



Pakistan - Libya Relations

Report

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Foreword:

While the International community recognizes the Libyan rebels-led Transitional International Council (TIC) Gaddafi Stadium is the home of the Pakistan Cricket Board and the site of the final of the 1996 World Cup which Pakistan's dearest friend Sri Lanka won stands as a memento of Pakistan Libya Relations.

History of Relations:

Pakistan and Libya have had a very unique relationship with more ups and downs than an Alfred Hitchcock movie. Saudi king Faisal, Pakistan Prime Minister Bhutto and Gaddafi made OIC in 70s, While King Faisal was assassinated in 1975 then PM Bhutto was assassinated in 1977 yet Gaddafi is still unluckily alive. While some say Bhutto had traded in the Lahore Stadium for Libya's financial assistance to his government, and many more jobs for Pakistanis than the sheer number of people who had greeted Qaddafi at the very stadium, during the 1974 OIC summit but it was infact a brilliant foreign policy move to have a foothold in North Africa further off from the conventional gulf states.

Difficult times:

Right after Bhutto was deposed and later hanged Gaddafi's reaction was swift he issued secret orders for the expulsion of all the 150,000 Pakistanis residing in Libya at that time. As Ambassador Shahid Amin recalls in his book "Reminiscences of a Pakistani diplomat" when he tried to get in contact with the head of the Asia Section at the Libyan foreign office (who had earlier served as the Libyan Ambassador to Pakistan from 1973-76) he replied by saying he was no one to challenge Gaddafi's authority. As the news spread there was a growing panic in the Pakistani community.

Eventually it was on 23 March 1980 speaking at Pakistan Day celebrations in Tripoli the Ambassador made one of the most difficult speeches of his career when he informed the community that "Pakistanis were proud, patriotic and would not allow anybody to insult their country. Those who thought Pakistanis would sell their honour for the sake of some jobs were sadly mistaken." and preparations were being made for their repatriation. Some Libyans even told their leaving Pakistani friends that they were lucky that they were being asked to leave, while Libyans were the unlucky ones that they cannot leave the country.

The Pakistani military deputationists in Libya did stay even during troubled years with instances of unfriendly treatment but matters came to halt in 1980 after an ugly incident. When a Pakistani air force officer and his wife were departing Tripoli airport a Libyan customs officer was rude and evidently tried to push them. The Pakistani officer's wife was infuriated and slapped the Libyan, a ring on her finger reportedly bruised his face. The couple was arrested until the Pakistani air force contingent head contacted the chief of the Libyan airforce and soon after Pakistan decided to pull out all military personnel immediately.

Gaddafi's long obsession for mercenaries in Libya which we have clearly seen in the last few months actually started with acquiring them from Pakistan. Libya as of early 1981 started hiring retired Pakistani soldiers under the pretext of security guards but the moment they landed in Tripoli they were taken in special buses to desert sites and kept in isolation with rigorous military training. It was not until someone brought a match box to the embassy with a SOS message the officials intervened to secure the release of the missing Pakistanis and they were finally released and flown back home.

A new crisis developed in March 1981 when hijackers of a PIA aircraft carrying 150 passengers forced the plane to proceed to Libya. Murtaza Bhutto had setup Al-Zulfikar which carried out a number of militant acts against the Zia regime. After a Pakistani diplomat who was a son of an army general was killed and thrown off the plane the Zia government accepted their demands for the release of a large number of PPP's activist. Although Libyan government refused landing rights and the plane proceeded to Syria. The ambassador received reports that the three hijackers later stayed in Libya.

Gaddafi also hosted Benazir Bhutto in Libya during the difficult Zia era which was confirmed to Ambassador Shahid Amin by Gaddafi himself. The Ambassador also confirmed that the colorful stories in the media that Libyan planes carrying cash dollars never arrived in Pakistan to finance the nuclear programme. With worsening of relations with Pakistan, Gaddafi's Islamic socialism converted into more soviet style socialism. While Libya's relations worsened with the US & Europe after its involvement in bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Scotland.

Gaddafi's interest in acquiring nuclear technology had been long standing for his self image and as a deterrent says BBC's Gordon Corera in the book "Shopping for bombs". Some believe that it is possible Pakistani officials including Dr A Q Khan believed somehow they owed Libya for its initial support or there was secret deal of sharing of expertise. Whatever that was it turned out to be a nightmare for

Pakistan when Gaddafi in 2003 through his intelligence Chief Musa Kusa turned over the centrifuge designs to the CIA in return for legitimacy causing Pakistan international isolation.

Warming of Relations:

PPP's governments during the 90s did not stay in power for long to make any concrete improvements in the relations with Libya. It was not until they came back to power in 2008 when the relations were restarted which paved way for President Zardari's May 2009 visit to Libya. He termed Libya as his "second home". "This is my second visit to Libya. I came once before with my martyr wife Benazir Bhutto and our family ties with Kadhafi are strong," he said. There were around 30,000 Pakistanis residents of Libya by then and a MOU was signed to send 50,000 more skilled workers to Libya by the end of the year. Which again had to repatriated after the February 17, 2011 uprising.

Current Situation:

Reports indicate the Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi is seeking Islamabad's assistance to overcome the challenges his authority faces in Tripoli. A senior official of the Libyan ministry of foreign affairs is due to arrive in Islamabad on July 27 with a special message from Qaddafi for President Asif Ali Zardari, as reported in the Pakistani media. The special envoy will also meet Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar such is the closeness between Gaddafi and the Bhutto family.

Pakistan has so far refused to accord recognition to the Transitional International Council as the legitimate authority in Libya even when Gaddafi's oldest friend Russia have send envoys to meet with rebel leaders. Pakistan refused to attend the Istanbul conference despite having the secretary-general of the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) representing Muslim countries at the meeting. We hope Gaddafi's envoy isn't looking for a place of safe refuge for the Colonel in return for his support to the Bhuttos and PPP.

Recommendations:

Progressive Muslim countries like Turkey, Qatar and United Arab Emirates have recognized the Transitional International Council as the legitimate authority in Libya and it is high time Pakistan realize Gaddafi is a relic of the past. Pakistan's Ambassador in UAE Jamil Khan should be concurrently accredited to Libya due to his expertise on Libya to safe guard Pakistan's future relations with Libya. A good start would be renaming the Gaddafi Stadium which would give a loud and clear message that Pakistan won't be on the wrong side of history this time.

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