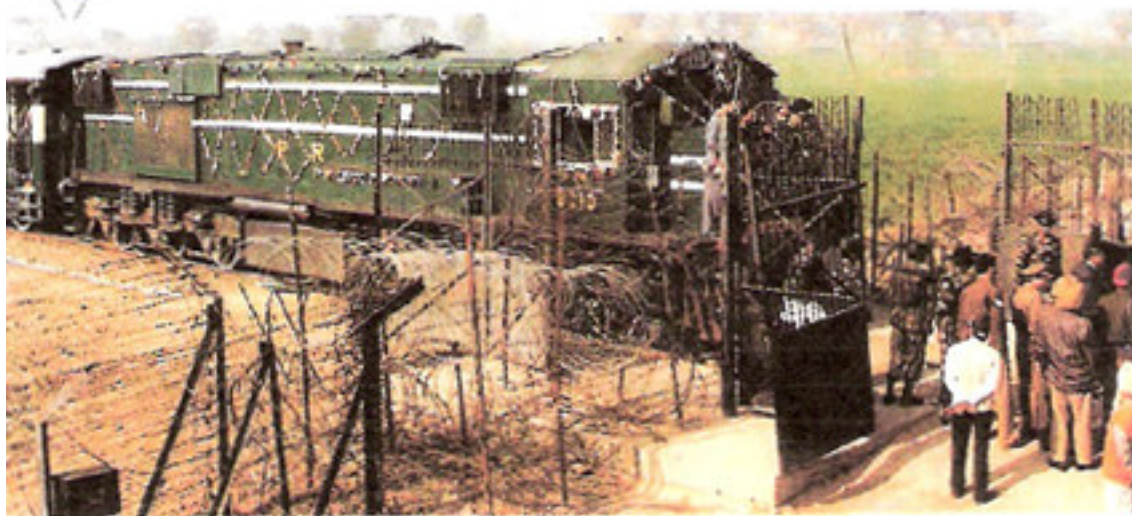


INDIA-PAKISTAN TALKS

Chugging along



AFP

THE successful conclusion of the foreign secretary level India-Pakistan talks in Islamabad reflects the realisation among leaders of both countries that hostility between the two nations is costly. Initially, the process was driven by immediate concerns. Indian prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee has elections to face. Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf needs international support to counter troubles in the army's ranks. Now, both sides are learning to appreciate the long-term value of peace.

There are still dangers ahead. General Musharraf is keen to resolve the Kashmir dispute before he sheds his uniform in December this year — an impossible task not only in view of the 50-plus years of history, but also the potential tensions over water in the future. India would like Pakistan to dismantle overnight the terrorist infrastructure that the ISI has taken 15 years to build. Both sides need to give each other time till they can see signs of sincerity.

Musharraf has so far been only instructing terrorist groups to calm down. He is reluctant to crack down. There is no fresh infiltration. But the offices and training camps of Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad, and Hizbul Mujahideen are active. Hafeez Saeed of Lashkar and Sayed Salahuddin of Hizbul are functioning freely. Maulana Masood Azhar of Jaish is underground and has so far eluded the Pakistani

Stop, go: The Samjhauta Express awaits the green signal at Attari

army. India needs to be cautious, though we need to give Musharraf time to move from the policy of calming down to crackdown.

If talks collapse around August-September (when a foreign ministers' meet is scheduled), it will be impossible to resume it for years. In the conflict that could ensue, at least 6,000 civilians, 2,500 security forces and 10,000 terrorists in Jammu & Kashmir could lose their lives by 2008. About 1,000 Indian soldiers could die in Siachen. Musharraf will find an excuse not to leave the top army post. As he faces turmoil in the army in 2005-2006, he may attempt an adventure on the eastern border.

To avoid a catastrophe, the governments have to follow the present approach of reason and restraint. Politicians need to separate Kashmir from a point-scoring domestic agenda. Businessmen have to go beyond goodwill missions to signing real deals. We can easily increase official bilateral trade from \$250 million today to \$5 billion by 2008. A conflict free investment climate can help India achieve double-digit growth, and help Pakistan cross the growth rate of 5%. The options are clear. ■

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