

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Bhutto, Gandhi defuse Siachen issue

India and Pakistan have taken positive steps to remove an "unnecessary irritant," in the words of Prime Minister Bhutto.

The three-day (June 15-17) talks between the Indian and Pakistani defense secretaries in Islamabad have successfully moved the difficult bilateral relationship another big step forward, with the decision to defuse the Siachen Glacier confrontation which had been an irritant to both nations for the last five years.

The final outcome of the talks—the result, according to informed sources here, of a direct intervention by Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and her defense adviser Chief of Army Staff Gen. Aslam Beg—was mutual agreement to pursue a comprehensive settlement of the matter “to conform with the Simla agreement.” Details are to be worked out now, but the commitment to a negotiating process was a real breakthrough.

The Simla agreement is the product of the 1972 talks held at Simla, India, between the late Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her Pakistani counterpart, the late Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. The agreement bound both sides to resolve all bilateral issues through mutual negotiations and not by military means.

The Siachen Glacier, a snow-covered area about 74 km long and 2-8 km wide, is located at about 18-20,000 feet elevation in northern Baltistan. The glacier is bound on the north by the Karakoram Range, and on the south by the Soltoro Range. During the Simla agreement talks, which touched on various India-Pakistan disputes, the Siachen Glacier was not an issue. Ac-

ording to Pakistan, the issue was not raised because the area was physically impossible to demarcate. In all likelihood, the area's strategic importance, which later added a new dimension to the conflict, was also considered minimal at the time.

However, the vagueness of the Line of Control in the Siachen area following the 1971 India-Pakistan border war gave rise to a great deal of confusion later—particularly following Pakistan's decision to collaborate with China to build the mountainous Karakoram Highway connecting Pakistan and China by road.

The Indian government, highly suspicious of the late Pakistan President Mohammad Zia ul-Haq's intentions, realized the strategic importance of the area and in April 1984, carried out a military action whereby Indian soldiers, dropped by helicopters, took up positions in major points of ingress to the glacier from the Pakistani-held areas north of the point.

A full year later, Pakistan, claiming that the Indian soldiers had been positioned inside Pakistan's territory, made an abortive attempt to push them back. The Indian soldiers, holding the higher ground, repelled the Pakistani initiative. Since then, the snowbound, frozen land has been the scene for occasional exchanges of gunfire and irritable rhetoric.

Although the Siachen issue remained important mostly to army personnel, the foreign media, seeking sensationalism, often depicted it as a

“hotspot” which could at any moment trigger yet another India-Pakistan war. Notwithstanding the foreign media's mischievous stoking of the fire, the issue did create ill feeling within Pakistan, where accusations of “losing” Siachen were often hurled at the Zia administration.

Things began to move in the right direction soon after the Pakistani People's Party (PPP) government, led by Benazir Bhutto, took power last December. Bhutto went on record calling the Siachen Glacier an “unnecessary irritant” in bilateral relations between India and Pakistan. In answer to a query from the United News of India, Bhutto said India should withdraw its forces from the Siachen Glacier to the pre-Simla agreement positions to help bring about good neighborly relations between the two countries.

Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was quick to respond. Following his December 1988 meeting with Bhutto in Islamabad, where a cultural pact was signed to improve bilateral ties, a schedule of talks on pressing bilateral matters was adopted, prominently including the defense secretaries' meeting on Siachen.

In May a meeting of home secretaries produced constructive results on the issue of cross-border terrorist, and drug- and gun-smuggling traffic. Simultaneous with the Siachen talks, Indian and Pakistani foreign secretaries were also meeting in Islamabad to prepare for the meeting of the Joint Commission, the first in four years, and led by the foreign ministers, set for July.

The emergence of the Simla agreement as the cornerstone for Indo-Pakistan ties is expected to clear away accumulated roadblocks to improved relations, in particular the stalemate over the proposal for a “no-war pact,” put forth by the Zia administration, and India's counterproposal for a “treaty of friendship.”