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N-war unthinkable: Musharraf

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WASHINGTON, Feb 14 (PNS): President Pervez Musharraf has said that the initiation of nuclear conflict is unthinkable for both Pakistan and India.

Addressing a packed audience of a seminar titled 'Pakistan: a vision for future', organised jointly by the Woodrow Wilson Centre and the Carnegie Endowment for Peace, Musharraf said that under the circumstances even a non-nuclear war would be a very expensive undertaking and should not be initiated.

"Both India and Pakistan are poverty-stricken and both are going for economic development," he said, adding, "India and Pakistan ought to act responsibly on the issue of war." Musharraf had before him the cream of Washington think tanks, government, media and scholars, listening about that has gotten into limelight like never before. There was this feeling that they have worked with this country so closely, particularly during the struggle against the Soviets in Afghanistan, and yet it remained enigmatic.

Musharraf explained to them the phenomenon like a commander tells to his troops with a stick and blackboard, categorizing the Pakistani society into twos and threes and then dissecting them further into As, Bs and Cs. Somehow, it seemed to work. Many said they understood Pakistan more, simplistic it may be, the way Musharraf divided the Pakistani society into three groups.

A huge bloc of moderates sandwitched between two tiny minorities of ultra (sloppy) liberals and religio fanatics. And then he had the religious extremists into three groups, Mushaikh the good, Ulema the not so good and religious political parties the real ugly stuff that can't be trusted and needs to be moderated.

He was helped in his endeavour by confused questioning by some Indian enthusiasts who provided him a fillip to establish his credentials as a good speaker. For many Pakistanis, it was virtually a repeat of his January 12 speech.

He mentioned all the reforms that his government was taking in education, health and security. He stressed that in order to have peace in South Asia, it was indispensable to resolve the Kashmir issue through outside mediation.

Musharraf claimed that it was now being widely recognised that Kashmir was the 'core dispute' between India and Pakistan. Referring to the current stand-off with India, he said: "The present tension and escalation is not from our side, it is from India... we have reacted."

He quite successfully foiled an attempt to be pinned downed on Kargil, saying that "why start history from Kargil, why not talk about Siachen, or may be 1971. Let's not get into the past and look towards forward."

The audience was amused when he said "may be, sometimes generals know war more than others." He said: "Though the Simla Agreement calls for bilateral resolution of disputes, 'bilateralism' has failed, and therefore, I believe there is a requirement of mediation or facilitation in resolving the disputes between India and Pakistan."

Musharraf said that Pakistan wanted peace in the South Asian region, where many countries were facing abject poverty and backwardness, and this called for addressing all issues between India and Pakistan, including the Kashmir dispute.

"If we think peace can be brought about by addressing all (other) issues and sideline Kashmir, it is foolish. It cannot happen," he said, adding it was this 'core' issue over which 'Pakistan and India have fought so many wars and over which even now today there is tension on the borders'.

Musharraf said: "Pakistan or Pakistanis do get emotionally involved with Muslim causes around the world." But he added, "We are not religious extremists; we are moderates; we are religious all right; our concerns are over-involvement or involvement with Kashmir and our concerns with India -- this is what regulates attitudes and behaviour of the Pakistanis."

Musharraf said he went to Agra with all sincerity and open-mindedness, and claimed that the two sides even reached the formulation of a declaration, which addressed and accepted the centrality of Kashmir for bringing peace between India and Pakistan.

"Nevertheless, it got scuttled. A hall, a table and two chairs were ready for the signing ceremony and the draft declaration was formulated and yet it got scuttled by the Indian leadership. We need to move forward on that," he said.

Alleging that India had used the December 13 attack on the Parliament as an excuse for massing of troops along its borders with Pakistan, he said the attack was 'condemned', but it 'cannot be used as an excuse for brinkmanship'.

He said that although India might not intend to indulge in any act of aggression right now, the large-scale deployment of its forces raised suspicions and could anytime lead to a confrontation.

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"We expect sincerity and purposeful negotiations from India to move forward to resolving the Kashmir dispute and all other issues bedevilling our relationship, as an unpopular imposition of an unpopular and unworkable solution will remain untenable", he added.

He said this situation needs to be eased and expressed his 'special gratitude' to the personal diplomacy of US Secretary of State Colin Powell to bring about easing of tensions between India and Pakistan.

When a member of the audience noted that he is 'the same Musharraf' who initiated the Kargil war after Lahore peace process, the Pakistan president said: "Why not start with Siachen and East Pakistan?" "One must not go back into history," he said, "because history has been a bitter one. One has to look forward. I want to look to peace for the future. I am a military man and sometimes military men understand wars more than civilians understand. Maybe I am the right man for peace. I look for peace."

He said: "We should not have bloodshed. I agree we are continuously fighting and there is killing going on along the Line of Control almost every day. We are confronting at the Siachen Glacier at height of 20,000 feet in an unimaginable setting there. What is the solution? I have given the solution. We ought to sit down and talk through a dialogue; we need to address all issues, and the main issue in all issues is the Kashmir dispute. If anyone denies that Kashmir is the main dispute, he is just being insincere." Musharraf said that everyone in India recognises that.

AFP adds: President Pervez Musharraf warned he had seen "indications" of a possible new nuclear test by India "The missile test carried out by India and some information, some news even, of maybe a possibility of a nuclear test is most untimely and may I also say provocative," Musharraf said.

Questioned later on the allegation, Musharraf said "there were certainly indications." "I did share these with the US leadership. I can't give conclusive evidence of it, but I thought if at all there was a possibility, it should be checked," he said.

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