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The storm has abated

ABDULLAH AHMAD: Thank you for receiving us. We are very grateful for this honour. None of us has been to Pakistan before except for me. Even so, this is my first visit in 40 years. I interviewed Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in New Delhi last year, and since have been trying to get an appointment to see you. Our first question: What is the status of Pakistan-Malaysia bilateral relations.

A: I would say it is extremely warm, as far as the people of Pakistan are concerned. My people love Malaysians, they respect them - that I am very sure of. But we haven't expanded that in our Islamic relations. I think much more needs to be done.

Q: What are your comments on Malaysia as a moderate and successful Muslim nation?

A: I think Malaysia should be taken as an example of mixed traditionalism and modernism. I personally would like to say that this is the example for other Islamic countries to follow.

Q: Has the threat of nuclear war between Pakistan and India diminished? Does Pakistan believe it is catastrophic to both sides, or is it because of American interests in the region and international pressures?

A: The threat of war in the last four or five days has diminished. But the situation has not changed, I suppose, because in the comparative counter view we consider an opposite force, we see their intentions and their capabilities. Now, intentions may not be achieved if the capabilities are not there. This is very serious. Because intentions can change overnight. The intention may be different tomorrow.

But if the capabilities are not there, capabilities cannot be developed overnight. So the situation now is (that) the capability is there. Maybe the intention has receded but the capability exists. And that is very dangerous. We are also on the border. Any side can do anything but let me assure you that Pakistan will not initiate the war.

Now why it is diminishing? I think it is diminishing more because of neutral deterrence. It is the deterrence that Pakistan has in the army, navy and air force.

This is the cause of chances of war receding. Because both sides must realise that war is extremely costly. The Indians must know and I presume they know. The military commanders must know the ground realities.

Q: The Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes said he thought you have been very positive. He said one has to trust Gen Musharraf (referring to no nuclear war) and give Musharraf a chance.

A: I'm glad that he changed his views. I think in the past he has been extremely vocal and extremely offensive. But now he's saying what I've been saying. Simply talking about nuclear war is extremely dangerous. I'm very glad that he changed his views.

Q: Why do you think India appears tough? Is it because of internal politics - after all foreign policy is dictated by domestic issues. Doesn't this in a way also govern your action or inaction?

A: One is maybe they want to regain their lost popularity and the other is they want to create the effects of war on us. To prevent us from our stand on Kashmir and to suppress the Kashmiri people's struggle.

They said they want to have an election in September in Kashmir. The Kashmiri people don't want the election because Kashmir is not a part of India. It is a territory created by a UN Security Council resolution in

1948. So they probably think that we are prevented from giving any moral or diplomatic kind of support to the Kashmiri people. They may be able to suppress the Kashmiri people and then force them to come out for election this September.

Q: Assuming there is a resolution to the present crisis, how will the issue of Kashmir be resolved? Is there no permanent solution to the issue?

A: I think there is a solution if there's a will on both sides. First of all there should be sincerity, there ought to be a realisation of Kashmir in the central core issue, the core dispute between India and Pakistan which has bedevilled relations between the two countries. We have fought wars, we are killing each other every day on the Line of Control (LOC) though it is most ridiculous for them to say, "no, there are other issues". What other issues are they talking about. This is the dispute.

We are killing each other every day. And we've fought in wars other than minor battles elsewhere also a number of times. Now we must first of all be sincere, if we want to improve relations. We have to address the Kashmir dispute. And the way forward is first of all, start the process of dialogue, secondly accept the reality and centrality of Kashmir, thirdly eliminate through an elimination process whatever is unacceptable to them and unacceptable to us.

Eliminate that and the fourth step - go for a solution to whatever remains. Though I think it is a way forward, sincerity is required.

Q: Generally, there is only so much a leader or a nation can do. And some people think you have done what you can. However, the world seems to believe India and that you have not done enough to halt cross-border incursions. What do you have to say and what are you going to do to correct this impression?

A: We've done so much. We have given them so many reasons to de-escalate and start dialogues. But unfortunately the will lacking from Vajpayee or the conflict within ourselves, within the Government and among our hardliners, is a problem.

We cracked down on religious extremists for our own good, there were a number of parties banned, a number of groups banned, the senior officers of the two organisations they were blaming for the parliament attack - these are more than enough reasons to de-escalate and start talking. They didn't do anything. And then came the 12th May attack, again they blamed Pakistan.

Hysteria goes right upwards. Every time it is my Government that is sponsoring every thing. So this kind of attitude is very odd. I think we have given all the reasons. Now I'm saying, the latest view, there's nothing going on, I talked to them at the Line of Control. And my word has to be taken on this.

Now, when that is the case, let us see what is their response. And may I add, the response is they have not de-escalated. I keep telling them don't go up to the Line of Control ... our army, air force and navy are around the border. You don't do us a favour, we may be doing you a favour by de-escalating. This is a favour we are doing for ourselves.

If you de-escalate, you are doing a favour to your own army which is fed-up being at the border.

The response that I'm expecting is de-escalation followed by initiation of a dialogue on Kashmir.

Q: Your support for the US war against terrorism has won you kudos from Washington. How do you reconcile this with your support for Kashmiri militants?

A: As far as we are concerned, we are very clear: we are against terrorism in all forms and manifestation - by individuals, groups or state.

Unfortunately in this world, when an individual kills another individual, we conveniently call him a terrorist, but when the killing is by a state, we do not say anything. We see thousands being killed in Kashmir. What is happening here is state terrorism. We are very clear that in Kashmir we see freedom fighters, not terrorism. Terrorism must be clearly defined. I would ask the UN to define terrorism.

But what the world is talking about, cross-border terrorism? What I say is that beyond the Line of Control (the border separating the two sides in Kashmir), there is nothing happening now. I would also say that the shooting incident at the Indian Parliament where people were killed recently and the incident where civilians and army personnel were killed in a bomb attack on a bus earn our condemnation. We have nothing to do with these terrorist acts and we certainly condemn whoever is doing it.

Q: How did your meeting with Richard Armitage (US Deputy Secretary of State, who met Musharraf before we did) go? CNN just now, quoting US sources, said it was a good meeting.

A: I agree, it was a good meeting, a very good meeting.

Q: Are you now more optimistic that escalation (of hostilities to war) won't take place?

A: Yes, I am very optimistic that if whatever discussions we had are accepted, then things should move in a better direction.

Q: What progress have you made in curbing the proliferation of the unsanctioned religious schools or madrasah which attract militants from many Muslim countries including Malaysia?

A: We set out certain rules of the game for them. Firstly, they will have to get registered and we want them to teach four subjects so that we bring them closer to the normal stream of education instead of teaching just religious subjects. And then we told them that nobody from abroad should be in the madrasah without valid documents. We are strict on this and are cracking down (on them). And may I say the implementation part of teaching the four subjects will have to be done.

Q: What are the four subjects?

A: English, mathematics, science and Pakistan studies.

Q: The more I listen to you, the more you sound like (Datuk Seri) Dr Mahathir (Mohamad) whose definition of terrorism is like yours, well, almost. And we also, after 45 years of independence, are bringing back English and to teach all subjects like you said.

A: Yes, I am trying to tell them, "Why are you restricting a young boy only to becoming a mullah in a mosque and therefore (contribute to) a proliferation of mosques in the country where every 200 yards there is a mosque". They want jobs and they can only become mosque officials.

I promised some of them scholarships to leave the madrasah and go to any university. I have seen a boy in the madrasah who looked good for the army. So I asked, "Why are they teaching him only religious subjects". They can teach the students normal subjects to enable them to join the forces or take up any profession.

Q: We understand that the Pakistani Constitution will be amended at the end of the month. What are you planning to do? Perhaps you can reveal a bit to us. This could perhaps be the only new thing you would be telling us. Your answers to our previous questions and the following ones, I think, will be mere reiterations of previous statements. Granted, you may give new emphasis in an evolving development or breaking news.

A: No, I'm not going to amend the Constitution at the end of this month. I have said all along that we are examining draft amendments to ensure four things.

First, we want to bring back the essence of democracy to Pakistan. So we must have checks and balances on all the powerbrokers of Pakistan, which

means really the President, the Prime Minister, and chief of army staff. There must be checks and balances for each one of them so that they don't take any impulsive personal action ever again.

Then, we want to be sure that the restructuring that is done is sustained and we have done a lot, especially the local government that we have introduced and have empowered administratively and politically. This was never there before.

Thirdly we want to ensure that national interest is kept supreme. This is happening in Pakistan, if it is personalised interest or political interest - like when tariff structures are changed for personal gain - we want to ensure that national interest is always paramount.

And lastly, we want to bring inter-provincial harmony which has not been there.

We are getting feedback (on the constitutional amendments). We want to throw it open to the media to ana-lyse them. Once we get the feedback, we will decide what to do. We will give about a month for debate. I presume we will decide by the end of July.

Q: What are the prospects for trade relations with Malaysia? What are your thoughts on major Malaysian investments in Pakistan such as the Liberty Power project? In which other ways do you think Malaysia and Pakistan might pursue economic linkages?

Could Islamic banking and finance be among them?

A: I think there is tremendous scope. I think the public and private sectors of both countries need to go into the details and find the areas of co-operation. But I'm very sure that at least in the defence sector there is tremendous scope. I think the most important thing is the will to enhance bilateral relations.

On Liberty Power, yes, there were few problems initially on the provision of gas and the tariff structure, etc but that is the same with all the 14 IPPs in Pakistan which we have all resolved.

Having said that, I feel Pakistan and Malaysia are two Islamic countries which in my view must get together. And I mean every word of it. I think Malaysia is a country we must co-operate with. I think we need to join hands for the betterment of not only bilateral ties but far beyond the Islamic ummah. There is a lot we can do together, I think we can rise above most countries in the interest of the Muslim ummah and co-operate with each other. The sky is the limit. I think we in Pakistan believe that Malaysia is one of the success stories of the Islamic world and we can join hands to bring this kind of example to the world.

Q: What are your thoughts on the Commonwealth, OIC and NAM? Do you see ways in which Malaysia and Pakistan might speak with one voice at the CHOGM forum?

A: We should speak with the same voice. Unfortunately we are out of the Commonwealth at the moment (Pakistan has been suspended) and we are disappointed. I think to the Commonwealth, democracy only means having an elected government whereas to me it means much beyond that. Elected government is only the beginning. How they govern determines real democracy. They don't see that and their attitude towards Pakistan has been very negative. It's a pity that just because I am a man in uniform and that I have not been elected yet, they have this negative attitude towards Pakistan. As for OIC, I think Islamic countries need to be more focused and should help each other more.

Q: I gave a talk recently and I blamed the Arabs sometimes when they think that they are synonymous with Islam. The truth is there are more Muslims outside the Arab world.

A: Yes, of course. I think we lack homogeneity. As for NAM, it has lost importance ever since the end of the Cold War.

Q: What are the prospects of the Pakistan general election scheduled for October in view of the current India-Pakistan crisis?

A: It is very certain there will be an election. We will have an elected government. But like I said, this will be the label of democracy. The essence of democracy is already there in Pakistan. We'll put the label in October.

Q: How might the election and the appointment of a new Prime Minister impact your position, duties and role as President?

A: I have already mentioned about the essence of democracy and the four parameters of checks and balances. Within this, we are running a parliamentary form of Government in which the Prime Minister, the Cabinet and Parliament are supreme. A lot of people are saying I am only interested in concentrating power within myself. As a military man I believe in unity in commanding the running of our country. Without that unity you cannot run a Government effectively. There can't be two men sharing power, so the real power should be with the chief executive running the Government, making decisions on all matters whether it is education, finance, economy or anything.

That is what I am going to shed in October. There will be a PM and I will shed this function of running the Government which is the real power. What I will retain is the president's authority to make sure that the PM is governing well. I don't call that power. Power to govern is power. To oversee is the only power that I will have. I am also going to institutionalise this system.

Previously the power of dismissing Parliament or the Government was with the President - with one individual. In the past 12 years, four times the Government had been dismissed - twice Benazir (Bhutto) and twice Nawaz Sharif. In the history of Pakistan, no Government has completed its tenure. So much for the democracy of Pakistan. Now we want to change this. We want to make sure that the Government functions.

In the past whenever Governments were dismissed, it was always the President versus the PM. And always the chief of army staff was drawn into the conflict. He used to be called in to mediate. There are therefore three pillars of power. I want to institutionalise this.

There will be a National Security Council. I will be chairman. The President will be the chairman but the chairman will not have the individual power to try and dismiss the Government. What I am trying to do is not for myself because I won't be around forever. We are trying to introduce a system to make sure that no President on his whims and fancies removes a PM and likewise no PM tries to impeach a President, and no army chief removes a Government and takes over.

Q: Would you be comfortable with the Benazir Bhutto administration should she and her party win the polls. Do you think she will return and will you allow that?

A: She is staying out on her own choice. She has to face all the court charges against her. Secondly, I haven't imposed this prerequisite - she is not a graduate and can't stand for election. I don't think she is a graduate and that is a requirement that she has to fulfil.

Q: Are your affluent and military backgrounds assets in your work as President?

A: I very much think so, especially in this situation when I am on a roller-coaster ride or in a pressure-cooker situation. But I have to accept the challenges and make decisions and I think the army teaches you these things - decision-making under crisis, facing up to the crisis, standing up to a crisis.

Q: Has your affluent background also enabled you to resist all the temptations?

A: I'm not affluent. I'm from a middle-class family. My father was a diplomat. I don't come from a very rich family. Comfortable, yes. But I'm a totally self-made man. When I joined the army, I didn't have any relatives in the army. I have never asked anyone for anything and I think I've been getting the best from the army always. In the army, I'm proud to say, I give my own examples. A lot of people think that way. This army recognises merit.

Q: You are also very satisfied?

A: Yes, I'm very satisfied. When you mentioned about corruption, I must say really I can't imagine why a man who has the basic requirements of life would want more? I really don't understand. I have the basic requirements. I can think. Well, if I have a Toyota, I can think of owning a Mercedes and then why not a helicopter, why not jetplane. So there's no end to it. I am a very contented man, I have a nice family, I've got good children and they're doing well in life. I like games, I like socialising.

Q: The army has treated you very well and you have looked after it too.

A: Yes.

Q: I understand that you like sports. Just before meeting us, were you playing tennis or squash?

A: No, I am not well. I got a frozen shoulder for the last few months. So I only go walking. I walk for about 45 minutes and then I swim. I do about 14 laps breaststroke because that is good for the shoulder and then I do a little bit of exercise and then I go for physiotherapy. All this will take about one hour 30 minutes or one hour 40 minutes.

I used to play tennis and squash. I was playing squash till about one year back. It was very competitive squash. But then my wife reminded me how old I was and asked me to quit. Then I switched to tennis. But since the last 15 months I have stopped playing tennis too. Just now, I walked for about 40 minutes, then I went to the swimming pool, then I went for shoulder exercises. Then the physiotherapy.

Q: You look well, you look really fit. This must be the army. But then again some army officers don't look very fit. When they wear medals...

A: Yes. But you have to look after yourself (laughter). I agree. Some officers are a disgrace to their uniform.

Q: Is it prestigious to be in the army in Pakistan?

A: It used to be. But I had wanted to join the army since my childhood. My father was a defence attache at the Embassy of Pakistan in Turkey and I used to look up to him.

Q: You strike me as an articulate and cultured person. Did the army teach you this?

A: I'm flattered (laughter). The army teaches you a lot of manners and etiquette, and culture. The army teaches you a lot. People come from the villages to join the army and they learn manners and etiquette, how to eat and how to sit. It's tough in the military academy because they punish you for misbehaviour. You have to stand properly, you have to talk properly. But then home upbringing is very important too. My parents were extremely tough. There is no doubt how I was brought up at home.

Q: I noticed that in interviews on TV you hardly have notes to refer to. It shows self-confidence. I've seen presidents who have to be prompted on what to say but you don't have anybody to do that.

A: I think you have to coach yourself. When I was an instructor at the staff college, I coached myself. I used to get notes. There was a Malaysian officer there by the way. We were supposed to bring these pinks (small notes) and teach from them. Then I thought why should I carry these pinks. Why don't I absorb the crux of the whole thing, leave the notes aside and start talking. And I succeeded in doing it, especially when there were military plans involved. Each plan has its value and I used a

lot of logic in my teaching which everyone accepted. So I really taught myself.

Q: Did you have your education solely in Pakistan?

A: I spent seven years in Turkey.

Q: I mean, not in Europe, England or the US?

A: No.

Q: What other games do you play?

A: I played every game. I was a jack of all trades but master of none. I picked up a game fast, but tended to switch my interest from one to another. Like water sports, I was good in rowing and sailing.

Q: If I may say so, you are also good in politics

A: I am? I don't know. I don't think I can be good in politics.

Q: In politics, it is very difficult to stay at the top for long. Dr Mahathir... I told him once jokingly of course, that he is not as clever as I think he is. He laughed and said "How else have I been here for 21 years". (laughter)

A: You can't defeat that argument.

Q: Last question Mr President. I like to make this observation. You may not agree with what I am going to say but it doesn't matter because what you say is important to me. Does it not seem utterly feeble now for the world to call on you and PM Vajpayee, two antagonists locked in such bitter conflict, to sit down together and talk as civilised and reasonable men? It may be wrong to say that there is no other way - for there is, besides war. Should India and Pakistan both escalate their current exchange of bullets and rattling of nuclear sabres into an all-out war with the idea of lancing a boil, all they will achieve will be to post their historical baggage to the future, as their predecessors did, and with the same result of consigning generations unborn to the flames of ancestral rivalry and even, if I may be blunt, hate? I don't think there will be war but you know better. What do you think?

A: I think the chance of war is minimal. I think leaders in both countries need to be sensible enough to work on the path of peace. But more than being sensible, I think courage is required. Boldness and courage are required. And sincerity too. But there is a stumbling block in the way of peace - it is the Kashmir dispute. Nobody, no leader in Pakistan can put the Kashmir dispute on the sidelines. Every individual of Pakistan is concerned about Kashmir. There is Kashmir in Pakistan too. There are Kashmiris among Pakistanis.

We seek justice on Kashmir. We are not demanding anything unjust - we are just seeking the implementation of the UN Security Council resolution and the world must understand. Is it something unusual to seek implementation of a UN Security Council decision of 1948? I have gone a step further, beyond that. And no leader has done that before. When I went to Agra (in India), every time we talked about self-determination (for Kashmir), I said we will approach the Kashmir problem with flexibility.

A lot of people are asking, "What do you mean by flexibility?" and saying "You better not talk about that". But I thought the only way we can solve this problem is through flexibility from stated positions on both sides.

If we carry on badgering each other with whatever we have been saying for 50 years, we carry on with the conflict. If there is sincerity and we show flexibility, we can solve the problem.

We're prepared to be bold, we're prepared to be courageous here for the sake of permanent peace if there be a similar courage and boldness from the other side.

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