

Journal of Peace Studies, Vol. 12, Issue 4, October-December, 2005

Statement by Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh at the 13th SAARC Summit

Let me begin by extending our sincere congratulations to the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Her Excellency Begum Khaleda Zia on her election as Chairperson of SAARC. I also express my heartfelt appreciation to the Government and people of Bangladesh for the excellent arrangements made for this truly historic Summit. We have been overwhelmed by the warm and friendly hospitality extended to us since our arrival in Dhaka.

I would also like to take this opportunity to express our sincere appreciation to the immediate past Chair, Pakistan, for the unfailing commitment and zeal with which it has pursued the revival of the SAARC process.

Our region has seen intense suffering caused by major natural disasters this year. Sri Lanka, Maldives and India were the victims of the Tsunami in the early part of the year and now Pakistan and India have suffered from a major earthquake, which has wiped out entire towns and villages. We grieve for our citizens and fellow South Asians who lost their lives, and resolve to continue to help others affected, rebuild their lives.

These disasters once again remind us of the need for forging even closer ties to enable us to pool our collective resources and wisdom to deal with such calamities. This Summit should evolve effective regional mechanisms for effective and timely cooperation in disaster relief as well as management. We have extended modest help to our neighbours in a spirit of solidarity, and we are prepared to do more. We are glad that India's offer to host the SAARC Centre for Disaster Preparedness has been accepted.

Disaster management is an issue whose urgency compels us to address it with seriousness of purpose that it deserves. The possibilities for meaningful cooperation range from early warning systems to provision of relief and reconstruction. It is incumbent on us to do more in this area, drawing on existing experience in South Asia. For instance, I understand Bangladesh has developed innovative approaches for reducing the impact of disasters through community involvement in planning and risk management. The use of micro-credit both for pre-disaster risk reduction and for post-disaster reconstruction and rehabilitation are cited as global best practices that are worthy of replication in other countries of South Asia.

SAARC is entering the 20th year of its existence. It was in this very historic city that we began our journey towards a shared goal of collective prosperity. The vision of President Zia-ur-Rahman helped move forward the idea of SAARC and it is only

appropriate that we honour his memory at this Summit with the first SAARC Award. May his spirit continue to guide SAARC process to its ultimate destination.

At this point in SAARC's journey, it is fair to ask whether, in these 20 years, we have done justice to that initial blueprint for regional cooperation. The honest answer is that regional economic cooperation in South Asia has fallen far short of our expectations and the dreams of our founding fathers. It remains far behind the more successful examples in both Asia and other regions of the world. I sincerely hope that SAFTA comes into force by January 1, 2006, but even this will represent only a modest beginning in terms of our goal for regional economic integration.

It is important that we assess South Asia Regional Cooperation in the larger Asian context. Today, ASEAN is evolving rapidly into a truly integrated economic community. Parallel to this intra-ASEAN integration is the broader movement towards economic integration in the context of the proposed East Asian Economic Summit. We are clearly witnessing nothing short of an Asian resurgence based upon the rebuilding of the pre-colonial arteries of trade and commerce that created a distinct Asian identity in the first place. My question is - is SAARC prepared to be an integral part of this emerging Asian resurgence, or is it content to remain marginalized at the periphery? If our region wishes to be a part of the dynamic Asia, which is emerging in our neighbourhood, then we must act and act speedily and without any further loss of time. It is our location at the crossroads of Asia that gave our sub-continent its unique civilisational attributes – the assimilative traditions in our culture, the adaptability of our people and a boundless creativity that arises from a constant interplay of new ideas.

If SAARC as a region has to recapture its role as a crossroads of culture and commerce, how much more necessary is it for us to remove the barriers to the free flow of goods, of peoples and ideas within our own region. We cannot be the crossroads of Asia, but remain disconnected within our own region. Without the latter, the former is not possible, or at least, will be possible to a very limited extent. Ancient roads crisscross the subcontinent, and the link-up with the seaports that were the gateways to the rest of the world. Our rivers form the waterways over which people and cargo traveled across the region. This historic connectivity within the sub-continent became overlaid in the colonial period with modern railroads and macadam highways; ancient seaports on our coast became a part of the new web of shipping links, the new channels of colonial commerce. Colonialism did produce wealth in our region, though it was not wealth for our people but plunder for the imperial system.

If we wish the next twenty years of SAARC to be different, we should take the first decision to reconnect the countries of the subcontinent on the one hand and then reconnect the subcontinent to the larger Asian neighbourhood on the other. We need to recharge and regenerate the arteries of transport and communication that bind us together and in turn link our region to the rest of Asia to reclaim the prosperity that is undoubtedly our due. In pursuit of this vision, I suggest let us agree, at this Summit,

that all South Asian countries would provide to each other, reciprocally, transit facilities to third countries, not only connecting one another, but also connecting to the larger Asian neighbourhood, in the Gulf, Central Asia and in the South-East Asia. India, which borders each of the members of the South Asia, is willing to do so.

In this context, I am happy to announce that India offers to hold a South Asian Car Rally. This would be a run-up to our next Summit. It would symbolise vividly our regional identity and also draw attention to the urgent need to improve our SAARC transport infrastructure.

We should also improve air connectivity amongst ourselves. India is prepared to offer to all SAARC neighbours, on a reciprocal basis and without prejudice to existing rights, the facility of daily air services by designated airlines, to our metropolitan cities Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Bangalore, Hyderabad and Kolkata, and as many services as they may wish, to eighteen other destinations all across India. I would also like to offer to the designated airlines of SAARC countries the facility to exercise fifth freedom rights, both intermediate and beyond, within the SAARC region, on a reciprocal basis. We should encourage more air services and for this it may be worthwhile to provide, in our air agreements, multiple destinations of airlines.

More liberal movement of peoples and goods across our borders also requires greater sensitivity on the part of all member countries to pressing concerns. No member country should allow its territory to be used against the interests of another member country. There should be zero tolerance for cross-border terrorism and for the harbouring of hostile insurgent groups and criminal elements. It is only in an environment of mutual confidence and a collective commitment against the scourge of terrorism, that we can register the progress we all desire in more intense interaction.

The people of our subcontinent are at the cutting edge of scientific and technological research and in the front ranks of the knowledge society across the world. Wherever an enabling environment and world class facilities are made available to our talented people, they excel. My suggestion to you is, why cannot we as seven member countries, pool our resources to create a center of excellence, in the form of a South Asian University, which can provide world class facilities and professional faculty to students and researchers from every country of our region? Let this become a forum where our academicians, our scholars, our researchers and gifted students, can work together in the service of human advancement. India is willing to make a major contribution to the realization of this project over the next three to four years. We can certainly host this institution, but are equally prepared to cooperate in creating a suitable venue in any other member country.

I would like to propose for our collective consideration one other collaborative project. Food security is a major challenge for all countries of South Asia. I would recommend that we establish a Regional Food Bank, to which all member countries would

contribute, to be used to meet shortages and losses caused by natural calamities in any one of our member countries. There could be a network of storage depots across the region, with member countries contributing shares on the basis of their capacity and availability of surpluses.

Similarly, energy security is increasingly one of the major challenges facing our region, particularly as our individual economies expand. We could therefore consider promoting regional co-operation in strategizing for the future. I propose a South Asian Energy Dialogue, involving experts, academics, environmentalists, officials and NGOs, to recommend measures to tap this vast, latent potential for co-operation.

I would like to mention here some other recommendations that have been put forward by India. A year ago, India offered to contribute US \$100 million towards the creation of a Poverty Alleviation Fund on the understanding that this money would be used entirely on projects within SAARC, but outside India. We regret to note that not one project proposal has been received by us in the past year. We welcome the decision to merge the different existing and proposed funds into an Umbrella South Asian Development Fund, with different windows for different purposes.

We have also taken an initiative to develop projects for increasing awareness on HIV/AIDS and Tuberculosis, and developing medical skills and competence in the region for tackling these scourges. Here again, we have not made much progress. I suggest establishing a collaborative healthcare project involving a regional Tele-medicine network. We would be happy to share our expertise in this field, by installing such a facility linking all SAARC countries.

Our association has before it the Report of the Group of Eminent Persons, who set out a road map for the creation of a South Asian Economic Union by the year 2020. I have referred to the fundamental decisions that we need to take in order to advance towards this goal. At the July Ministerial meeting we had recommended the establishment of a SAARC High Economic Council, which could promote initiatives in economic, trade, finance and monetary areas with a view to moving towards precisely such regional economic integration.

South Asia possesses a very rich and living tradition of exquisite handicrafts and textiles. Each member country has its own unique culture and distinctive craft traditions. India would be happy to preserve and foster this valuable legacy by establishing a "SAARC Museum of Textiles and Handicrafts". This Museum could sponsor training of crafts persons, foster design skills, hold promotional events such as fashion-shows and demonstrations by artisans of the region and also undertake research. We could also explore the setting up of retail outlets in each of our capitals to promote our textiles and handicrafts region-wise.

Let me conclude by assuring you of India's unswerving commitment of India to the realization of the solemn goals of our Association, an association to whose formulation your Late husband played such a glorious role. As SAARC, we must resolve to become a part of ongoing transformations now underway in all parts of the world. The challenges we face as a region and as members of the larger international community are no longer susceptible to purely national solutions. There is an imperative need to change and overcome the divisions of history and politics to forge a new architecture of mutually beneficial economic partnership. India, for its part, remains ready for this endeavour.

Dhaka
November 12, 2005

Courtesy: <http://meaindia.nic.in/sshome.htm>