

OPINION

When Hamid Gul Offered India Peace

A. K. Verma

Former head of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Gen. Hamid Gul, who died recently, has been described in the Indian media as a monster, the originator and perpetrator of terrorism against India. Yet, there is another side to his personality which needs to be disclosed.

In early 1988, Pakistan President, Gen. Zia-ul-Haq, expressed concern that the Pakistan Army, by consuming almost 48 per cent of the nation's budget, was unfairly depriving citizens of funds which could raise their standards of living. He was particularly concerned about the expenditure on the operations in Siachen and was convinced that an agreement with India was possible to cut down on these expenses.

Gen. Zia was anxious for a meeting between the Intelligence Chiefs of

the two countries to explore possibilities and approached the then Crown Prince Hassan of Jordan to speak to the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and facilitate a move forward.

Intelligence chiefs' meet

Prince Hassan conveyed the proposal to Gandhi, who promptly agreed. The two Intelligence Chiefs then met at Amman under the aegis of Prince Hassan. What could be done was broadly discussed. They met again at Geneva after political endorsement of their confabulations at Amman from their Chiefs. The Foreign Offices and other elements of government on both sides were kept out of the loop though it must be assumed that Gen. Zia would not have embarked on this initiative

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without sounding out his Corps Commanders.

The final agreement between the two Intelligence Chiefs envisaged: a) withdrawal of the Pakistani forces to the west to the ground level of the Salto mountains; b) giving up of Pakistani claims to territory from NJ9842 to the Karakoram pass; c) the Line of Control to run North from NJ9842 along the western ground level of Salto exactly North till the Chinese border; and d) reduction of Pakistani troop strength by two divisions with some corresponding adjustments on the Indian side.

In confirmation of this understanding, Gen. Hamid Gul sent a GHQ Survey of Pakistan map where the new line of LoC north of NJ9842 and the western foot of Salto was clearly demarcated. After the receipt of this map, steps were undertaken on the Indian side to convert the covert operation to an overt process. First, the Director of Military Intelligence was asked whether a new Line of Control on the western foothills of Salto would be agreeable to the Army to bring about a solution to the Siachen question. He was sceptical of the Pakistani military accepting such a line but said that an effort could be made. Thereafter, the proposal was made into a Government of India proposition with the Ministry of Defence also

giving their assent. No one was, of course, told about the ground work done earlier by the Intelligence Chiefs of the two countries.

The two Chiefs had also agreed to remain in close contact with each other over the public telephone, using code words and names. One rewarding development of this relationship was that Gen. Hamid Gul decided, on his own, to return the four Sikh soldiers who had defected to Pakistan, angered over the Army assault on the Golden Temple. Over the telephone, he conveyed to his Indian counterpart that four soldiers would be released in a specific geographical area on a certain date.

The information was immediately passed on to the Border Security Force (BSF). The four were taken into custody by the BSF from the specified location on the date agreed. The BSF was given no inkling about how the release had been made possible .

Sudden end

A meeting of the Defence Secretaries of the two countries was already scheduled. It was decided that India would put forth the proposal for demilitarisation of Siachen from its side and await Pakistani reactions. The Defence Ministry had no idea that the proposal already had been agreed to by the Pakistani top authority at the

covert level.

On the designated day, the Indian defence delegation left for Pakistan but a supreme tragedy occurred simultaneously. It was announced that Gen. Zia-ul-Haq had been killed in a plane crash. Thereafter, Pakistan turned down the Indian formulation. It has not been heard of since.

On the Pakistani side, the secret operation, as it moved forward, was known only to the Pakistani High Commissioner, Niaz Naik. Sometime later, he also died in mysterious circumstances. After Gen. Zia's death, a civilian government took office in Pakistan. Gen. Hamid Gul was removed from the post of Director General of ISI.

When the Indian authorities made efforts to pick up the threads of the covert operation, they were told that no such operation was ever carried out and there was not a single paper in the Pakistani records which would testify to its existence.

Gen. Zia's was a major effort to break out of the psyche prevailing in Pakistan at the time but apparently his Corps Commanders had not realised the extent of compromise he would be ready to make to start a new beginning with India. Once they were informed about the exact terms, they became uneasy and wanted to stop the progress

of these developments at any cost.

Could it be reasonable to speculate that Gen. Zia's death in the air crash was actually a planned assassination, planned at the highest levels of the military hierarchy by those who were opposed to a policy of reconciliation with India? The new Zia line, of which Gen. Gul was the principal architect in Pakistan, was never consummated.

Rajiv's regret

Barbara Crossette, correspondent of *New York Times* in the early 1990s, following an interview with Rajiv Gandhi on May 21, 1991, hours before he was assassinated, quoted him as saying that during Gen. Zia's tenure, India and Pakistan "were close to finishing agreement on Kashmir. We had the maps and everything ready to sign".

It is thus clear that Pakistani generals will go any extent to prevent a new page opening up in Indo-Pakistan relations. This was evident also from the recent collapse of the National Security Advisor (NSA)-level talks. Two generals like Gen. Zia and Gen. Hamid Gul, who believe in taking unorthodox steps to solve disputes with India, are unlikely to emerge in Pakistan easily.

A charitable view could be taken

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that Gen. Hamid Gul's subsequently donning on a mantle of extreme hostility towards India was just to save his skin and whitewash his role in the secret talks between the two countries. ■

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