

Siachen...

Ecological Peace between India and Pakistan

By Dr. Saleem Ali

Borders might make sense for national affiliations but they are senseless for environmental conservation. Ecological processes happily defy the vagaries of ethnicity and the petty politics of family feuds. Humans are certainly territorial animals and South Asians are no exception to this raw natural proclivity. However, as stewards of some of the world's most precious ecosystems we can surely transcend our territoriality.

I arrived in Mumbai, as a Pakistani-American, to try in my personal capacity to explore ways of using ecology as a peace-building tool between our nations. The focus of my visit was to be a meeting organised by the Himalayan Club and *Sanctuary Asia* on a proposal for a joint conservation zone in the Karakoram Mountains that straddle the disputed territories controlled by both countries. Apart from the majesty of the mountains, the lower altitudes of this region are also home to the highly endangered snow leopard, Marco Polo sheep and numerous rare flora. The glaciers of the Himalaya also supply water to several hundred million people. Yet, because of the standoff on the Siachen Glacier (the world's largest non-polar glacier), scientists have no access to study the impact of climatic changes or glacial recession.

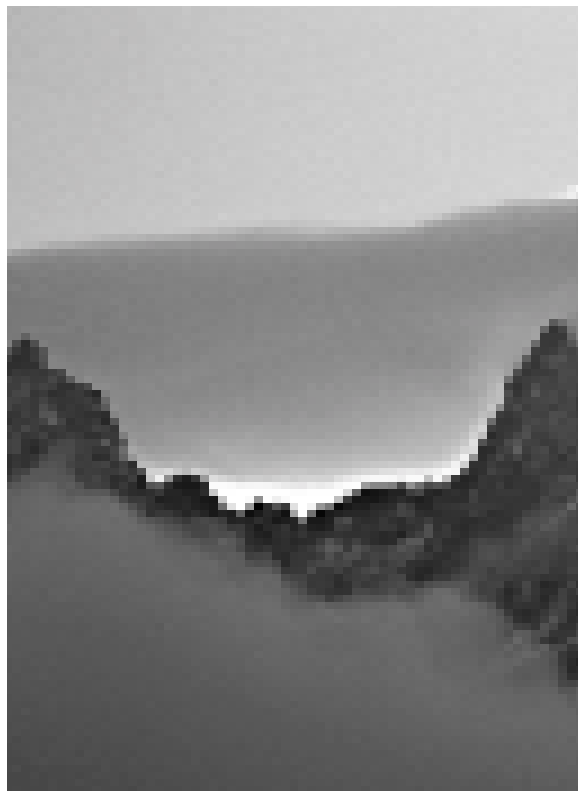
Mountaineers on both sides who love the Himalaya are also keen on climbing peaks on the 'other side'. The situation around the peaks is downright dangerous. In the words of Bittu Sahgal of *Sanctuary Asia*, "boys with big toys," on both sides are making this pristine environment the victim, not only each other.

Humour aside, there is of course a sombre and poignant reality to the conflict. More than 15,000 lives of young army officers have been lost by both sides on the glaciers. Army families certainly deserve sympathy and

respect and any peace park or conservation zone must memorialise the lives lost in this tragic conflict. Harish Kapadia, one of India's most distinguished mountain explorers and a strong supporter of the peace park effort, lost his young soldier son in army operations in the north. One of the most moving moments of my visit was hearing him relate how this tremendous loss had motivated him further to think about using the environment as a peace-building tool.

On the Pakistani side, there are also numerous families with similar accounts of grief and resulting grievance. This is clearly a no-win situation for both sides, militarily and environmental considerations might be a respectable exit strategy. There are some comparable examples of hope from other acrimonious areas. The Sharm-al-Shaikh region on the Sinai peninsula in Egypt and the adjoining marine ecosystem has been designated a peace zone. No one needs a visa to enter the area and the marine sector is jointly managed by Egypt, Israel and Jordan. Sovereignty has not been relinquished, yet conservation has been positively embraced. On the other side of the planet, the resolution of a territorial dispute between Ecuador and Peru was facilitated by bringing environmental conservation of the Cordillera del Condor ecosystem into the strategic equation.

The Mumbai meeting on December 14, 2004 discussed such cases while acknowledging the unique characteristics of the Indo-Pak conflict. There was a recognition that national identities on both sides are firmly entrenched and that any peace effort must not try to atavistically rewrite history as many Bollywood and Hollywood movies have been provocatively suggesting. The goal must be to live as independent, yet friendly, countries



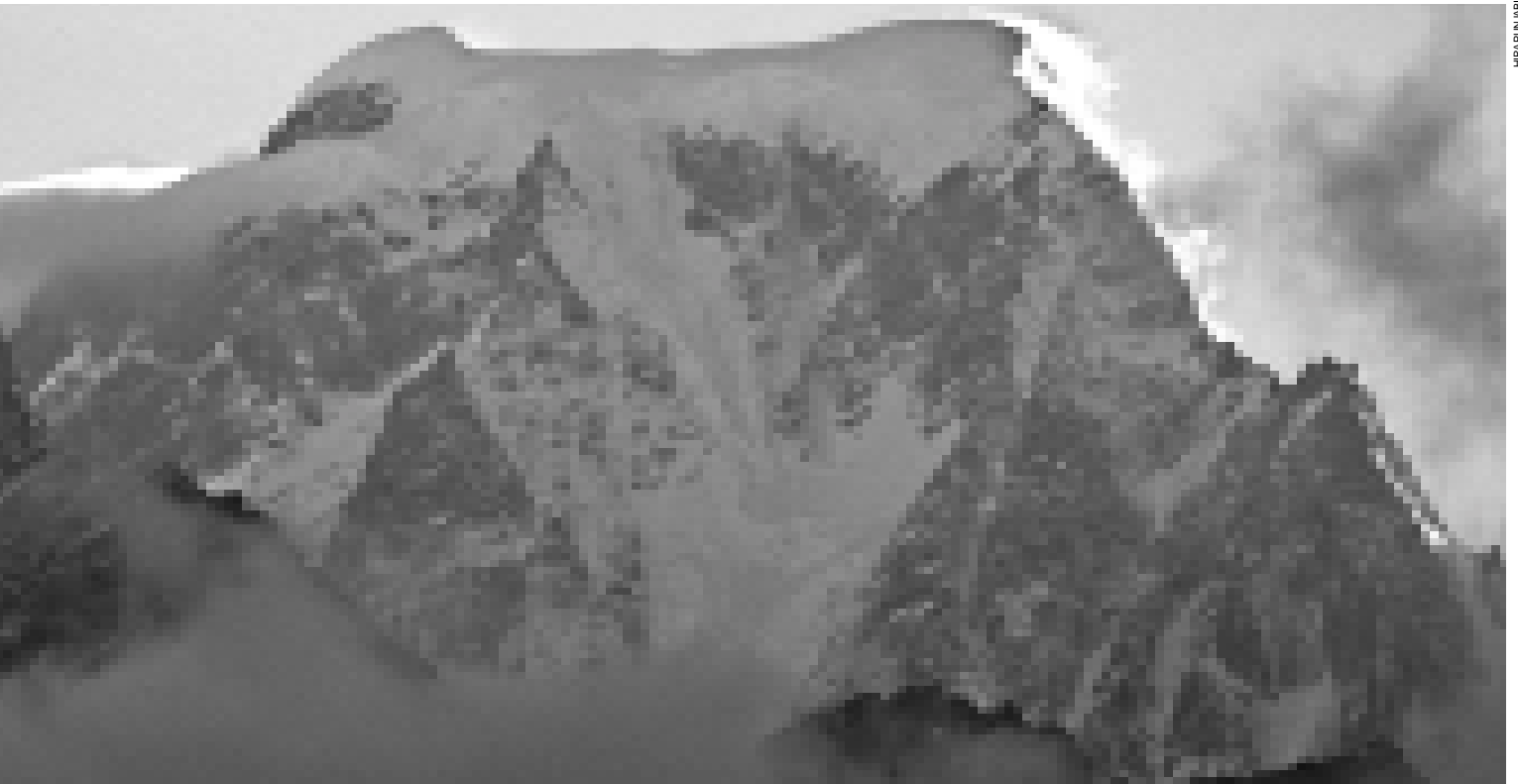
perhaps analogous to my adopted homeland America and its neighbour to the north, Canada. Living in Vermont, only 64 km. from the US-Canadian border, I can appreciate the differences and similarities between both countries, which had a common heritage but an amicably divergent national identity.

We also discussed how conflict situations can lead to a sense of cynicism and entrapment. Parties in protracted conflicts such as the Indo-Pak case tend to feel that too much time and too heavy a price has been paid and that any sign of compromise is unacceptable and would in any event be tantamount to losing face.

This is a classic psychological-trap, which I always ask my students in environmental conflict resolution to recognise. Often, in my classes, I use the example provided by the late Jeffrey Rubin, an eminent conflict psychologist and mountaineer, who ironically perished in a mountaineering accident in the Himalayas more than a decade ago. Dr. Rubin used the example of a wolf trap that was



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operated by Canadian trappers in the winter to explain the process of entrapment. Trappers would use small bait attached to a knife's edge and buried in the snow. A wolf that tried to eat the bait would cut its tongue and would taste some of its own blood and go on licking the knife's blade, eventually bleeding to death. Such is the peril of psychological entrapment – for it seems so compelling and is yet so cruel and condemned to failure.

When we contemplated the peril of entrapment and indeed the peril of environmental devastation caused by conflict, all cynicism at the meeting evaporated. We started to think of solutions and how the military could also play a constructive role without necessarily involving immediate withdrawal. There was discussion of training the armed forces on both sides to play the role of conservation rangers who would assist scientists in studying the area as well as maintaining a clean working environment.

Currently there are literally tons of human excrement and military waste lying on the ice masses that have very slow biodegradation rates. Cleaning up this mess would be a Herculean effort but environmentalists and mountaineers are ready to be the first to initiate this challenging exercise. Foreign donors are also able and willing to help financially but must receive the 'green light' from the governments. In a world where conspiracy theories have high currency,

foreign involvement or indeed even United Nations involvement is considered interference. We must therefore display abundant caution, lest the 'hawks' on either side feel obliged to dismiss our effort.

Nevertheless, leadership and courage are the only way out of this mess, which the former Indian military commander in Siachen, General V. Raghavan has termed a "conflict without end," in his authoritative book on the subject. He too is a supporter of a peace park along with some retired Pakistani army people, including General Talat Masood.

Statesmanship is what is now required to dare to move towards peace in the Siachen at all levels – governmental and non-governmental. 2004 was an auspicious year on many accounts – it was the 50th anniversary of the first ascent of K2 by the Italian mountaineer and university professor Dr. Ardito Desio and his team. It was also the year in which the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded for the first time on environmental grounds. The work of Kenyan academician, government official and activist, Dr. Wangaari Maathai, in forming the Greenbelt movement was acknowledged by the Nobel committee as a peace-building venture. Awarding the prize was itself a mark of leadership as the cynics in many European media venues, including the *Economist*, scathingly criticised the Nobel committee for giving the prize to such a 'low politics' issue,

and to someone who has questioned conventional wisdom about conflicts.

At the end of my visit to India, I felt confident that there is positive environmental leadership, though resources are scattered. Amidst the cell-phone interruptions and relatively scarce time that Indian environmentalists offered for this meeting, there was palpable warmth towards this cause and towards peace-building with Pakistan. Across the border, notable Pakistani environmentalists are moving the agenda forward as well. IUCN (the World Conservation Union) has one of its largest field offices in Pakistan, as does the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF-Pakistan). Both are willing to facilitate the process. Whether this will translate into leadership from these organisations and their counterparts in India remains to be seen, but *Sanctuary* and the Himalayan Club believe that positive initiatives will be matched step for step. Civil society has traditionally galvanised languid governments to action – let's see if we environmentalists in South Asia can also serve this cause – *Insh'Allah!* 🐾

In 2003, *Sanctuary Asia* had initiated an online petition drive in support of the Siachen Peace Park. To lend your support to the initiative, or to get a measure of the tremendous support it has received, log on to www.sanctuaryasia.com