

Review

LONG MARCH OF PEACE SOLDIERS

By **Neha Tara Mehta**

DAYS before the 26/11 terror attacks in Mumbai pushed the relations between India and Pakistan to their lowest point ever, a group of Indian 'peace warriors' — ex-military officers who had come together under the banner of the India Pakistan Soldiers' Peace Initiative (IPSI) — had completed all the formalities for their annual visit to the neighbour. The terror strikes made sure the visit wouldn't happen.

Two months later, the man who was to host them in Pakistan, Brigadier (Retd) Rao Abid Hamid, was in New Delhi with a civil society group to push for peace between the two countries. "We were slowly and favourably moving toward improving our relationship. And then the Mumbai attacks happened. Everything came to a grinding halt," says the man who had staged a campaign for the release of the Indian spy, Roop Lal Sahariya.

"When IPSI talks peace in such times, some people ask us why we are being so silly," Brig. Hamid says. "Yet the mad pursuit for peace must continue, no matter how long it takes."

Among the soldiers talking peace are Lt. Gen. (Retd) Nasir Akhtar, a former corps commander of the Pakistan Army and close friend of both General Pervez Musharraf and Asif Ali Zardari, and Lt. Gen. (Retd) Moti Dar, a former chief of the Indian Army, who has seen action in the 1965 and 1971 wars against Pakistan. Today, they are presidents of the IPSI chapters in Pakistan and India. They are close friends who often stay with each other when they travel across the border.

They keep soldiering on

On May 10 last year, they were walking together in the streets of Mumbai carrying peace banners. The march, ironically, started at The Trident Nariman Point, the five-star hotel towering over the Arabian Sea, which was targeted by the 26/11 terrorists. Its purpose was to highlight the futility of war between the two nations, and there could not be more qualified spokesmen for the cause than those who participated in the march from Pakistan: three retired lieutenant generals, four major generals, one rear admiral, two brigadiers and one colonel.

Organised by Major General (Retd) Tej Kaul, who had been the brigade commander of Jammu in 1997 at the peak of militancy, the peace rally went from Girgaum Chowpatty to Mani Bhawan, Mahatma Gandhi's old residence.

IPSI has seen similar — if not worse — lows in the India-Pakistan ties in its decade-long existence. "When IPSI was launched, the situation was even worse than it is now. The atmosphere was heavily laden with animosity and anger," recalls the Magsaysay laureate, Admiral (Retd) L. Ramdas, IPSI's chief patron. Talking about those early days, Lt. Gen. Akhtar remembers the mood when he landed in India six months after the Kargil war for the first IPSI meeting. "Tempers ran very high," he says.

Then there was the dark period of intense tension between the two neighbours following the December 13, 2001, Parliament House attack in New Delhi. "In that phase, the public mood was for war, and both the armies were ready for

26/11 may have brought peace talks to a halt, but it has not stopped a group of retired armed forces officers on both sides from fighting for peace. These unusual warriors tell their story of waging a quiet war against biases that divide.

an operation. But on both sides, IPSI stuck to its mission of maintaining peace," says Col (Retd) Virendra Sahai Verma, secretary of the Indian chapter, who has fought two wars against Pakistan as an artillery officer.

Lt. Gen. Akhtar credits people-to-people contact between the two neighbours for the de-escalation of tensions. "Before such exchanges, every Indian used to think all Pakistanis were extremists with long beards," he says. "Even in these troubled times, our potatoes and tomatoes come from India." The retired corps commander is waiting for tempers to cool between the two countries for IPSI activities to resume on both sides.

Admiral Ramdas agrees: "We need staying power. In the last 60 years, we have

fought many wars with Pakistan and achieved lemon. We have started the war for peace only recently. Give us time."

'Didi' and Musharraf

Soldiers on both sides credit the late IPSI chairperson, Gandhian parliamentarian Nirmala Deshpande, for easing the tensions on both sides. "It was the benign and charismatic presence of Didi that soothed those who felt very strongly about hating the other side," says Brig. Hamid.

What helped IPSI was the fact that Deshpande, then a Rajya Sabha MP, enjoyed a rapport with both the Indian government and General Musharraf. "President Musharraf had a lot of respect for Nirmalaji

and considered her a great friend of Pakistan. He was keen to support the IPSI in every way possible," remembers Lt. Gen. Akhtar.

Long, informal talks of IPSI members with General Musharraf helped push the ceasefire between the two countries. "The idea of the ceasefire was actually incubated at IPSI meetings. It proved to be a great respite to the Indian army," says an IPSI India member, Commodore (Retd) Ranjit Rai, who retired as director of naval operations and intelligence.

With Deshpande's death and Musharraf's political demise, IPSI finds itself toothless. But Lt. Gen. Akhtar sees hope in Zardari, Pakistan's president, who is said to be keen on hosting the IPSI India group in Pakistan. "IPSI Pakistan was trying to get us

an appointment with Zardari when 26/11 happened," confirms Lt. Gen. Dar.

Their extended family

"Soldiers speak the same language and therefore understand each other," says Maj. Gen. Kaul, pointing out that the families of IPSI members from the two sides have become close friends. They go across the border when the children of their counterparts get married. At the wedding of Lt. Gen. Dar's daughter in April 2007, IPSI Pakistan sent across a General in a gesture laden with symbolism.

Lt. Gen. Dar belonged to the Poona Horse, which had a Kaimkhani Musalman unit that had been sent to Pakistan after Partition. The General who came for the

wedding is the son of an officer who had gone to Pakistan as part of the Kaimkhani Musalman unit. "When he came for the wedding, he said he belonged to my family," remembers Lt. Gen. Dar.

There are other touching stories. When Lt. Gen. Dar fought the 1965 and 1971 wars with Pakistan, he was assisted by a Sikh unit that had moved over to Poona Horse from Pakistan after Partition in exchange for the Kaimkhani Musalman unit.

Colonel (Retd) Tahir H. Kardar, coordinator of the IPSI's Pakistan chapter, was a POW in India for two years after the 1971 war. He has another India connect. He comes from a film family in Pakistan and has close ties with the B.R. Chopra family in Mumbai. "When he came to Mumbai last May, he met Ravi and Renu Chopra, as well as Lara Dutta and Boman

Irani," says Neelu Kaul, Maj. Gen. Kaul's wife. Lt. Gen. Akhtar lost his 23-year-old brother, Lt. Naem Akhtar, in the 1965 war with India. But there is no bitterness against India for his brother's death. "He is *shaheed* and it's a great honour for our family. As a part of IPSI, I am committed to peace in the sub-continent and there is no question of bitterness against India," he says.

Akhtar invited Indian soldiers for his son's wedding in Lahore. Remembers Commodore Rai, who represented IPSI India at the wedding, "The hospitality was outstanding." It's these abiding ties that give hope to the peace warriors that more young men won't have to fight their brothers across the border or become martyrs to a needless cause.

neha.mehta@mailtoday.in



(From left) Lt. Gen. (Retd) Nasir Akhtar, president of the IPSI's Pakistan chapter; Maj. Gen. (Retd) Tej Kaul of IPSI India; actor Sanjay Dutt; former J&K chief minister Farooq Abdullah



Indian and Pakistani soldiers go through their evening rituals at Wagah border near Amritsar

Token of love from across the border

Letter from Mehr Saleem, daughter of Pakistani Major General (Retd) Malik Muhammad Saleem Khan, to Major General (Retd) Tej Kaul of IPSI India

Dear Tej Uncle, This is to acknowledge your hospitality and warmth during our recent visit to India. I had a great time associating with you all! Thanks to you all, I left India with lots of fond memories, which I will cherish forever!

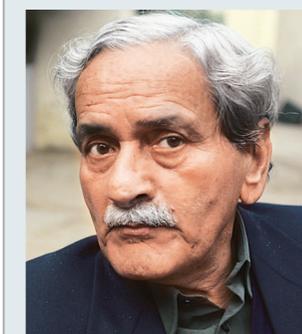
Post Bombay and Delhi, I got a chance to visit Agra, Jaipur and Ajmer and I must admit I am in love with India and Indians! I had an amazing time connecting with so many people at various levels. Although I met them for the first time, I felt I have known them forever and I hope to be in touch with them for a long time to come! I thank you and IPSI for that opportunity!

This visit, in particular, made me realise how perceptions can make us enemies, when in fact deep down we are the same people. India and Pakistan are two homes for two of the same family members and we must never allow ourselves to become symbols of hate for the inhabitants of these homes, especially when we share so much together.

Once we get to know each other better, then it will be hard for us not to love each other, as we are all children of one God.

I hope you and your family members are doing more than well and I hope we get the opportunity to host you in Lahore soon!

Love,
Mehr



When IPSI talks peace in such times, some people ask us why we are being so silly. Yet the mad pursuit for peace must continue, no matter how long it takes

— Brigadier (Retd) Rao Abid Hamid