

US-Pakistan Leaders' Forum to bridge relations gap

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ISLAMABAD (February 26, 2011) : The US-Pakistan relations have a chequered history, and the Raymond Davis issue has once again brought the allies in the war against terror at crossroads, but US-Pakistan Leaders' Forum is hopeful to bridge the gap and establish people to people contact.

A group of 20 Americans from different walks of life, most of them on their first visit to Pakistan, interacted with budding entrepreneurs in Lahore, students at Lums, educationists and media personnel while looking forward to develop people to people contact between the two countries.

"We have identified many areas, but our initial focus will be on education, agriculture and media, for mutual co-operation between private sectors of the two countries," said Aakif K Ahmed, co-director of US-Pakistan Leaders Forum, while talking to journalists here the other day.

When asked whether this realisation, of improving people to people contact, had any nexus with the Raymond Davis issue, he categorically denied, saying that the issue had nothing to do with the initiative, and the Forum's first summit (that held in Pakistan) was scheduled eight months ago.

A stable, prosperous and democratic Pakistan is considered vital to US interests. The US Ambassador to Pakistan, Cameron Munter, had noted earlier in January this year that, "We have learned our lesson from 1989 when at the conclusion of the Afghan War we turned our attention elsewhere. We turned away from this region. We made a mistake and we won't repeat it." But there are media reports that the US had suspended high level contact with Pakistan in the backdrop of Davis issue.

At this juncture, the US-Pakistan Leaders' Forum is looking forward to work in areas like business entrepreneurship, governance, energy and water. The private sector of both countries sat together to explore possibilities of enhancing co-operation without involvement of their respective governments for the first time in history of bilateral relations of both nations, he maintained.

Referring to their meeting with Care Foundation, The Citizen's Foundation (TFC), leading non-governmental organisations working in education sector, he said that the Americans were very much impressed, "and we are going to launch a pilot project of 20 schools under the sister school

programme". He said that CARE Foundation and National Association of Retired Teachers, USA had agreed to enhance co-operation for providing trainings to teachers here in Pakistan.

Similarly, representatives from University of California and Agriculture University, Faisalabad sat together and made commitments of co-operation. "We also talked about holding Pak-US media summit," he added. "This all happened during the Davis week" Aakif noted, adding that "when you bring people together, things do happen".

He said that the forum would generate 50:50 percent amount by themselves and, if need arises, government's help could be sought, but efforts would be made to maintain at minimal level and require \$700,000 per annum. When asked about future plan of action, Aakif said that the projects launched under this initiative would be completed in three years. However, in case of success, it could be extended to five years. The next summit of the forum is expected to take place in September/October in US.

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