

INTERNATIONAL THE NEWS

'India, Pakistan urged to cut defence budget by 10% yearly

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By By Shahid Husain

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Pakistan and India should cut their defence budget by 10 per cent every year and spend it in social sector, former law minister and Co-chairman Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) Iqbal Haider said on Friday.

Speaking at a news conference at Karachi Press Club (KPC) after participating in a peace conference held at New Delhi from January 10 to 12, he said that the peace activists of Pakistan and India would be meeting at Islamabad in the third week of March. He requested the Pakistan government to issue "multi-entry visas" to peace conference delegates. He said that Indian editors and intellectuals would also be visiting Pakistan in February, besides a delegate from the Indian Federation of Commerce and Industry was expected to visit Pakistan shortly. Iqbal Haider was flanked by B.M. Kutty and Sharafat Ali of Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research (PILER) and Asad Saeed Butt of HRCP.

"Terrorism and Jihadi culture is not the answer; only peace is the answer to the problems faced by the two neighbours," he said. "Poverty in both these countries can only be eliminated if there is peace in this region and terrorism is eradicated," he added.

"We greatly appreciate the Amn ki Asha initiative by the Jang Group and The Times of India Group. It's a brilliant idea. These conferences of peace activists are supplementary to Amn ki Asha. We have no differences in our objectives," he said.

He said that there were as many as 800 Pakistani citizens, including fisherfolk, languishing in Indian prisons and the roadmap towards peace includes joint India-Pakistan committees on prisoners, Kashmir, human rights, distribution of water resources, hate speech, military expenditure and confidence building measures (CBMs).

"Some people from Pakistan proposed to discuss Balochistan issue at the conference but we rejected it because we thought it should not be discussed on Indian soil," he said. He, however, made it clear that there were not two opinions that military action in Balochistan should come to a halt, adding, maximum provincial autonomy should be given to that province and "missing" people should be recovered.

The Declaration of "India Pakistan Conference: A Road Map towards Peace" urged the resumption of dialogue and the composite peace process and said once resumed the dialogue should be uninterrupted and uninterruptible. It called for considering a suitable location near the border where the talks could be held at regular intervals.

It said there should be coordination amongst the various ministries of the Indian government involved and concerned with India-Pakistan relations and policy; there must be no militarist/chauvinist statements from political or military leadership of the two countries; confidence building measures must be initiated on items awaiting solution such as Siachin, Sir Creek, Wullar Barrage and they need to be settled, besides demilitarising the border between India and Pakistan.

The declaration also said that both the countries should work together to counter terrorism and fundamentalism "which are common challenges" and set up joint mechanisms, and share intelligence and related information within the framework of the 1987 SAARC convention on combating terrorism.

The declaration emphasized upon free flow of goods and commodities and encouragement of joint business initiatives and said that India must unilaterally open the borders to further facilitate border trade, ease customs and tariff procedures as well as issuing business visas.

Referring to Kashmir dispute, it said that since it was a "core issue", therefore, there must be a "genuine and urgent effort to find solutions". It said that both India and Pakistan must jointly agree to de-militarise Jammu & Kashmir and the Indian government should repeal the Armed Forces Special Powers Act.

The declaration called for rolling back the nuclear programme in both the countries to establish a nuclear-free South Asia and cooperate jointly towards global disarmament. It also called for the joint management of water resources and revisiting the Indus Water Treaty in the light of new factors such as climate change and its implications based on the principles of equitable sharing rather than division of waters.

The declaration said that Siachen Glacier must become a "zone of peace" and evacuated from army altogether.

Prominent amongst those who spoke at the peace conference in New Delhi, included: Kuldip Nayar, Aitizaz Ahsan., Admiral (retd) L. Ramdas, A.H. Nayar, Asma Jahangir, Hasil Bizenjo, Yasin Malik, Akbar Zaidi, Ayesha Siddiqa, Mani Shankar Ayar, Salman Haider, Mahesh Butt and Madeeha Gouhar.