPELL OF UNCERTAINTY seems to have gripped Sri Lanka once again. Just one year after the last parliamentary polls, President Chandrika Kumaratunga has dissolved the parliament on October 10 and scheduled snap elections for early December. She decided to do so after it became clear that her People's Alliance government would face defeat in a confidence motion.

This was not unexpected. When the PA government was reduced to a minority following the exit of members of a key constituent, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), it was widely felt in Colombo that Kumaratunga would prorogue parliament to save the government from being defeated at an impending vote of no-confidence. She however has acted within the constitution. The

constitution allows a president to prorogue parliament for a maximum of 60 days.

On the other hand, this has angered the opposition leader Ranil Wickramasinghe of United National Party (UNP) because it had prevented the opposition from gaining its majority on the floor of the parliament.

This move is being looked at Kumaratunga's setback and the president has been accused of being arrogant as far as power is concerned. According to Kumaratunga's critics, it was a "one-woman show" like the late president Premadasa's "one-man show".

Earlier, Kumaratunga also called a referendum on a new constitution. This move took Sri Lanka by surprise. Kumaratunga has been talking about a referendum on the need to change the constitution ever since she became president in 1994. Even if she won

any referendum, it was unclear how she would use it to change the constitution. A referendum is not legally binding on parliament. Given the highly polarised and confrontational style of interaction between the PA and the opposition United National Party (UNP), co-operation to bring about constitutional change is difficult.

Now, Kumaratunga is expected to focus on the need for change in the electoral system. An Information Ministry statement has also confirmed that. For rest of the country, the challenge now is to see that a free and fair election is conducted. But, the mechanism that was being installed to achieve that purpose, the election of Independent Commissions for the Elections, Police, Public Service, Media and the Judiciary has also been halted with the dissolution of the parliament.

What happened in the past few elections held has been not

very much appreciated by Sri Lanka observers. Some gave bad name to the democratic process of the country. Gen. Anuruddha Ratwatte and S.B. Dissanayake were accused not only by the UNP, but also by their own MPs, such as the General Secretary of the PA, D. M Jayaratne, of getting supporters to commit offences such as attacking polling centres. Kumaratunga despite strong protests made within her own party, not only restored them as cabinet ministers but went on to give additional designations.

Atremendous task lies ahead for the political parties in Sri Lanka to ensure fair elections, and new strategies have to be thought of instead of the former tactics. Fair election leads to democracy, which is essential for ending 18-year ethnic conflict in the emerald island.

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NEPAL

Mayday, mayday

Nepal's domestic airlines are on the verge of collapse.

BINOD BHATTARAI

JUST a few years ago Nepali domestic aviation was a model of successful deregulation. New airlines were popping up every week, services were getting better, and even the price of tickets had started going down.

Today it is all in shambles. Battered by a tourism slump that started with the Indian Airlines hijack in December 1999 and carried on to the post-11 September worldwide downturn, Nepal's domestic airlines are struggling to stay aloft.

The impact of the policy of opening up the skies was there for all to see:

The number of Nepalis flying internally jumped almost five times from about 350,000 in 1992/93 to 1.8 million last year.

Domestic airlines hauled a million tonnes of cargo last year, compared to half that amount in 1992/93.

Last year there were 19 private airlines flying, compared to only Royal Nepal Airlines ten years ago.

The government had given air operator certificates to 31 airlines by 2000.

To be sure, most of the aircraft in the domestic field are second-hand, safety standards have not been up to mark with a series of tragic crashes. But tourists and Nepali passengers have benefited. There are now more than 20 flights a day between Kathmandu and Pokhara, about 15 a day to Lukla. There are no waits for flights to Jomsom or Bhairahawa. However, airlines have not made much of an impact in remote, non-profitable sectors like Jumla, Bajhang or Taplejung. Private airlines that do venture out to these routes are known to charge

double, sometimes triple, the Royal Nepal Airline's rate on the sly. There were already serious problems with undercutting and unhealthy competition for passengers and the domestic airline industry was getting ready for a shakeout. There were talks of mergers and acquisitions. Also, as the airline industry generates quick revenue that is where fly-by-night investors would want to be. Anyone with just enough money to buy/lease two aircraft can join and these would be the first to leave when the downturn begins.

But the crisis in tourism has made matters much worse and much faster than anyone imagined. Now, the challenge is staving off bankruptcy. A tourism slump had hit nearly all private airlines and they had pinned their hopes on the autumn season. But the cancellations after 11 September and the strikes against Afghanistan have spooked all except the most determined tourists. "We just don't have enough people flying," said Lt Col (ret'd) Narayan Singh Pun, who took over as Chairman and Managing Director of Necon Air last month. "Necon has big problems, almost close to shutting down if things don't improve."

Necon's losses over the past few years have ranged between Rs 100-120 million and revenues are now sliding even faster. According to Pun, Necon's monthly earnings average around Rs 40 million, while the operation cost is to the tune of Rs70 million.

No business can run with such statistics but industry analysts suspect the situation is similar for others in the business, but they do

not disclose their numbers as easily. When Pragnay S. Rana of Mountain Air was asked why the airlines were still flying. "We have no choice," he shot back. "We have to get as close to break even hoping that things will improve."

Necon has been trying to cut costs by taking on a smaller partner in a marketing alliance but the process remains caught up in employee resistance and other procedural hold-ups.

There are just too many reasons

for the problems nagging the industry. First is oversupply of seats, especially to the main hubs and the tourist routes, which has triggered steep undercutting in the already low fares. Necon's latest rates, sent to travel agents two weeks ago, offer a mountain flight in an ATR plane for as low as \$1400. In a full-occupancy scenario this translates into a ride to Mount Everest and back for as little as \$32, almost 60 percent below the government-approved rates. It is a different

matter that passengers may not actually get tickets that cheap because the travel agents pocket the difference.

The problem with all operators is that they are already so deep in debt and commitments that it is almost impossible to close shop and walk out. If low tourism is one reason for the downturn the other larger problem is government, and the incomplete liberalisation of domestic aviation. By law, the government fixes the fares, which

have not been revised since 1993 while prices of everything from spares, insurance and fuel, and parking and landing fees have increased several times. The insurance premiums have also doubled since the last fare revision not to mention the new coverage airlines have to seek to protect themselves from possible terrorist attacks.

Some of the existing domestic fares are just unbelievably low and operators say they don't cover the costs even at 100 percent occu-

Requiem for Congress men

ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE death of Congress leader Rajesh Pilot in a road accident last year near Ajmer in Rajasthan state was a bolt from the blue for the main opposition party. They saw in him a person who possessed the potentials of coming to the top of leadership at one stage and lead the country. Pilot was less than 50 years of age when he died but he had already given indications that he was meant to play a big role in the Congress and also for the nation. A former home minister, he contested for the presidency of the Congress party, but lost the race to elderly Sitaram Kesri.

Another heavyweight who was in the fray for the top party position was Sharad Pawar of Maharashtra, who later quit the party on differences with Sonia Gandhi, who replaced Kesri as the party chief even before he could complete his term. Pilot, despite his defeat in the election for party chief, remained active and was preparing himself for a bigger role in future while remaining loyal to Sonia. The very fact that he did contest the position of Congress chief was sufficient indication of his importance in the organisation and that he was in serious quest to cut-out a pivotal role for him in the Congress. But the premature and shocking death robbed the party and also India off a politician who was known for his bold personality, forthright comments and organizational capability.

Congress had to bear this loss. But the death of Madhav Rao Scindia has been a bigger shock for the Congress and political

circles in the country. The 54-year-old deputy leader of the opposition in the Lok Sabha was largely seen as the future top leader of the party. He was already enjoying the status of being only after Sonia Gandhi and it's needless to say that Scindia was clearly among those in the line to succeed her.

A number of senior leaders like Arjun Singh, Sitaram Kesri, Pranab Mukherjee, N.D. Tiwari, A.B.A. Ghani Khan Chowdhury and Sheila Kaul remained in touch in Sonia since the death of Rajiv and encouraged her in joining public life but some youthful influential leaders like Madhav Rao Scindia, Ghulam Nabi Azad and Rajesh Pilot enormously influenced her important decisions. While some of the elders fell wayside or were sidelined, the relatively younger leaders increased their importance in the party and also with Sonia Gandhi. Madhav Rao Scindia, the Oxford-educated sports-loving politician from former princely state of Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh, was definitely at the top among them.

Secular and progressive in approach, Madhav Rao sharply differed in politics with his mother Vijay Rajee Scindia, who was a senior leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). She disliked her son so much that a "will" released after her death some time ago showed that she deprived Madhav from her assets for sheer political differences. The son has intermittently refused to succumb to the pressures of mother to change political line and even ignored the threats of deprivation of assets which obviously are enormous in size.

Scindia won elections for the

Lok Sabha time and again braving her mother's opposition. He was popular among the people for his sincerity, commitment to the causes he believed and a lifestyle which was broadly in contrast with a person of his social and family status. Madhav was shocked but accepted gracefully when he learnt that his late mother deprived him from most properties despite being the only son. He paid the price for refusing to toe his mother's political line which he thought was wrong. His death in a plane crash the other day while traveling to Kanpur from Delhi to attend a political rally came at a time when the Congress is struggling to revert to its position as largest political party in the country and capture power at the federal government.

The party was encouraged in this direction as its performance in the five state assembly polls a few months ago was encouraging. Sonia Gandhi, a new comer in politics, is still seeking to adjust with the leadership of the main opposition and is relying on a some party leaders for organizational and other assistance. Evidently, she is at the helm of Congress because of family tradition since the party is emotionally bound to the India's famous political "Nehru dynasty" of which she is the latest link despite being foreign-born and having less penchant for politics earlier.

Madhav Rao Scindia was among her closest aides for political advices and policies. Being from vast Madhya Pardesh state, Madhav was also a challenge to Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who also hails from the same state although he was

elected from Uttar Pradesh. In his death, the Congress and the opposition have lost a real force whose absence is being deeply felt at a time when the opposition is striving to recover from setbacks it suffered in the last national polls but found enough glimpses of hope in the state assembly elections in which the centre-ruling BJP and its allies cut sorry figures.

Sonia Gandhi, although leader of opposition in the Lok Sabha, is clearly handicapped by her inability to converse much in Hindi and is still grappling to acquaint herself fully with Indian political and cultural conditions. Hence, Scindia was in effect the leader of opposition in the lower house and he was doing a commendable job when judged from opposition points of view. An MP for several terms with enough prospects awaiting for him, he spared no efforts to strengthen the opposition politics and reinforce the Congress at all levels.

Scindia also did not lag behind in promoting his leader Sonia as he was close to Rajiv Gandhi. He stood by her when senior leaders like Sharad Pawar, A.P. Sagma and Tariq Anwar parted ways with her. His unfortunate death in one hand is a big blow to Sonia personally as she needed him most for embellishing her leadership qualities, and the congress and the opposition on the other since he was a strong anti-government voice that was useful. Indian opposition has certainly been weakened by the untimely death of a dynamic politician.

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