

## India asks Pakistan to jointly fight terror, discusses Kashmir CMBs

India Tuesday asked Pakistan to jointly fight terrorism 'amidst a new democratic environment' in Islamabad even as the two countries exchanged Kashmir-specific CBMs and moves for expanding economic ties.

As foreign secretaries of India and Pakistan met here Tuesday, India conveyed its concerns over cross-border terrorism, the recent attempts by militants to sneak into Jammu and Kashmir from Pakistan, and firing along the Line of Control (LoC) that divides the region between the two countries. One Indian soldier was killed Monday in the alleged Pakistan firing.

Indian Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon and his Pakistani counterpart Salman Bashir concluded their review of the fourth round of composite dialogue that ended last year on a positive note and expressed 'satisfaction' at the 'progress' in the talks. The two countries resumed the peace dialogue in a 'friendly and constructive atmosphere'.

'Both sides made it clear they want (the November 2003 ceasefire) to hold and will do everything to make it hold,' Menon told reporters later.

The Indian side underlined that the two countries should 'work together against the common scourge of terrorism' for security of the region and discussed ways to make cooperation in the fight against terrorism more effective, Menon said.

'Both sides agreed that we need to deal with the issue. There are dangerous people on both sides who mean harm to us,' Menon stressed.

Menon said there was an overlap in the CBM proposals.

Meanwhile, Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee, who began his two-day visit to Pakistan Tuesday 'amidst a new democratic environment of great promise', also stressed that the two sides must work together to combat terrorism and that the future of the talks would depend on an 'atmosphere free from terrorism, violence or the threat to it'.

But even as he set the positive tone for engagement, Mukherjee reminded interlocutors about India's concerns on cross-border terrorism - an issue that has shadowed ties between the two countries for years and which has acquired an added importance after the bombings in [Jaipur](#) last week in which more than 60 people were killed.

Menon, underlining the positive atmosphere in both countries for carrying forward the peace process, said they 'expressed determination to improve relations to move forward on the full normalization of relations as rapidly as possible.'

He, however, replied tactfully when asked what he thought of the new civilian leadership in Pakistan and whether the peace process between the two countries stood a better chance now under a democratic dispensation in Islamabad.

'I don't want to compare. We had successful and productive fourth round of composite dialogue (under the Musharraf administration) last year (in March),' he said.

'The determination is very strong on both sides, within the government and in the political system to carry forward the peace process. It has popular support of both countries,' Menon said.

'We have an interest in building the relationship and resolving issues,' Menon said while speaking about 'considerable progress' made by both sides in resolving 'solvable' disputes over Siachen glacier and Sir Creek marshland. 'We are closer to an agreement on Sir Creek,' he said.

Menon said India was 'determined' to make the Siachen glacier 'a mountain of peace' and stressed on the 'narrowing of differences' with Pakistan over the disputed glacier and Sir Creek marshland that separates the Kutch region in Gujarat from Sindh in the neighbouring country.

Alluding to several cross-border confidence-building measure made by both India and Pakistan during their delegation-level talks, Menon said the two sides decided to make cross-border travel links 'more effective and easier for people' across the border.

Expanding trade and economic cooperation figured prominently in the discussions, Menon said while underlining 'great potential' in this area.

India and Pakistan also agreed to deal with the release of prisoners in each other's country and deal with the issue in a humanitarian manner, Menon said.

The issue of the clemency of Indian death row prisoner Sarabjit Singh figured in the discussions with India repeating its plea for clemency for him.

The joint panel of retired judges to deal with the issue will meet in Islamabad soon, Menon said.

Both sides are giving finishing touches to some new CBMs including the release of fishermen arrested on the sea, relaxations in visa policy and exchange of students at the university level.

The two sides are trying to bring these issues to a stage where the agreements could be signed, said Menon.

The two foreign secretaries prepared the ground for the talks between Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee and his Pakistani counterpart Shah Mahmood Qureshi Wednesday which will review the dialogue process and outline the future course of peace process between the two countries.

Mukherjee, who will meet President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani Wednesday, met the leaders of the two parties in the ruling coalition, former prime minister Nawaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Asif Ali Zardari, co-chair of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP).

The launch of the Jammu-Sialkot and Kargil-Skardu bus services may be announced at the end of the review of the composite dialogue Wednesday.

The two sides also explored the possibility of increasing the frequency of the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad and the Poonch-Rawalkot bus services by making these a weekly affair.

The foreign secretaries took an overview of the progress in discussions on all eight issues included

in the composite dialogue: peace and security, including confidence building measures (CBMs); Jammu and Kashmir; Siachen; Sir Creek; Wullar barrage; terrorism and drug trafficking; economic and commercial cooperation; and promotion of friendly exchanges.

India hopes that such confidence building measures will increase the flow of trade and travel between the two halves of Kashmir, one controlled by India and the other by Pakistan, with a view to 'making borders irrelevant.'

*Manish Chand* ( © IANS / India eNews)