

NOTE

THE PEACE MISSION

Imtiaz Alam writes :

Given the bitter history of past 60 years, nobody thinks India and Pakistan can really live in peace. Official efforts to initiate peace process and dialogue invariably get bogged down in a mess after a certain point and never take off. All sides wait for excuses and pretext to whip up jingoism and war cry. And the November '08 terror attack on Mumbai produced a perfect stage for sabre-rattling. People's initiative for peace in South Asia is a new area of cross-border activism that deserves serious attention and encouragement as well.

The attack on Mumbai is not an isolated incident, similar incidents, not as well reported, have occurred elsewhere including several in Pakistan. In the Northwest of Pakistan, people are subjected to daily attacks by the Talebans, girls schools are being forcibly closed down. In Bangladesh too there have been grenade and bomb explosions. The threat of such attacks is to the entire region and not only to India. Therefore it is more than urgent to share information, to build trust in each other and to act collectively.

South Asians for Human Rights (SAHR) and South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA) jointly took a Peace Mission from Pakistan to New Delhi from 21st to 24th January 2009. The 22-Member Delegation interacted with civil society, media and political leadership of India to stress the need to keep the peace process going, jointly fight the scourge of terrorism at all levels and in every manner and avoid war in the best interest of the peoples of India and Pakistan. The Peace Mission explored the possibilities of reciprocation by the civil society of India.

The Peace Mission condemned, unequivocally and unreservedly the November 26, '08 terrorist attack in Mumbai as a most heinous crime against innocent people. Unfortunately, this outrage brought India and Pakistan to a dangerous crossroads and peace-loving people on both sides of the fence hope they will not be diverted from the path of peace. The two countries must not allow the terrorists to hijack the peace agenda. They must resume the Composite Dialogue process, and the sooner the better. War or even a state of suspended hostility between India and Pakistan will blight the whole region's future.

India's rage after Mumbai was justified and the world had sympathy for it. When Pakistan revealed its hurt it didn't wash with the world and ended with bringing Pakistan's democratic experiment under tremendous strain. But the media on both sides did not pay due heed to the long-term interests of the subcontinent's teeming millions.

After passing through a denial mould, Pakistan has finally acknowledged that the surviving Mumbai raider came from Pakistan which it should have accepted much earlier. Subsequently, the interior ministry has ordered an investigation and vowed to bring the culprits to justice. Mumbai should not threaten Indo-Pak relations, nor should it endanger South Asia. It should compel South Asia to seek solutions to problems that are bound to become more trans-border than they are now. Terrorism is spreading like a disease. It has engulfed Afghanistan, a SAARC member, and has spread to most of Pakistan too. Some traces of it are already visible in India where a majority of the South Asian population lives. Instead of accusing each other of terrorism, the SAARC states must get together and discuss it as a common problem. A regional consensus against terrorism and extremism and a common strategy to fight it—that is the only answer. □□□