

Cease Fire With Fresh Hope?

Anil Bhat*

*[*The author, a strategic analyst and former Fellow, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, is Managing Editor, WordSword Features & Media]*

Yet another overt-ure for peace by India to Pakistan - this time, of a cease - fire on the 740 kms long Line of Control (LoC), the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL), (Siachen Glacier area), and the International Boundary - seems to have been received favourably. Because this stretch with the first two parts being of the steepest of climbs in the coldest of times, which simmered with the heat of bombardment and resounded with the staccato of small-arms fire, not to mention the amount of blood that has been shed, for over five-and-a-half decades, is reported to be silent.

Meanwhile, in the Valley, terrorist groups have been active, necessitating operations by security forces to continue. Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) activities in India's North-Eastern region continue unabatedly, with, in fact, a step-up of creating and fanning communal tensions through insurgent groups there. Two Pakistani terrorists of Hizbul Mujahideen were killed in an encounter with the police in New Delhi, near the Lotus Temple, on 7th December 2003, based on information from interrogation of two of their colleagues apprehended earlier. These terrorists, from whose hideout automatic weapons and explosives were recovered, had planned lethal attacks in the capital. While movement of terrorists across the LoC may have stopped, there are other routes from Jammu and even distant Sindh province of Pakistan on which movement into India is on.

However, the response of Pakistan Army on the border is a most welcome sign. If it continues in a sustained manner, without any excuses to resume, it will indeed make a meaningful beginning in a so far dismal record of Pakistani responses to many moves in the past by the Indian Government, including personal initiatives by Prime Minister A B Vajpayee, since 1999. There are a number of factors and events in the past five decades, which need to be taken into account, while proceeding with the present gesture.

While the United Nations 'arrangement', the Karachi and Tashkent agreements, following the 1947-48 and 1965 India-Pakistan wars are buried in history, the Simla Talks after the 1971 war resulting in the liberation of Bangladesh merit mention here because the then Pakistani Prime Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had begged his Indian counterpart, Indira Gandhi to return 93,000 prisoners of war in India's custody. She agreed and all the prisoners were repatriated in good health with a packet of sweets to each, to boot. There are still at least 54 Indian Armed Forces personnel captured then, languishing in Pakistan's jails, flouting the Geneva Conventions. This is the worst kind of prolonged torture to those personnel and their family members. Repeated requests have been stonewalled. Of course, none of the terms of the Simla Agreement were honoured by Pakistan. If this cease fire holds, then it can be said that one major aspect of that agreement has been implemented, albeit, three decades later.

During late Rajiv Gandhi's tenure as Prime Minister, as distinguished columnist, Inder Malhotra, speaking to this writer, expressed, ".....in 1988, there was great euphoria about Rajiv Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto, both young heads of state and untainted by the Partition, moving towards peace.....but all hopes were dashed after Rajiv's visit to Islamabad in early 1989..." In fact, the irony was that despite Bhutto's father being murdered at the hands of Pakistan's third dictator President, General Ziaul Haq, she went hysterical in shouting 'azadi' (freedom) for Kashmir in all her public speeches, while Haq's plan to destabilize India by waging proxy war and exporting terrorism - 'bleeding India by a million cuts' - was put into action during her tenure.

In 1997, when both India and Pakistan were celebrating their 50 years of independence and birth respectively, there were great hopes of the then Indian Prime Minister, I K Gujral, known for his doctrine for peace, and his civilian counterpart Mian Nawaz Sharif approaching the negotiation table, when some inspired leaks in American media about Indian non-nuclear missile deployment put paid to them. In 1999, when Vajpayee made the historic bus trip to Lahore, the then Pakistan Army Chief, General Pervez Musharraf's mis-adventurous plan of infiltrating the Northern Light Infantry into Kargil had already been put into action. Despite the bloody Kargil war, Musharraf was invited to India for the Agra Summit, which he made an absolute mockery of. Exactly three years ago, in December, 2000, the Indian Government had offered a Ramzan peace gesture of putting on hold all operations against Pakistan-supported terrorist groups operating in Jammu & Kashmir (J & K). This was further extended by two more months, even as a reduced level of engagements and apprehensions along the LoC continued. The net result was that the terrorist groups used this period of respite to regroup and reinforce their ranks, while the security forces suffered by having their intelligence network going cold. It was after this initiative that Pakistani terrorists attacked Red Fort, Indian Army's innocent family members in Kalu Chak, near Jammu, and Parliament. While there was public anger, India's response, even with its Armed Forces mobilised for ten months, was restrained.

Every winter, since the late 1980s, when the movement of terrorists from Pakistan Occupied Kashmir began, the winter snow has been the one major impediment to movement across the LoC. But as soon as it melts, induction of terrorists resumes with fresh fervour. Over the years alternate routes were also figured out, some as circuitous as from Akhnur, West of Jammu, where the great Indian plain ends and the hills begin, or even from parts of neighbouring Himachal Pradesh. So, the sincerity, or efficacy, of a positive change in ingress of terrorists can only be determined by the end of the summer of 2004.

In the years following the unprecedented terrorist attack of 11th September 2001 in New York and Washington, many other subsequent strikes elsewhere, have been traced to Pakistan's military-mullah combine, directly or indirectly, with reports of Osama bin Laden, his infamous Al Qaeda and Taliban being based in Pakistan's ungovernable Tribal region, as well as their spill-over, and 'outsourcing', for further destructive operations against many other countries. There have been reports of Al Qaeda members moving into Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, as part of Jaish-e-Mohammad, which has been active not only in J & K, but other parts of India too.

Whereas India needs to be very wary, Pakistan needs to do much more by way of reigning in the large number of terrorist groups its military establishment raised, which are still active in J & K and many other parts of India. The relationship between these groups and Pakistan Army is very old and obviously, as has been seen, even after 11th September 2001, not severed yet. Terrorist attacks after this date, even in a number of other countries, are reported to be by groups, which have direct or indirect connections with Pakistani terrorist groups and / or the ISI. This is one factor, which, despite American pressure on Pakistan, which is a major impediment to peace in the Indian sub-continent and even elsewhere, because not all the groups are under full control of the Pakistan's establishment.

There have been many people to people exchanges as part of Track Two diplomacy, the last of which was the one arranged by the South Asia Free Media Association (SAFMA). There is no doubt about a desire by people on both sides of the border for peace. The Pakistani establishment, controlled by its army, must begin thinking of the future of its country, its people, their aspirations and needs. Baby Noor, or other ailing people must enjoy life-saving medical resources in Pakistan, instead of senseless rhetoric and millions being spent on an unattainable obsession (five and a half decades of hostility with India over Kashmir) as well as pseudo-religious obscurantism. The Pakistani public has since long desired peaceful ties with India. When General V N Sharma, former Indian Army Chief visited Pakistan in the late 1980s for a reunion with his old schoolmates of Rashtriya Indian Military College (erstwhile Prince of Wales Royal Indian Military College, Dehra Dun, India), with a brief from then Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, to explore any opportunity for peace, the one question asked of him by shopkeepers in Lahore as well as other gentry, was "...is something going to happen?..."(meaning peace talks). Recently, during the exchange of visits of parliamentarians and others to both countries arranged by SAFMA, the general consensus by interacting Pakistanis was that the peace process need not be held up only for the Kashmir issue, which, should be resolved, but can wait.

There seems little doubt about the current Pakistani response on the LoC, coming as a result of pressure from the US. Some Indian observers feel that this response is to ensure that Vajpayee comes for the January 2004 SAARC meet in Islamabad in a mood to speak to Musharraf, for whose announcement in the media about the award of a Nishan-e-Pakistan to the former, has no takers. Be that as it may, the lull on the LoC must be made to continue towards a process of building up long lost confidence on both sides. Periodic telephonic contact by both countries' heads of military operations, with an understanding to increase the same if felt necessary, is indeed a welcome step towards a process, which shows a ray of hope towards making, what has often been referred to as a line of no control, to meaningfully, a Line of Control.