

Peace activists call for 'uninterruptible' Indo-Pak dialogue

** India-Pakistan conference urges demilitarisation of borders*

** Declaration asks India to build bilateral trade, ensure free flow of goods*

By Iftikhar Gilani

NEW DELHI: Peace activists called for an "uninterruptible" dialogue process and demilitarisation of borders at the end of a three-day India-Pakistan conference on Tuesday.

A declaration reached at the end of the conference vowed to evolve "a road map for peace" also urged transparency and accountability in the dialogue process, which it said should be held periodically along the India-Pakistan border.

Calling for an immediate settlement of issues such as Siachen, Sir Creek and Wullar Barrage, the document also asked both countries to desist from issuing aggressive statements. The conference recommended seven joint committees on Kashmir, hate speech, human rights, distribution of water resources, prisoners, military expenditure and other confidence building measures (CBMs).

At the end of the deliberations, peace activists asked for setting up a joint mechanism to share intelligence within the framework of the 1987 SAARC convention on combating terrorism and to work together to counter terrorism and fundamentalism.

It was felt that India should support and cooperate with Pakistan to defeat terrorists.

Economic cooperation: The document asked India to take the lead to build trade between the two countries and ensure free flow of goods and commodities besides encouraging joint business initiatives.

It asked India to unilaterally open the borders to build cooperation on the existing initiatives and ease customs and tariff procedures. It also called for the two countries to set up banks and financial institutions in each others' territories. The declaration asked both countries to agree to demilitarise the parts of Kashmir under their control and repeal repressive laws.

It said withdrawal of troops and punishment for those found guilty of crimes against the people should be paramount. Demanding that Kashmiris be allowed to work and live in Pakistan, it asked the Indian government to restore the sanctity of Article 370, a provision in the Indian constitution guaranteeing special status to Jammu and Kashmir and protecting the interests of minorities. While the speakers agreed that the media had played a negative role and at times behaved as a combatant, the document called for self-censorship to stop war mongering. It also called for free flow of information, import of books, periodicals and meeting of senior editors to lead media away from jingoism. It also called for revising curricula to detoxify the education system.

Activists also called for a visa-free South Asia and opening of consulates in all the major cities of both the countries. It also called for free exchange of scholars, students and technical experts. Other recommendations included rolling back of nuclear programme, reducing military spending by 10 percent per year, facilitating academia and civil society to build a better understanding and creating space for minorities. On the contentious issue of water, the conference called for joint management of water resources and revisiting the Indus Water Treaty (IWT).

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