

NATIONAL

Call for promoting peace in South Asia

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NEW DELHI Speakers at a peace conference said here on Sunday that elements with extremist agenda should not be allowed to hold the peace process hostage in South Asia.

Addressing 'A roadmap towards peace' conference, they stressed the need for continuing dialogue for peace in the region.

Representatives of civil society, intellectuals, media persons and former diplomats from Pakistan and India are attending the three-day conference.

Former president of Supreme Court Bar Association Aitzaz Ahsan said that almost 40 per cent of the one-fifth of humanity in South Asia lived under the poverty line and they had a strong desire for peace for themselves and also for their future generations.

"Problems are enormous but resources too are enormous, there is a need to change mindset of the stakeholders," he said.

He said that India was buying armaments worth \$11 billion during the next few years and he called upon Pakistan and India to reduce their defence budgets by five per cent and save between \$6 billion and \$8 billion for development.

Stressing the need for resuming peace process, Mr Ahsan said the countries should iron out their differences and India being the larger country should play a positive role. He said that Kashmir was an issue and unfinished agenda which needed to be resolved amicably.

He said the issue of water had erupted because construction of Kishenganga dam by India which would render the Neelum valley in the downstream dry.

Terming terrorism a common enemy, Mr Ahsan said the government and people of Pakistan were fighting this menace.

Condemning the Mumbai terror attacks, he said Pakistan was also a victim of terrorism and people were being killed by terrorists. "Pakistan and India have to cooperate with each other to eliminate this menace."

In order to promote peace, he said India should allow import of Pakistani goods, curriculum should be cleansed of hate material and minorities should be protected in both countries. He said the media could play an important role and it should not indulge in inciting hatred.

Former chairman of Human Rights Commission of Pakistan Iqbal Haider called for setting up a joint anti-terrorism commission because terrorism was a common enemy. He said that terrorists should not be allowed to derail the peace process.

"Terrorism has to be tackled with mutual cooperation because if it spills over the Wagah border everybody can understand its implications," he said. He said that free flow of information, open trade, increased people-to-people contacts, liberalisation of visa regime and stopping blame game would contribute to peace.

Former Indian minister Mani Shankar Aiyar said uninterrupted talks in both good and bad circumstances could lead to resolution of outstanding issues.

Advocating resumption of talks between Islamabad and New Delhi, President of People's Democratic Party Mehbooba Mufti called for ending the 'siege of Kashmir'.

She proposed that Kashmir be made a show piece for Saarc region with free trade and dual currency.

She said that a joint mechanism for both parts of Kashmir and free movement of people and trade were some of the measures which could lead to a resolution of the outstanding issue.

Eminent columnist Kuldip Nayar said that war was not an option. He said that people-to-people contacts and

increased trade ties could create a congenial atmosphere which essential for peace in South Asia. A book, 'Bridging Partition: People initiatives for peace', was launched on the occasion.

Mr Ahsan and Mr Nayar stressed the need for initiating confidence-building measures in the region to remove trust deficit.—APP

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