



FOR PEACE: Veteran journalist Kuldeep Nayar, head of the visiting Indian peace delegation, speaking at the Arts and Craft Village Monday. — Dateline photo

Indian peace delegation plants a 'Tree of Hope'

■ MUNIR AHMED

ISLAMABAD — The visiting Indian peace delegation started the first day of their tour to Pakistan by planting a sapling at the Arts and Craft Village in the Shakarparian National Park area Monday. The delegation termed it a "Tree of Hope."

The 10-member delegation comprising Indian politicians, civil society activists and media persons is being hosted by a group of Pakistani NGOs including Sungi Development Foundation, Strengthening Participatory Organisations (SPO), Aurat Foundation, Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research (PILER), South Asia Free Media Association (SAFMA), and Pakistan India Peoples Forum for Peace and Development (PIPFPD).

The delegation had a meeting with local civil society and media representatives following the tree plantation. The guests and the hosts were on the same page and agreed on the role of peace which they believed could play a key role in eliminating poverty, hunger and violence against women.

The visitors and the local counterparts said realization of peace was a must to end exploitation of workers, especially home-based women workers in India and Pakistan and other countries in the region.

The delegation members reiterated that although there were anti-peace forces in both countries, they agreed there was a growing realization of peace among the masses.

Veteran journalist Kuldeep Nayar said even the fanatic forces in India have realised that stability

in both India and Pakistan was in the best interest of the region. He called for continuation in the dialogue process saying: "Without it we would reach nowhere."

Expressing his feelings on the visit, Nayar said: "This land is not strange to me. The people and their sufferings are no different than those in my country. The governments of both countries and the peace-loving people should work hand-in-hand to eliminate the sufferings of the marginalised communities and segments of society instead of preparing for war."

Jatin Desai, an activist and journalist noted: "We, the forces of peace and stability, have significantly defeated the forces of fanaticism and extremes." He is the National Joint Secretary of Pakistan India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy and bureau member of South Asians for Human Rights.

Pakistan People's Party MNA Chaudhry Manzoor said his party believed in the words of Shaheed Benazir Bhutto who once said: "Both the governments should let the people meet freely, and that would bring peace."

He, therefore, supported the idea of relaxing the visa policies for the people as a first step. "The visa might be abolished in future for free movement of the people if the governments agreed."

Karamat Hussain, the head of PILER, said: "The member countries of SAARC have already ratified a Convention in 1987 that calls for suppression of terrorism between the SAARC countries. But, so far, no mechanism has been developed for implementation of the convention.

The participants of the meeting demanded of the SAARC members to create a mechanism for the convention to end terrorism in the region. They also urged the SAARC countries to make the convention effective.

Dr Bhalchandra Mungekr, an India parliamentarian, suggested: "All SAARC countries should give Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status to each other which is obligatory under World Trade Organization (WTO) regime. India has given Pakistan MFN status but Pakistan has yet to reciprocate." His suggestion was endorsed by all present on the occasion.

Shahid Siddiqi, a former member of Indian parliament, asked for 'No-war pact' between the SAARC countries to seriously pursue the peace agenda in the region.

In the discussion, the participants urged the governments of both countries to cut down their defence expenditures and divert the resources for social sector development to bring positive changes in the lives of people.

Mazhar Hussain (NGO executive), Sanjay Nahar (Pune-based social worker), Haris Kidwai (peace activist from Delhi), Krishna Rao (journalist-turned-activist), Ramesh Yadev (from Amritsar) and Lakshmi Prasad (former parliamentarian from Andrapradesh) also spoke on the occasion. Renowned filmmaker Mahesh Bhatt will join the delegation Tuesday.

The delegation also visited the Quaid-e-Azam University where they had an interactive session with the students. The Jinnah Institute arranged a reception for the visitors in the evening.

Without continuing the dialogue process, we would reach nowhere: Kuldeep