

Pakistan New Position On Kashmir

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AHMED RASHID IN KABUL

In a dramatic shift of policy towards the disputed region of Kashmir, President and army chief Pervez Musharraf said he was prepared to drop Pakistan's 50 year old demand that a plebiscite be conducted over Kashmir region which is disputed between India and Pakistan. In a clear bid to woo Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who is visiting Islamabad on January 3 for a South Asian summit meeting, Musharraf said his government would be "bold and flexible" in an attempt to resolve the dispute over Kashmir that has led to three wars between the two countries.

"We are for the UN Security Council Resolutions - however now we have left that aside," he told Reuters in Islamabad yesterday. A UN resolution after partition of the Indian Sub-continent in 1947 which was never implemented, stated that Kashmiris could decide whether they wanted to join India or Pakistan.

"If we want to resolve this issue, both sides need to talk to each with flexibility, coming beyond stated position, meeting halfway somewhere. We are prepared to rise to the occasion, India has to be flexible also," said Musharraf. Both countries numerous efforts at peace talks over the years have stalled over long held, rigid positions on Kashmir. India has long demanded that Pakistan stop supporting "cross border terrorism" or the dispatch of Islamic militants to attack Indian forces in Kashmir.

"The basis of everything, the basis of a reduction in militancy...is moving forward on a process of dialogue," said Musharraf. "If the political dialogue does not come about, who wins and who loses? It is the moderates who lose and the extremists who win," he added. Former Indian Foreign Secretary J.N.Dixit said the Pakistani leader's offer marked "an important shift in policy." Both countries are taking significant steps to reduce tensions before the two leaders meet in January. Vajpayee began the recent moves towards normalization of relations in November when he offered a 12 point package to Pakistan, which Islamabad has largely accepted. Since then the two countries have resumed bus services between each other capitals and talks are on to resume air and train services. There has also been extensive people to people contacts. Last week more than 1000 young Indian and Pakistani intellectuals, artists and film makers gathered in the port city of Karachi to demand peace between the two countries. Both countries have also faced unrelenting pressure from the US and Britain to resume a dialogue who have also urged China and Russia, the traditional allies of Pakistan and India respectively to get involved.

For Musharraf the most difficult policy decision is how and when to curb the cross border infiltration into Kashmir by Pakistani extremist groups. The Pakistani military and the intelligence agencies have had a close relationship with Islamic militants groups. However earlier this week President got a wake up call when extremists tried to assassinate him just one mile from his home, placing a bomb under a bridge which blew up just one minute after his convoy had passed.