

US diplomats, experts laud India, Pak peace effort

By Ashish Kumar Sen

Fremont (California), June 12: While Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Pakistan Chief Executive General Pervez Musharraf's forthcoming meeting may not yield a "perfect solution", policy experts, academics, two former US ambassadors to South Asia and a prominent Democrat Congressman agreed that just sitting down together was an essential component in diplomacy between India and Pakistan.

"The impulse for peace is very strong," Washington Democrat Congressman Jim McDermott told an audience at a daylong conference on Kashmir here on Saturday. "There is no perfect solution (to the problem in Kashmir), but if we keep waiting for one and don't talk, we will never get anywhere," said Mr. McDermott, a co-chairman of the congressional caucus on India.

The conference, *From Paradise to Ideological Battleground: A Symposium on the Kashmir Conflict*, was organized by the Indo-American Kashmir Forum. Former US ambassador to Sri Lanka and director of the South Asia program at the Washington D.C. based Center for Strategic and International Studies, Ms Teresita Schaffer said while it was easy to get cynical about a lengthy negotiation process, this was necessary.

Agreeing that there was no "perfect solution", Ms Schaffer, a former deputy assistant secretary of state for South Asia, warned neither the Indians, the Pakistanis nor the Kashmiris would be fully satisfied with any resolution. "Everyone will have to give up something. But all three will need to be satisfied enough to learn to live with the solution," she said.

In a wide-ranging discussion, panelists covered everything from the historical perspective of the issue and the impact of insurgency, to restoring normalcy and planning a framework for peace.

Mr. Yossef Bodansky, director of the US congressional task force on terrorism and unconventional warfare, presented a pessimistic view saying there was, at present, "no solution in sight".

Calling Kashmir a classic case of state sponsorship taking over a people's movement, Mr. Bodansky explained, "Terrorism in the Valley is driven by the Pakistani government's interests and not by a so called desire to protect the well being of the people."

Former US ambassador to Bangladesh, Mr. Howard Schaffer, however, said the insurgency had not been created by Pakistan, but was instead a home grown problem. He predicted it would be difficult to get a dialogue moving in a positive way, and cited the position adopted by the Hurriyat as being a sign of this.

Dismissing the significance of the Hurriyat in the upcoming dialogue, international coordinator of the IAKF, Dr Vijay Sazawal told *The Asian Age* state department officials had told him the Hurriyat had no legitimacy. "The US government sheds no tears for the Hurriyat," Dr Sazawal said.

Captain S.K. Tikoo (Retd.), general secretary of the Jammu Kashmir Awami Conference in Srinagar, said the Hurriyat was known as the "hartal party" in Kashmir. "It is a paper tiger," Captain Tikoo, who works with reformed militants, said.

On the other hand, Mr. Schaffer cautioned New Delhi must not shut out any groups. He said it was essential Kashmir be treated as a "political problem" and suggested there were three ways of dealing with it - "reducing infiltration on the Pakistani side, improving human rights on the Indian side and reducing the enormous Indian military presence in the Kashmir Valley."

Echoing former President Bill Clinton's opinion that the Indian subcontinent was the most dangerous neighborhood in the world, Congressman McDermott added Kashmir was the lynchpin of that problem.

"Gen. Musharraf should be given credit for accepting Mr. Vajpayee's invitation. He is sincere in his beliefs, but I think the fundamentalists are making things difficult for him," Mr. McDermott said while applauding Mr. Vajpayee for making the "right decision" by reaching out to the Pakistani General.

"The Vajpayee government has shown it is keen to extend its hand in peace no matter how much abuse that hand receives. I marvel at the strength of the Prime Minister," the congressman said.

Dismissing a suggestion that the US brand Pakistan a state sponsor of terrorism, Mr. McDermott said, "Name calling will not help India."

Others like Dr Hira Lal Fotedar, of the IAKF (Michigan), advocated the use of India's "entire military might" to crush the insurgency in Kashmir in the face of a failed ceasefire.

Deputy consul general at the Indian consulate in San Francisco, Mr. Abhijit Halder said this was, however, easier said than done. "The Israelis haven't had much success with this plan either," he pointed out.

As the conference entered its final session on a framework for peace, Ms Teresita Schaffer underscored the risk to the government that makes this peace. "This risk is far greater in Pakistan than it is in India."

She emphasized that both India and Pakistan would be unable to reach a settlement without some kind of "outside" assistance. "The government of India has made it reasonably clear that it is prepared for discreet diplomacy, and I think this is where the US can play a role," Ms Schaffer said.

In spite of some patches of pessimism, most delegates agreed that Prime Minister Vajpayee's invitation to Gen. Musharraf was a welcome step towards a solution to the problem in Kashmir.

"Getting there is much more difficult than defining precisely what 'there' ought look like. If you can start the process you are well on your way to having people who need to do so define the goal," Ms Schaffer concluded.

Other participants included Mr. Subhash Razdan, chairman of the board of trustees of the

National Federation of Indian-American Associations, Prof. Damodar SarDesai (professor emeritus at the University of California, Los Angeles), Dr Rajiv Pandit, Mr. Mumtaz Wani, member of the Srinagar bar council, Mr. D.N. Munshi, chairman of the board of trustees of the All India Kashmiri Samaj (India), Prof. Raju G.C. Thomas, Allis Chalmers, professor of international affairs at Marquette University in Michigan, Dr Subroto Kundu, past president of the Association of American Physicians of Indian Origin and Mr. Gaurang Desai, president of the Northern California chapter of the Friends of India Society International. Mr. Jeevan Zutshi, national director of the IAKF and Founder/President of Indo-American Community Federation, convened the event.