

India-Pakistan - Hope Springs Eternal

The first Indo-Pakistani summit in more than two years collapses over Kashmir, but a ray of hope remains around the goodwill that the meeting built between the leaders of both countries.

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By Ahmed Rashid/Lahore and Washington

In the 54 years of enmity that include three wars and countless deaths, no summit has generated hopes of peace among the peoples of India and Pakistan as high as mid-July's three days of talks in Agra, India, between Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf.

So when the nail-biting suspense ended with the collapse of the summit at the last moment, disappointment was huge. Musharraf, his face dark with fury, left for home. A draft joint declaration was abandoned in tatters. Prophets of doomsday scenarios for the Subcontinent could say, "I told you so." Even the gods appeared angry as an earthquake and storms hit Pakistan and parts of India. "The two leaders were clearly not prepared for a failure of this kind," said Shekar Gupta, chief editor of the Indian Express.

But amid the debris some hope remained. It centred on agreements on future contacts formulated before the row over the wording of the final statement. These agreements, though not laid out in any final communique, apparently stood and may provide a framework for resuming the peace process through dialogue. Of course this was a lot less than both sides sought. But expectations of what might be achieved grew unrealistically as the summit ran over its original two-day schedule before foundering over the disputed territory of Kashmir.

In the aftermath, both sides struggled to keep rhetoric under control and avoid a tit-for-tat blame game. Indian spokeswoman Nirupama Rao told a press conference that while "the commencement of the process and the beginning of a journey have taken place, the destination of an agreed joint statement has not been reached." Said Pakistani spokesman Maj.-Gen. Rashid Qureshi: "The ice has been broken and there is goodwill between the two peoples."

Indian External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh said the talks broke down after India wanted the summit document to state that "cross-border terrorism"-the euphemism for Pakistan-based militants fighting in Kashmir-was unacceptable and must cease. Pakistan holds that they are freedom fighters. But Singh said India hoped to keep talking. "We will pick up the threads from the visit of the president of Pakistan. We will unceasingly endeavour to realize our vision of a relationship of peace, friendship and cooperation with Pakistan," he told reporters. Pakistani Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar was even more upbeat, saying that "the two leaders had a meeting of minds" and "the existing goodwill can, and will, achieve mutually desired results." He added: "It is only appropriate that time should be given to a mutually acceptable formulation."

Both leaders are to meet again at the United Nations in September. Vajpayee at the summit accepted an invitation to visit Pakistan later this year. According to Pakistani officials and Indian press reports, both sides agreed to annual summits and bi-annual meetings of their foreign ministers to discuss three issues-peace and security, narcotics and Kashmir. "It may be a disappointment but not a disaster. I hope the substance will survive the disagreement over language," says Maleeha Lodhi, Pakistan's ambassador to Washington.

Outside the region the biggest disappointment was bound to be found in Washington, which is widely expected to step up its efforts to keep Indo-Pakistani relations from deteriorating again. Contrary to speculation in Pakistan and India, the United States did not directly pressure New Delhi to call the summit or try to micro-manage the build-up to the talks. Instead, the Bush administration went out of its way to convince visiting Indian officials since January that it wants India as a partner in its global and Asian strategy, particularly in dealing with China. But, as U.S. officials also stressed, New Delhi's bedevilled relations with Pakistan would limit how far India could become a true global ally of the U.S.

The summit fell apart as the U.S. is preparing to use a presidential waiver to lift sanctions imposed on India for its 1998 nuclear tests. Similar U.S. sanctions on Pakistan will not be lifted so fast. "In just a few months we have made extraordinary progress with India in defining our common interests in many fields-counter-terrorism, defence, trade, investment-and reducing tensions with Pakistan will enhance that," says a State Department official. "The

administration and Congress want to lift sanctions on India by the end of July." India meanwhile is preparing a list of U.S. weapons systems it wants to buy once sanctions are lifted-the first time that India would enter the U.S. arms market in 40 years.

Pakistan's problems with the U.S., meanwhile, centre on Afghanistan. "We cannot do Pakistan any favour because of its continued support to the Taliban in Afghanistan who back terrorism. And Pakistan has few friends left in Congress," says a National Security Council official. In addition, Islamabad is covered by several layers of sanctions-imposed in retaliation for Musharraf's October 1999 coup-that cannot be lifted before elections are held.

The summit's sad end was welcomed by Hindu hardliners in India and Islamic extremists in Pakistan and Kashmir. Should the Kashmir conflict intensify, moderates such as Vajpayee and Musharraf, who both made concessions during the talks, could be marginalized. A total of 90 Kashmiri militants, soldiers and civilians were killed during the talks and 139 in the nine days before them. Sayed Salahuddin, head of the Pakistan-based Hizbul Mujahideen, the largest group fighting Indian rule in Kashmir, told reporters: "The Indian leadership cannot be trusted and this is what we have been telling Pakistani leaders. Jihad [holy war] is the only solution."

But even if their leaders were not invited to the summit, many Kashmiris want an end to the territory's 12-year-old conflict that has cost 60,000 lives. "The time has come for a negotiated settlement," Mirwaiz Omar Farooq, the most revered religious leader in Indian Kashmir, said on July 11. "It's very clear everybody wants an end to the killing and destruction." In a confidence-building measure announced on the first day of the summit, India said it was withdrawing 20,000 of its 200,000 troops in Kashmir.

The failure was all the more disappointing because in four meetings lasting nearly eight hours in total, both leaders got on well and came so close to agreement. Initially India was determined to stay within the confines of "a composite dialogue" agreed in 1998, but in which Kashmir is only one of eight issues for discussion. India also wanted Musharraf to pledge to curb cross-border terrorism.

Pakistan wanted new terminology altogether, with Indian acknowledgement that Kashmir was the "core issue" between the two countries. "We cannot deny that there are vast differences between us," Vajpayee told Musharraf in their first private meeting, according to a text released by New Delhi. "We are willing to address these differences and move forward," but "let no one think that India does not have the resolve, strength or stamina to continue resisting terrorism."

leaders should build

In an early sign of problems at the talks, Musharraf told Indian newspaper editors on July 16: "I keep talking of Kashmir, you keep talking of cross-border terrorism . . . We can't even agree on what to call it-a problem, a dispute or an issue." But hours later a text was agreed by him and Vajpayee, after both made major concessions. Then, according to Pakistani officials and Indian media reports, hardline Indian ministers objected to the language and sent the text back twice to the Pakistani delegation requesting amendments, which ultimately the Pakistanis refused.

The summit failure highlighted the political problems for both leaders. India's ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, which dominates the federal coalition, was routed in state elections in May and faces more state contests in January. If defeated, an ailing Vajpayee might have to call mid-term elections and hand the BJP leadership to hardliners. Pakistan's regime is isolated internationally as it grapples with what some Western commentators have dubbed "a failing state."

The summit, however, gave both leaders plenty of media coverage and photo opportunities-a walk around the Taj Mahal by Musharraf and his wife, exotic meals and concerts. It was the first summit in the region played out live on satellite TV. Its closing hope is that both leaders can build on their bonhomie, not allowing hardliners in both their camps to push them further aside and leave only more bloodshed in Kashmir.