

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

New strains in Indo-Pakistani relations

The tortured relations between India and Pakistan have taken a new, more complex turn.

The announcement here that formal talks of the foreign secretary level set for July 18 and the next session of the Indo-Pakistani Joint Commission in early August have been postponed until "after September" was sudden.

Postponement of the two meetings for which all preparations had reportedly been made was suggested by India, according to the official spokesman for the ministry of external affairs, and Pakistan agreed. There have been many contacts between the two sides at a high level, the spokesman explained, and "we should allow ourselves a little time to assess their results."

Indeed, diplomatic contacts had intensified over the last months even as evidence mounted on the Indian side that Pakistani claims of good will contained a large portion of doubletalk. While the government has not yet spelled out the details, Pakistani collusion in some form in the destabilization of Punjab is undeniable. It is a matter of record that Pakistani media coverage has featured open adulation of the cause of the Sikh separatists.

Behind the veneer of apparent cooperation to free the hostage passengers, Pakistan's behavior during the recent hijacking raised more doubts. The Indian ambassador who was present at the Lahore Airport where nine hijackers diverted an Indian Airlines plane from Srinagar on July 5 was denied access to the hijackers. Pakistani authorities not only refused to hand over the hijackers' baggage, but also

sidetracked the Indian request for a joint search of it, saying they had already done the job and could only hand over a list of items recovered.

Finally, General Zia made clear that the hijackers would not be returned to India, claiming that he wanted to do nothing "either in favor of or against the Sikhs or India"—as if the two were mutually exclusive.

Whether the hijackers will ever be tried—as is mandated by international legal codes Zia has professed to honor—remains to be seen. Despite similar claims in the past, the culprits in the 1981 hijacking incident have yet to be tried and are living comfortably in Pakistan. Days after the hijacking, General Zia told the *Palestine Times* that charges of Pakistani involvement in the Sikh insurgency were baseless "in view of Pakistan's record of conduct toward India, especially the great restraint it had shown in the wake of the recent Muslim killings in Bombay in the interest of peace."

Determined not to allow derailing of the attempt to find a firm basis for mutually productive relations, Prime Minister Gandhi rejected counsel to cancel the July 5 visit of Indian Minister of Information and Broadcasting H. K. L. Bhagat to Pakistan. The tough communication that preceded Mr. Bhagat's visit through diplomatic channels apparently prompted the surprising article in the major Pakistani daily, *Nawa-i-waqt*, which championed Mrs. Gandhi's action in Amritsar. The Sikh community, the paper

said on July 5, should be grateful to Mrs. Gandhi for coming to their rescue and restoring the sanctity of the Golden Temple.

Though Mr. Bhagat's trip was apparently aimed at sorting out certain aspects of Indo-Pakistani relations, any positive result was queered, at least temporarily, by the developments surrounding the hijacking.

In an attempt to save the situation diplomatically, India took advantage of the July 9-10 foreign minister-level meeting of the South Asian Regional Commission in Maldives. Pakistani Foreign Minister Yaqub Khan had been invited to Delhi and offered a lift to Maldives in Indian Foreign Minister Narasimha Rao's special aircraft.

But the several hours of talks, according to the public record at least, produced only the reiteration from Yaqub Khan that Pakistani intentions toward Punjab were not to be doubted: If Pakistan wanted to exploit the problem there are a great many things it could have and would have done, he said. He refused to relent on return of the hijackers, and offered neither explanation nor apology for the various inflammatory statements made recently by Pakistani officials.

Under these circumstances, New Delhi deemed a hiatus in the dialogue unavoidable. How soon and under what circumstances it will be resumed remains to be seen. Both heads of state are also operating under the shadow of powerful domestic lobbies which, for their own diverse reasons, are distinctly unhappy with any prospect of reconciliation between India and Pakistan.

In any case, Narasimha Rao's removal as foreign minister and Mrs. Gandhi's takeover of the foreign affairs portfolio in the recent cabinet reshuffle signals an end to business-as-usual in Indo-Pakistani relations for the time being.