

Separatist alliance favours ceasefire along de facto Kashmir border

Izhar Wani, *Agence France Presse*, 08/13/03

Kashmiri separatists slammed India's dismissal of a Pakistani ceasefire proposal in the disputed state, saying Wednesday the spiking of guns could create a "congenial atmosphere" for talks. "We have been saddened by India's negative response to the Pakistani ceasefire offer," Molvi Abbas Ansari, the head of region's main separatist alliance the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, told AFP. "There is still time for India to reconsider a ceasefire along the LoC as the development can create a congenial atmosphere for the talks," he said, referring to the ceasefire line splitting Kashmir known as the Line of Control.

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf said Tuesday Islamabad could "facilitate" a ceasefire in insurgency-wracked Kashmir, but that this was up to India. "If India stops atrocities, human rights violations, releases political prisoners and creates an atmosphere, then maybe we can facilitate a ceasefire (in Indian-ruled Kashmir)," Musharraf told Indian lawmakers, journalists and ex-diplomats in Islamabad. The near-daily skirmishes between Indian and Pakistani soldiers along the ceasefire line splitting Kashmir could be halted immediately, he added. "A ceasefire can be achieved on the Line of Control, even today, if both sides agree," he said, according to a senior Pakistani official.

India dismissed Musharraf's ceasefire suggestions as propaganda, and urged Islamabad to end what New Delhi claims is its support for Islamic militants engaged in a rebellion against Indian rule in the divided Himalayan state. Pakistan denies the Indian allegations but says it extends moral and political support to an "indigenous" movement in the region. Ansari said Wednesday a ceasefire along the LoC will "add momentum to the latest peace initiatives between India and Pakistan."

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee instigated a fresh peace bid in April, 16 months after relations with Pakistan nosedived and both sides moved to a war footing following a deadly attack on the Indian parliament that New Delhi blamed on Pakistani militants. Ambassadors have so far been reappointed, a suspended bus service has resumed, talks on reviving air links will be held in two weeks, and there have been several exchanges by MPs and businessmen. "We have been urging India and Pakistan to reduce troops on the LoC," said Ansari. "If that is not possible they can at least stop shelling each other's positions."

Hurriyat was formed in 1993 with the aim of pushing for the resolution of the Kashmir issue either through a plebiscite backed by UN Security Council resolutions or through trilateral talks involving India, Pakistan and Kashmiri representatives. Kashmir is divided between India and Pakistan by the 750-kilometer (465-mile) LoC, along which the armies of the two countries routinely exchange artillery and mortar fire, resulting in both military and civilian casualties. "People along the LoC are living a life of torment," said Ansari, "and if guns are made to fall silent they will more than welcome the development."

Cross-border shelling has forced hundreds of residents in both parts of divided Kashmir to migrate to safer places. Ansari was hopeful a rebellion launched 14 years ago by Muslim

militants that has so far claimed more than 38,000 lives could be ended. Separatists put the toll at twice as high. "I am optimistic that if India ends human rights violations in Kashmir, the boys with guns can be motivated to call for a ceasefire," he said, adding that it was essential militants are involved in talks to resolve the Kashmir issue.