

In search of peace

By Kuldip Nayar

It was a welcome coincidence that both Bangladesh and Pakistan figured in the recent discussions in New Delhi. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed was on her first official visit after a landslide electoral victory last year. Top Pakistan lawyers, academicians and human rights activists sat in the capital with their counterparts to find 'A Road to Peace'.

What was common to both meetings was the search for peace. Both took certain decisions which, if implemented, will yield numerous benefits. The difference is that while the governments of Bangladesh and India signed several agreements to restart their friendship after a dreary journey, India and Pakistan have gone still further apart.

The Manmohan Singh government was at pains to accommodate Sheikh Hasina to show that India had opened all its doors to cultivate at least one of its estranged neighbours. On the other hand, New Delhi took hardly any notice of the three-day India-Pakistan meeting right under its nose.

The media was slightly better. This shows the difference between official and non-official initiatives, notwithstanding the fact that both represent the people's aspirations. In Third World countries, nothing moves without an official nod.

Sheikh Hasina's visit came at a time when she had assessed her country's needs and India's capacity to meet them. She did not demand anything. But it was apparent that if her government did not lift her people economically, her popularity graph would dip further — it is already down from 83 to 67 per cent.

The India-Pakistan meet also felt that the time was ripe for the two countries to start talking. In fact, its plea gives New Delhi an opportunity to think over its stand which has become counter-productive.

Sheikh Hasina's biggest contribution to Bangladesh is the strength she has given to democratic and secular forces — the plank on which she fought the election in which she won three-fourths of the seats in parliament. India, too, has gained. The lessening of fundamentalism in a neighbouring country helps.

Sheikh Hasina will not allow Bangladesh's soil to be used by anti-India groups. When Dhaka handed over to Delhi ULFA (United Liberation Front of Asom) leaders, the insurgents from Assam, it was the beginning of a new chapter.

In fact, during the talks between Manmohan Singh and Sheikh Hasina, when the latter assured the Indian prime minister that no terrorists would be allowed to function from her country the entire scenario changed. She had a long list of demands.

But even before she could name the first, Manmohan Singh reportedly said that she did not have to ask for anything. India would go to any extent to meet Bangladesh's needs.

The proposed \$600m credit to Dhaka was doubled. India gave an undertaking that it would not take any step regarding the Tipaimukh hydroelectric project without the consent of Bangladesh, which is a controversial issue. Nor did New Delhi ask for any transit facility which again is a sensitive issue in Dhaka.

The resolve to eliminate terrorism is what the region wants, from Kabul to Dhaka. Islamabad would like New Delhi to join the operation but India is in no mood to listen to Pakistani's argument for the resumption of a composite dialogue.

The 26/11 carnage, even though 13 months' old, is still fresh in the minds of the people. The India-Pakistan meet has also appreciated the point and has suggested a bilateral and regional approach to combat the menace.

It would be better if Manmohan Singh and Sheikh Hasina were to integrate their efforts with the ones initiated by Pakistan Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani and Afghan President Karzai.

Pakistan would then have no argument for refusing to allow the withdrawal of its forces from the eastern

border with India to deploy them in the north-western tribal areas for a meaningful fight against the Taliban.

The Pakistani speakers spoke of the havoc the terrorists were creating in their country. One of them said that anyone leaving the house was not sure whether he would return alive. Islamabad needs to be retrieved. This does not mean that India would be less anxious in having Pakistan pursue its effort to crack down on the perpetrators of 26/11. But it does mean that New Delhi's frozen attitude would melt so that the two countries can meet across the table once again.

Disappointment in Pakistan over the 'no' to talks should not make President Asif Zardari indulge in jingoism. He may want to bolster himself politically. But his rhetoric may make him more dependable on the army which has been the biggest factor in Pakistan.

Islamabad has not yet understood how the system works in New Delhi. Otherwise, it would not have overreacted to the statement made by Indian army chief Gen Deepak Kapoor that India may have to prepare for war against China and Pakistan. However irresponsible the statement, it does not pose any threat to Pakistan.

The systems in the two countries are different. Gen Kapoor or the army has no say in India's political affairs. He is due to retire after serving his tenure. The government will soon be naming his successor. Making a mountain out of a molehill gives the impression that Pakistan is trying to score a point, however weak.

What this means is unending mistrust. Both sides must ensure that they do not present an exaggerated picture, indulge in accusations or imagine something which has no basis.

Sheikh Hasina's visit and the India-Pakistan meet should lead South Asians to consider what miracles can be achieved if all countries in the region were to pool their resources. They would not have to give up their separate identity or sovereignty. But they would be shedding distrust and suspicion for the good of the region.

The writer is a senior journalist based in New Delhi.