

Call to resume India-Pakistan talks

Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI: The three-day India-Pakistan conference of civil society activists to frame a roadmap to peace ended here on Tuesday with a draft declaration calling for resumption of the composite dialogue and undertaking confidence building measures, including resolution of the Siachen dispute.

The meet attracted the participation of Indian and Pakistani civil society activists from several areas including, theatre, media and academics, besides former service personnel and diplomats. The event was organised after a long hiatus with the intention to kick-start the peace process which was halted following the Mumbai terror attacks in November 2008.

Apart from securing a consensus on the draft declaration, the activists also resolved to take measures that would ensure greater people to people contact. For instance, it was decided to collect 200 signatures from Parliamentarians in India and a good number of their Pakistani counterparts seeking a visa on arrival scheme for children and senior citizens.

Speakers at the afternoon session on media and culture and later at the concluding session urged Indian diplomats and intelligence agency personnel to learn humility. They also spoke against the large scale and often indiscriminate arrests of fishermen and felt Track –II dialogue had been reduced to being the “handmaiden” of the government. People engaged in Track-II talks had hardly any independence and dialogue depended on the will of the government.

Some speakers also wanted the next conference not to take up as many issues as was the case this time, while some wondered if it was time to form an action group that would pursue sentiments expressed at the meet.

For the second successive day the conference saw commotion. But this time the differences were within the peace activist community, unlike on Monday when uninvited Kashmiri Pandit migrants protested and tried to disrupt Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front leader Yasin Malik’s address.

Pakistani theatre personality Madeeha Gauhar registered her protest on the decision by the organisers not to allow a performance by her theatre troupe Ajoka on the plea of paucity of time. Ms. Gauhar had ensured visas for her entire troupe when assured that it will be allowed to stage a performance here. Jailed repeatedly for staging anti-establishment dramas and participating in human rights protests, Ms. Gauhar set up Ajoka in 1983 when oppression by military dictatorship was at its peak. The aim was to promote a secular, humane, just and egalitarian society. The first play was performed outdoor in Lahore in defiance of strict censorship laws.

Joint mechanism

Noted Pakistani human rights activist and lawyer Asma Jahangir on Tuesday suggested a joint mechanism of think tanks within civil societies of both India and Pakistan to discuss issues relating to the two countries.

“Think tanks should be formed within civil societies to identify issues and formulate strategies to

tackle them,” she said at the India-Pakistan Conference — A Road Map Towards Peace.

Pointing out that all political parties, women’s groups and civil society members were fighting against a “very sinister political agenda” of the Taliban elements, who were using religion to carry forward their agenda, Ms. Jahangir said the people of Pakistan needed not sympathy, but “support and understanding” from the people of India.

“Taliban and terror elements are forcing people to embrace their ideology, and into their way of thinking and want to subjugate the people into their brand of Islam. If Lahore is Talibanised, Amritsar is not far away,” Ms. Jahangir said .

Addressing a session on the third and concluding day of the conference on “Militancy, joint mechanism and role of U.S.,” she said her country was experiencing a “fragile democracy” and going through a phase of “transition which is like walking on eggshells.”

Ms. Jahangir said Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has clearly shown that India wants peace with Pakistan. “All political parties in Pakistan are also very keen on having a workable relation with India. We have to strengthen this joint mechanism and the system so that it remains under civilian control and decisions are influenced by it.”

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