



J&K challenges grow: Truce a tactical pause



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The Kashmir Valley badly needed a pause, a moment to take a deep breath and step away from the frenzied cycle of killings, mob violence and public hysteria. The announcement of the so-called Ramzan ceasefire by the Government of India provided an opportunity for a temporary calm and reflection by the conflicted parties.

Distress levels in the Valley have long breached limits with hundreds of thousands of Kashmiris believing that life has become intolerable. In the rest of the country, opinions against Kashmiris have hardened, with a majority supporting a hardline approach by the government.

The result is a tragedy of untold proportions: daily killings, emotional mass funerals and rising terrorist violence. At the same time, scores of young Indian soldiers from remote corners of the country are dying or being injured every month, adding to the national misery.

The borders in the state of Jammu and Kashmir too are in a state of extreme ferment, with large-scale firing and artillery exchanges putting on edge the life of border dwellers on both sides.

This cannot be a happy situation or end state that any government should desire. This is a condition of pathological imbalance that is not just brutalising the Kashmir Valley but the rest of the country as well, hardening attitudes beyond a point that is healthy for any democracy.

The conditional Ramzan ceasefire announced by Union home minister Rajnath Singh on May 16 directed the security forces in

the Valley not to launch operations during Ramzan. However, the minister made it amply clear that the security forces reserved the right to retaliate, if attacked by the militants or if necessary to protect innocents.

The move came after ceaseless requests for a ceasefire by the state's beleaguered chief minister, Mehbooba Mufti. Hardliners in New Delhi opposed her appeal, arguing that this would ease the pressure on militants and allow their regrouping. The criticism was valid but not justified in the circumstances. A change of tack was necessary.

The reaction of Kashmiri separatists and Pakistan-controlled terrorist groups to the ceasefire suggests that the move was in the right direction. The first to denounce it as a "cruel joke" was the separatist Hurriyat and the self-appointed Joint Resistance Leadership (JRL), comprising Syed Ali Shah Geelani, Mirwaiz Umar Farooq and Muhammad Yasin Malik.

The Hurriyat, as was recently admitted by former Pakistan ISI chief Gen. Assad Durrani, is a creation of Pakistan. It was formed to act as the over-ground political voice of the Islamabad-sponsored uprising in the Valley.

Syed Ali Shah Geelani has achieved notoriety as being more pro-Pakistan than most generals in Rawalpindi. He believes it is the Pakistan Army's duty to militarily intervene in Kashmir and wrest it from India. His hard-line views were publicly lambasted by Gen. Pervez Musharraf when he was trying to get the Indians to the negotiating table. Gen. Musharraf was reported to have told

Mr Geelani at a meeting: "Get out of the way, old man."

Ironically, now Gen. Musharraf is out while Mr Geelani remains standing and very much a player in Kashmir. Similarly, Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, a cleric who shamelessly uses his religious platform to propagate hatred of the Indian state, continues to be a symbol of the Kashmir resistance as does Yasin Malik, the former militant chief of the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), whose guerrilla force was wiped out by pro-Pakistan militants, ISI agents and the Indian Army.

The separatist trio have managed to retain their position over the years thanks to their unerring political sense. This time, they seem to have gathered it inadvisable to be seen as spoilers to New Delhi's offers for a political dialogue. Thus, after initially dismissing the ceasefire and talks offer out of hand, they backtracked a couple of weeks later.

Mr Geelani declared he was not against talks provided the Government of India accepted the Kashmir problem as a dispute; while the Mirwaiz dithered by saying New Delhi should clarify its talks offer. Clearly, they were reflecting a nascent desire in the Valley to begin some sort of dialogue with New Delhi.

There is also evidence to suggest that the ceasefire has been welcomed by elements of the Valley's largest and only indigenous militant group, the Hizbul Mujahideen (HM), if not its entire leadership.

Reports that the Hizbul

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has pulled back its fighters was confirmed by a message put out by a rival Pakistan-based terrorist outfit, the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), whose chief Maulana Masood Azhar mocked the HM suggesting that the lull left by them would be filled up by Jaish fighters: "Our friends have not announced a ceasefire; they have left open space for JeM. Now, these places will witness more firing from our side..." Azhar added that if the HM does not avenge the killings of their comrades by the Indian forces, then they would be only too happy to oblige.

The Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (LeT), the other major Pakistan-sponsored terrorist group operating in the Valley, has also rejected the ceasefire. The group's spokesman, Dr Abdullah Ghaznavi, terming the offer as "nothing but a drama", declared that a "ceasefire is no option and no thought can be given on such compromise... We deem it as sin and disgrace to the sacrifices put up in the freedom struggle. We are the heirs of the martyrs. Opting for such choice is treachery to blood of martyrs..."

Clearly, peace has more enemies than proponents in the Valley today; they want the strife, the killings and distress to continue. The ceasefire and dialogue offer by New Delhi is, however, the only way forward, although it is just a tactical step.

The bigger challenge is greater and more complex. Thirty years of military presence in the Valley has given birth to huge resentment. An entire generation has grown up under the shadow of the gun and has spawned an amorphous leadership that today transcends that of the tired separatist trio. Redressing this generation's grievances will require a huge strategic effort.

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