

View from Islamabad

By Ziaul Hasan

Islamabad, the seat of the Central Government of Pakistan, is a young, beautiful city and a quiet place, from where one can have an interesting view of the world from the angle of Pakistan's national interest.

The view is inevitably chequered, often confusing, since it is seen from three different angles, one represented by President Ishaq Khan, a non-party, former' bureaucrat, said to be the continuator of Marshal Ziaul Haq's policies. Another angle is that of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, whose policies are still tentative or, as political observers are found of saying, pragmatic.

The third angle is provided by the Inter-State Intelligence (ISIJ). Though not a policy-making body, the well-known organisation provides secret information to the Government on strategic matters, mainly connected these days with the Afghan Civil War, in which Pakistan has taken a partisan position in favour of the Mujahidee. Indian readers may wonder why military leaders have not been mentioned as a political force in Islamabad. Not that they are powerless, no; they are only lying low, waiting for the day when they should assert themselves. They are a very powerful, incipient, force, and all political leaders are aware of the dark cloud hanging over them.

India, looked at from Islamabad, whatever be the angle, is seen as a "big brother", a powerful, unfriendly neighbour, unhappy over Pakistan's economic and military strength and ever ready to strike a blow in one form or another. Its military manoeuvres about a year ago were seen as a means to overawe Islamabad, if not worse. India is expansive by nature. Look at its policies with regards to Sri Lanka and Nepal. It has already assimilated Sikkim and will like to do the same with Butan. The Siachen glaciers have never, in historical past, belonged to it. If there is any doubt read the documents connected with the famous Simla Conference between Z A Bhutto and Indira Gandhi, which described the region as without control either by India or Pakistan. This, it is said, was confirmed only a few months ago by India's foreign Secretary S K Singh. Yet, New Delhi went back on its own official position, immediately on Mr Singh's return at the end of his talks with Pakistan's Foreign Secretary.

In brief, Islamabad does not trust New Delhi. Any Indian visitor can see this if he stays only for a day and reads a couple of newspapers.

The latest fear expressed by a section of observers (none of them from any official circle) is that India was trying again to dismember Pakistan with the help of its agents in Sind — among both Hindus and Muslims. The kidnapping of Sindhi businessmen and heavy ransom demands on their families and other law-and-order problems are sometimes attributed to Indian agencies. The Jamaate Islamic Party has expressed this suspicion in print. Another important area in which north-west Asia and such important states as the USA, the Soviet Union

and China are interested is the Afgan problem. Instead of presenting the view in my own words. I would prefer to quote a longish comment in Dawn of June 28:

**Despite the discordant notes struck by hardliners, the
Afghan peace process has begun, to judge by public
support for the idea of Mr Yasser Arafat arbitrating on
the issue.**

Arafat's mission

Mr Yasser Arafat's brief stay in Islamabad on Saturday can now be seen and assessed in a fuller perspective. His address to the joint session of the two Houses of Parliament was, of course, primarily intended to reaffirm the warm and fraternal feelings that the Palestinians entertain for the people of this country. But the PLO chief's stress, in the course of his address, on a peaceful end to the Afghan conflict did provide an inkling of the diplomatic dimension of his visit. Mr Arafat twice met Mr Gulbadin Hikmatyar, the Foreign Minister of the Afghan interim government, and offered to mediate a political settlement in Afghanistan. This is a significant development. Given the military stalemate in Afghanistan and the Mujahideen's inability hitherto to dislodge the PDPA government in Kabul in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal, the need for a political solution has acquired a new urgency. In fact, Pakistan and the US, the main supporters of the Afghan resistance, have also lately been emphasising the importance of adopting a political approach. Mr Arafat's credentials as a mediator are impeccable. He is close to the Soviets who have extended considerable support to the Palestinian cause. His rapport with the Government of Prime Minister Bhutto is not to be doubted. His bona fides vis-à-vis the Afghan Mujahideen are generally accepted in the letter's ranks.

If President Arafat's proposal has not evoked a positive response from the Afghans it is not entirely surprising. Mr Hikmatyar and his colleagues are just not prepared to talk to President Najibullah who is regarded as a client of the Soviets and a remnant of the era of military occupation of Afghanistan. The Mujahideen are also not well-disposed to sharing of power with the PDPA. For its part Islamabad, too, is not inclined to accept any role for the present rulers in Kabul in a future broad-based government of Afghanistan. Hence the difficulty in making Mr Arafat's offers the starting point of negotiations.

But the PLO chief's good offices can still help launch a peace process. Mr Arafat could help initiate a dialogue between various groups with the aim of establishing a broad-based and neutral

government in Kabul. Mr Hikmatyar 'has reportedly agreed to continue the dialogue started by Mr Arafat whose aide has stayed behind in Islamabad for the purpose. This is to be welcomed, for it is difficult to think of anybody having credentials as good as Mr Arafat's.

I will only add two items of news from Dawn. The one from Peshawar, July 2, said that Peter Tomsen, special US envoy to the Afghan interim government, met Prof Sibghatullah Mujadidi who is President of the interim government, Later talking to newsmen Mr Tomsen reiterated the US continued support and said that his country's policy goals remained the same even after Soviet withdrawal. Mr Tomsen predicted major fighting in Afghanistan in the near future.

The second news item in Dawn is from Tehran, dated July 3. Issued by the Iranian official news agency 'IRNA. it said that Pakistan's Foreign Minister Sahabzada Yaqub Khan met the leaders of the Shiite Mujahideen groups based in Iran and advised them to unite with all Mujahideen forces, as otherwise the interim government formed by Pakistan-based Sunni groups would remain weak and fail to achieve victory over the regime in Kabul.

Despite the discordant note struck by the two news items, the Dawn editorial comment remains valid. The peace process has begun.

To complete the view from Islamabad, the USA is accepted here, though rather shamefacedly, as the economic-military patron of Pakistan and, as if to balance the account, the Soviet Union is projected as the patron of India.