

Pak. Minister lashes out at OIC

By Kesava Menon 2/1 29-10

MANAMA (Bahrain) JAN. 20. A Pakistan Minister has called the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) a toothless and redundant entity while some Arab analysts have begun to question the unstinted support their Governments had extended to Islamabad in the recent past. All this appears more in the nature of a lover's tiff rather than a rupture but, still, relations between Pakistan and their Arab brethren seem to be going through a rough patch.

Pakistan's Telecommunications Minister, Javed Ashraf Qazi, described the OIC as being "toothless and redundant" for its failure to issue any statement on the military stand-off between Pakistan and India.

The Minister, who was on a visit here, told the press that the least the OIC could have done was to get together and raise their concern over the military tension in the subcontinent since they had a duty to unite on all Muslim causes. Mr. Qazi said Pakistan had got "outright support" from the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain but then also added that he hoped "all these countries would also convey to India" the right course to adopt.

These Gulf countries and the rest of the Arab world have only expressed concern and nothing more. This was quite a change from the situation obtainable till before September last when many of these countries would have at least hinted that their sympathies were with Pakistan. Now it is as if they were telling the subcontinent to stop annoying them when they have their own problems to cope with. As for its part, the OIC had stopped short of fully endorsing whatever formulations on India or Kashmir that Pakistan wanted them to adopt only on account of stout rear-guard action by India's friends.

Pakistan does have reason to find fault with the OIC's behaviour this time around. A change in the OIC behaviour does not seem un-related to some new thinking that has emerged in the Arab world. There have been a few analyses and commentaries

critical of India's growing ties with Israel in the Arab media of late. Criticism was sharp on the matter of Israel's Foreign Minister, Shimon Peres, visiting India at a time of high tension between Israel and the Palestinians. A point focussed upon was that India, which had been such a staunch supporter of the Arab cause, should not be cosyng up to Israel, particularly at this point in time.

However, most of these commentators also went on to note that such a shift in the network of relationships was not entirely India's fault. The Arabs too had erred in neglecting India's concerns by going along with whatever Pakistan had to say on Indo-Pakistan relations, these commentators pointed out. There seems to be some irritation at having blindly followed the Pakistan lead on issues of concerns to India. But this irritation with Pakistan's foreign policy connects back to another cause as well.

Buddhist festival begins today

By Our Staff Correspondent

BODH GAYA, JAN. 20. The township of Bodh Gaya is draped in maroon, the colour of the monks' attire, announcing the commencement of the nine-day long Kalchakra Tantra initiation tomorrow striving for peace across the globe.

The Dalai Lama will be here to perform the rituals. This would be the 27th initiation to be rendered by the spiritual leader from Tibet. One of the significant aspects of the current event is that the 14th Dalai Lama will be seen with the 17th Karmapa.

Over 1,200 lamas have arrived here to perform the puja which starts with the preliminary teachings to the masses in preparation for the final stage of teachings by the Dalai Lama on January 24. However, the main course would be initiated from January 26 to January 29. A massive tent has been installed close to the Mahabodhi temple premises. The Bihar Government is holding a Buddha Mahotsava to coincide with the Kalachakra.

THE HINDU

India, Pakistan and the OIC

By Amit Baruah

NEW DELHI, NOV. 16. This is Gurbachan Singh's story. It shows how India was first not invited, then invited and finally asked to stay away from the final session of the foundation of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) in Rabat, Morocco.

It was the September of 1969. Mr. Singh, then 46, was India's Ambassador to Morocco and was sitting like any other Head of Mission at the opening meeting of the OIC on September 25, 1969. Today, the ramrod-straight former Ambassador is nearly 80. But his memory is sharp and he is able to give this correspondent a blow-by-blow account of what finally proved to be India's non-entry into the OIC.

When the inaugural session ended, Mr. Singh returned to the Indian Embassy only to be telephoned by a Moroccan official, who said the then Moroccan Foreign Minister, Laraki, wanted to meet him immediately. Earlier, the OIC, whose formation was taking place in the backdrop of the arson at the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem on August 21, 1969, had decided not to invite India — a country with the world's third largest Muslim population. "It was a Pakistani trick that ensured that India did not meet the membership criterion of the meeting set at an organisational meeting which had Pakistan and Morocco as members," Mr. Singh recalled.

The criterion was simple: a member State must either have a Muslim majority or have a Muslim as Head of State. "President Zakir Hussain had passed away in 1969. And the Pakistanis knew that," Mr. Singh said. When Mr. Singh, responding



The former Ambassador to Morocco, Gurbachan Singh. — Photo: Rajeev Bhatt

to the phone call, reached the OIC venue, the Moroccan Foreign Minister was waiting outside the conference venue to receive him. Laraki told the envoy that King Faisal of Saudi Arabia had proposed, the King of Morocco had seconded, and all other participants had unanimously agreed that India should be invited to sit at the OIC table as a member. "I obviously inquired whether Pakistan was part of the unanimous invitation. I was told that was the case," Mr. Singh said at his Kasturba Gandhi Marg residence this afternoon.

And then, without further ado, Mr. Singh was made the "acting leader" of the Indian delegation even though he had suggested that a visiting Indian Muslim academic take up the job pending the arrival of a full delegation from New Delhi. So, Mr. Singh, a turbaned Sikh, was the "acting leader" and Abdul Alim, then Vice-Chancellor of the Aligarh Muslim

University, and Ishrat Aziz, Second Secretary at the Indian Embassy, were the other members of the Indian delegation. "I addressed the OIC meeting at about 5 p.m. The Shah of Iran was seated next to me. I thanked all those present for the invitation and said, god willing, an Indian delegation would arrive to attend the Conference as soon as possible," he said. The next day, the then Agriculture Minister, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, arrived in Rabat at the head of an Indian delegation for the conference, and they were received with full protocol and honours by the Moroccan hosts. Like other delegations, they were provided a villa to stay.

Now started the real problem. The Pakistani President, Yahya Khan, who was attending the meeting, threw a fit and insisted that Indian participation was not on. So, what was the reason for Pakistan's volte face?

"A number of messages had reached Yahya from Pakistan that if he sat at the same table as an Indian at an Islamic meeting he might as well not return home," Mr. Singh recalled.

And then, the meeting was thrown into chaos. "Our delegation was treated well, but it could not attend the last session where some resolutions were passed," he said. Even the minutes of the meeting were altered later to ensure that India was "absent" from the OIC proceedings. "But my enterprising Second Secretary (Ishrat Aziz) got a copy of the original minutes and we sent them to New Delhi. They must be lying somewhere in the archives." But that was not the end of the story. Mr. Singh and his Indian colleague in Jordan were recalled to New Delhi to express New Delhi's displeasure. He went back after a full four months.

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Qatar annoys OIC partners

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By Atul Aneja

MANAMA (BAHRAIN), AUG. 1. Resource-rich Qatar, which has the world's third largest deposits of natural gas and is the current chairman of the 57-nation Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), appears to have provoked regional heavyweights, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The Iranian Foreign Ministry on Tuesday took exception to the meeting which the Qatari Foreign Minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem, held with his Israeli counterpart, Shimon Peres, in Paris. According to the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman, Hamid-reza Assefi, this meeting violated the OIC resolutions on isolating Israel. This sort of contact merely satisfied the wishes of the Zionist regime, he added. The Qatari Opposition has also denounced the Paris meeting, which it felt undermined inter-Arab and inter-Islamic relations.

The Qatari side, however, has pointed out that Sheikh Hamad, during his talks with Mr. Peres, had only emphasised that Israel must stand by the commitments it made to the Palestinians under the 1993 Oslo peace accords. Qatar, on the eve of accepting the chairmanship of the OIC in November 2000, had also closed an Israeli trade office in Doha.

Saudi Arabia is apparently unhappy with Doha on another count. The Saudi kingdom, according to observers, is not amused by the portrayals of the Saudi royalty by the Qatar based al-Jazeera television channel. Sheikh Hamad, at a recent press conference in Kuwait, said Qatar was seeking a meeting with Saudi Arabia to clear this misunderstanding. Analysts here point out that the Iranian and Saudi criticism of Qatar goes beyond a few events and may reflect their deeper concern about the overall recent orientation of the latter's foreign policy.

According to observers, Qatar has over the years developed a special security relationship with the United States. The U.S., for instance, has quietly developed Al-Udeid in Qatar as a huge air base. Its 15,000 feet runway is reportedly the biggest in the region and is large enough to operate any of the U.S. heavy-lift cargo and passenger planes. While the Saudis may not have a problem with the development of a new base, their concerns may have been activated on another count. The U.S. has so far been using Saudi Arabia's sprawling Prince Sultan air base as its main communication and surveillance command post in the region. This was evident during the Gulf War as well as during the counter-terrorism campaign in Afghanistan. But U.S. Central

Command officials have recently acknowledged that they are replicating some of their facilities that currently exist only at the Prince Sultan air base to Qatar.

Analysts point out that if this happens soon, the U.S. will acquire more flexibility for launching operations in the region, thereby undermining Saudi Arabia's key strategic importance in the region. The development of the Al-Udeid base may acquire special importance in the event of the U.S. deciding on air strikes against Iraq, as Saudi Arabia has already expressed its reservations about a military strike on Baghdad.

The cause of Iran's discomfort with the Qatari Government is fairly obvious, given its poor state of relations with Washington. Diplomatic sources here point out that Qatar is single-mindedly converting its relationship with the U.S. to draw economic benefits, especially in developing its huge natural gas reserves. The U.S. energy giant, Exxon, for instance, is a major player in developing Qatar's giant North Dome gas field. Qatar has also spotted India as a big market for natural gas and has already signed its largest-ever 25-year deal for shipping 7.5 million tonnes of liquefied natural gas annually to terminals in Dahej in Gujarat and in Kochi.

Palestinians not terrorists: OIC

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By Amit Baruah

SINGAPORE, APRIL 3. An extraordinary session of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) Foreign Ministers has called for the international community to agree on a definition of terrorism that differentiates between legitimate national liberation struggles and acts of terrorism.

The three-day meeting, which ended in Kuala Lumpur today and was dominated by the Israeli actions against the Palestinians, came out with a stringent attack on Israel.

"We reject any attempt to link terrorism to the struggle of the Palestinian people in the exercise of their inalienable right to establish their independent States with Al-Quds Al-Sharif [Jerusalem] as its capital," the OIC Declaration said.

"We condemn Israel for its escalating military campaign against the Palestinian people, including the daily brutalisation and humiliation of its civilians, resulting in mounting casualties, strangulation of the Palestinian economy, systematic and indiscriminate destruction of houses and residential facilities as well as infrastructure, institutions and structures of the Palestinian

National Authority," the Foreign Ministers said.

The OIC Foreign Ministers said in their declaration: "We reject any unilateral action taken against any Islamic country under the pretext of combating international terrorism, as this will undermine global cooperation against terrorism."

Condemning all forms of terrorism, including State terrorism, the Foreign Minister said: "We reject any attempt to link Islam and Muslims to terrorism as terrorism has no association with religion, civilisation or nationality." "We reiterate that preventive action taken to combat terrorism should not result in ethnic or religious profiling or the targeting of a particular community," it said.

Calling for an international convention under U.N. auspices to formulate a joint-response to terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, the OIC Ministers maintained: "We emphasise the importance of addressing the root causes of international terrorism, convinced that the war against terrorism will not succeed if the environment that breeds terrorism, including foreign occupation, injustice and exclusion, is allowed to thrive."

THE HINDU

eludes consensus

By Amit Baruah

SINGAPORE, APRIL 2. The OIC Foreign Ministers, who are meeting in Kuala Lumpur, are likely to come up with a declaration on terrorism tomorrow but apparently there is a split on how terrorism should be defined.

On the second day of the conference, the Malaysian Foreign Minister, Syed Hamid Albar, was quoted as saying: "We have not come up with the specifics of defining terrorism." "The question of finding a definition on terrorism is a difficult," Mr. Hamid said. His remarks followed the Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad's statement yesterday that killings of civilians constituted terrorism. Several West Asian delegates reportedly do not agree on this definition

principle on how to define terrorism and how to act on terrorism as a whole." "It (tomorrow's declaration) is on how they (OIC nations) differentiate the struggle in (West Asia) from terrorism and certainly such (a) message would have an impact (on the definition of terrorism)," the Malaysian news agency, Bernama, quoted Mr. Kharazzi as saying. Asked whether Palestinian suicide bombers were terrorists, the Iranian Minister said their psychological situation needed to be studied first. "Nobody will be happy when an innocent civilian is killed... the question is why they are committing suicide," Mr. Kharazzi maintained.

Arab members of the OIC will most certainly not agree to any reference of Palestinian suicide bombers as "terrorists". For the Malaysians, excluding suicide bombers from the list of terrorists will be a deviation from the U.S. "mainstream" definition of terrorism.

The Iranian Foreign Minister said the United States must convince Israel to withdraw its forces from Palestinian territories. "The first thing is to put pressure on the United States... as long as the Americans are supporting Israel, there is little chance that Israel will withdraw... they should take a more strong position if they are interested in resolving the issue," Mr. Kharazzi said.

OIC calls for curbs on Israel

By Amit Baruah

SINGAPORE, APRIL 1. Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) Foreign Ministers meeting in Kuala Lumpur today called for "deterrent sanctions" against Israel for its aggression against the Palestinians, warning that the region could face an "all-out war".

The extraordinary session of the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers on Terrorism said in a statement: "Israel's terrorist and aggressive practices posed a grave threat to international peace and security... and hence necessitates immediate action from the U.N. Security Council _ applying Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter." (Under this clause, the Security Council can order the use of force to maintain international peace and security if all other options are said to have run their course).