### It's time to stop demonising each other "The Summit is not just

The crises between and among countries will remain. But we must not let the crises overshadow our future. The ruling elite in Delhi and Islamabad must realise where they are drifting their region to. Failing that, catastrophic consequences will be waiting for all of us...

EKRAM KABIR

HE ice seems to have melted. A situation has been created for the foreign ministers of India and Pakistan to shake hands in Kathmandu. And finally, the leaders of the seven South Asian nations. including Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vaipavee and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, are meeting today Peoples across South Asia should heave a

sigh of relief because the summit is finally taking place. There had been fears that the summit - postponed from November 2001 because of the war in Afghanistan - might be delayed again by the muscle-flexing between India and Pakistan since the December 13 attack on the Parliament in New Delhi. Looking back, when General Pervez Musharraf took over power in Pakistan, the geo-political situation in the subcontinent resembled a simmering cauldron. Consequently, Saarc got stalled. The summit, which is an annual event, could not be held for more that two years, as India refused to sit with Pakistan on a regional plank.

The smaller countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal and the Maldives had nothing much to do in bringing India and Pakistan together and let the Saarc going. But they needed the gathering more than India and Pakistan did. India has always shown a neglected attitude towards the Saarc, sometimes doubting its usefulness.

Even though a late starter - all must remember - the success of Saarc was not negligible. Despite many constraints arising out of inter-state relations it made headway in forging a South Asian identity and evolving strategies for poverty alleviation through cooperation, co-ordination and integrated approaches. But, as South Asia was moving towards preferential trading arrangement

which would have eventually culminated into a compact economic bloc and free trade area fostering flow of investment and commodities among the member-states, came the blow. Relations between India and Pakistar reached an alltime low centring their long lingering

dispute over Kashmir resulting in their frenzy of arms race and nuclear capabilities.

However, the dark clouds that thickened over this regional body and put it in virtual

limbo are now likely to dissipate. When Saarc was formally launched in December 1985 it generated great enthusiasm, rising expectations and bold promises among the peoples of the member-states that burying their bitter pasts at long last they would be able to forge new destinies for them benefiting from a structured co-operative grouping. Till then, South Asia was the only region without any regional co-operation. Close by was the example of Asean through which South East Asian countries, once derided as 'the Balkans of the East', were making steady progress and bold strides towards economic development.

In South Asia, because of its size, population and resources India has the biggest clout. When Saarc was mooted, it was expected that India would follow the example of Indonesia in Asean so as to make the forum viable and effective. If Indonesia, the largest member-country in Asean, would have shown big brotherly attitude, co-operation in South East Asia would have faltered and fumbled. Now, the prevail-

ing political atmosphere in the region is certainly bleak, and the lack of unity among South Asian countries is too glaring, which however not the case with countries of other regions. Every country is working on regional

co-operation in a participatory process. But military tension and terrorism are dominating South Asian relations, with Pakistan and India frozen in a dangerous diplomatic standoff.

However in Kathmandu, diplomacy is likely to reign supreme at the conference. India is likely to push for effective implementation of the United Nations Security Council resolution on tackling the menace of terrorism. Pakistan, in this regard, has already said it would consider extraditing 20 terrorists wanted by India provided New Delhi gave evidence against them and took recourse under Saarc Anti-Terrorism Convention.

Leaving aside the political agenda, the South Asian leaders will have to remember that we have an economic agenda for the region. And they should emphasise, with all their abilities and interests, on expediting the process of doing business among the Saarc

South Asia, however, has many limitations that may take time to overcome. Despite all the ingredients and resources of becoming prosperous. South Asia continues to languish as the world's most prominent poverty

pocket, comparable only with East Africa. And Saarc was deemed as a panacea and a formula for pooling the resources and efforts of the member-states for their collective

The major objective of Saarc is to improve the 'quality of life' of the peoples. Leaders a the 11th summit must remember that only commonality among South Asian nations i "poverty". Blaming each other is acceptable to the "peoples" who are committed to demil tarisation, democracy, peace, stability, personal security and collective prosperity. The Saarc as a regional co-operation among the governments/states is still seen as a viable forum where the governments can sit together to build up a strong South Asia with

its human resources, culture and biodiversity. When most of the countries in the world are moving towards closer economic integration [Europe should be the best example right now] and mutual co-operation to successfully meet the challenges of globalisation and reap the benefit out of it, can we in South Asia afford to relapse into isolation from the global economic trends?

The crises between and among the countries will remain. But we must not let the crises overtake our future goals. The ruling elite especially in India and Pakistan - have to realise where they are drifting their region to. The sooner they do so the better for their peoples in the region. If we fail in this, there will be catastrophic consequences the signs of which are already visible.

We need to stop demonising each other; we need to stop glorifying problems.

Ekram Kabir is a Senior Newsroom Editor in Ekushey

# a photo-opportunity"

Nihal Rodrigo is a seasoned Sri Lankan diplomat, but the byzantine world of South Asian politics may have been too much even for him. After an aborted summit two years ago, Rodrigo is finishing his stint as SAARC Secretary-general just when the summit is finally taking place in Kathmandu 4-6 January. While supervising preparations for the Summit, Nihal Rodrgio found time to tell what he thinks of South Asian politics, SAARC, Track Two and his creative urges.



Nihal Rodrigo, SAARC Secretary General

#### Q. How difficult was it to get everyone to agree to come this time?

A. The commitment to SAARC has not diminished although the official process tended to slacken in the last two years. Informal consultations were being held on convening the Eleventh Summit by Sri Lanka as Chairperson and by Nepal as the host country. I myself took every opportunity to urge all Member States to convene the Summit as early as possible. Confidence needed to be built through meetings of first the senior officials and then the standing committee which Sri Lanka hosted outside the regular schedule of meetings. The question of actual dates became a problem when other constraints were removed. It was difficult to find a set of dates which seven Heads of State all found convenient. In the last fortnight, I have had meetings with the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, the Prime Minister of India and the President of Pakistan in their capitals and they are fully committed to the dates that have now been finalized. Earlier Mr Mahat and Mr Acharva visited all the capitals formally handing over the invitation for the

Q. Is it going to be just a photo opportunity?

A. No. This Summit will be quite significant. Many of the administrative and financial matters have already been settled at the Special Session of the Standing Committee in Colombo. There is, therefore, more time for issues of substance. Poverty alleviation, for example. India and Pakistan call poverty the main enemy. And the social issue women and children. A Social Charter for SAARC will set targets for the region on education, health, children, women, population stabilization and so on. Two regional conventions will be signed. One on children and the other against trafficking of women and children for prostitution. These would be major steps because member states sign on the dotted line, as it

Q. But on the political level?

A. As you know, SAARC concentrates on economic, social, technical and cultural issues. Political issues are taboo according to the Charter. However, at summits, there are informal bilateral talks outside the framework of the Conference. These are conducted in private and are entirely decided by the countries concerned. The SAARC Secretariat has nothing to do with these meetings which are at the discretion of the countries concerned.

Q. Is terrorism going to eclipse the SAARC agenda this time?

A. Naturally, terrorism has become a major issue particularly after the September mass terrorist attack in the US. Terrorism has, however, been a problem over many years for many countries in South Asia, particularly for Sri Lanka about which, being a Sri Lankan, I have no inhibitions to talk about. SAARC has a convention against terrorism but there are many legal and other impediments to its implementation. Frankly, as it stands, it is not very effective. I believe that the Sri Lanka delegation is proposing a meeting of legal experts to study the Convention in order to deal with whatever constraints there are. Questions of definition and so on pose major difficulties and even the UN Adhoc Committee has been hamstrung on this issue. What we need is a firm condemnation of terrorism in all its manifestations and practical action to encourage greater cooperation to

Q. Is SAARC going to get anywhere as long as the political will isn't there?

A. Relations among member states within any regional grouping, whether it be ASEAN or EU or SAARC, tend to fluctuate. Naturally, when good relations are at their

peak, much more can be achieved. Q. Isn't intra-South Asian trade and economic cooperation the place to start, why wait for the political

A. I think you touched on an important aspect. There are two views: one states that unless there is political will. nothing significant, beyond technical exchange etc., is possible. The other states that if there is economic cooperation that would create a certain ambience and would have a healthy influence on political relations. One cannot separate the two processes and I believe it was President Bandaranaike who made the point at the Colombo Summit when she stated that both processes should be encouraged and advanced without holding one process up until there is progress in the other. Q. Was SAFTA too ambitious?

A. Only about 4 per cent of South Asia's global trade is intra-regional trade. There is, of course, what is politely called informal trade as well as trade between SAARC countries contracted through third countries. The actual potential is immense. SAFTA was meant also as a process of confidence-building. SAARC was expected to complete drafting of a Treaty Framework for South Asia by the end of this year. This is obviously not possible. However, we have moved beyond rhetoric on the virtues of regional trade to the point where we have identified a series of problems that need to be resolved. The Secretariat has prepared a draft treaty framework

using inputs from the corporate sector as well as examples of the European Union and American Free Trade Area. Although the situations are obviously not the same, there are parallels, for example, how did a country like Portugal fit into the European Community with powerful economies like the German? A number of issues have been identified in our draft Treaty such as rules of origin; non-tariff barriers; compensation for revenue that would be lost; fitting in existing bilateral FTAs (Nepal and India or Bhutan and India) into a regional framework; transit rights of land-locked states like Bhutan and Nepal; and schedules that would provide the smaller economies more time to open up their trade. The delay has been because all these issues require clearance at a higher policy level, say ministerial level. Unfortunately, as you know, we have not been able to have ministerial-level meetings for guite some time until agreement was reached for commerce ministers to meet in Delhi in August this year

Q. Is there a problem with South Asia that it will never really cooperate regionally because of the imbalances and India's gravitational pull?

 A. South Asia is a region of tremendous asymmetry, not merely in terms of size but obviously in terms of economic strength as well. In addition, India is the central state not only metaphorically but also because of its size, and geographically in that it borders all countries in the region. Again one has to look at the example of other free trade areas such as AFTA, for example, where Mexico has been able to fit in with two major economies such as the US and Canada. ASEAN has the same problem since the accession to membership by Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, They call it the "development gap" which they are trying to reduce. The problem is not insurmountable but it will take time Q. So we will never be like ASEAN, or the EU?

A. Not being an astrologer, I cannot give you a firm answer. However, SAARC has only recently looked seriously at economic cooperation. Although SAARC was established in 1985, it was only in the early 90s that the Association felt confident enough to take on core economic issues. Tariff negotiations through SAPTA began only in 1995 with the coming into operation of the SAPTA Treaty. We are only now really grappling with the problems of establishing a free trade area only after the Colombo Summit. ASEAN has been around for over 30

Q. Is the Track Two dead on the tracks?

A. Actually, Track Two and the activities of civil society in South Asia have increased in the last two years I am not sure whether this is "because" or "despite" the considerable slowing down of the policy level official meetings. I believe on the eve of the Summit that a number of Track Two initiatives have been launched which include former prime ministers, foreign ministers, SAARC secretaries general; academics and so on. My only concern is that parallel tracks never meet. Unless there is some direct interaction between the governmental process and the parallel Track Two approaches, they will go into infinity without meeting. During my three years, I have tried to bring the two together. Conclusions and recommendations of civil society have been made available to the official SAARC process and some of these have been taken in account

Q. How frustrating is to be Secretary-General? Have you left any survival tips for your successor? A. Yes, the last two years have been difficult and required tremendous patience. However, I still remain a firm believer in the need for greater cooperation in South Asia at all levels. SAARC as an institution has its own drawbacks but it is the only framework endorsed by all seven Member States and their leaders. I have also made several suggestions about the institutional mechanisms of SAARC and its decision-making process. These reviews, as you might call them, are proceeding and some of them will be taken up in Kathmandu, hopefully for decision. My successor is an old friend and a SAARC-wallah. He has been a Director in the Secretariat and knows it well from inside. I came from the outside but with several years dealing with South Asian countries at the bilateral levels as well as in the SAARC context at a number of Summits and other meetings I was involved in. I was, therefore, more impatient as things worked faster in the bilateral context but I do not regret having taken on the job.

Q. How busy is the job of Secretary-General? Was there enough time for your painting? A. I was certainly kept busy but often for matters which would in other times not have taken that much time. Fixing of dates of meetings, for example, was much more torturous a process. Too much mini and micro... I did not have much time for painting but the experience of Nepal is very much with me and I hope to return sometime to pour it all out painting, a novel, I don't really know. A book on South Asia (non-fiction) is of course in production stage.

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# **Kudos to South Asian leaders**

ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

UBLICATION of this piece synchronises with the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in the capital of Himalayan kingdom of

Nepal.

The line-up to the summit has been marked by uncertainty. Barring last moment unforeseen develop ment, the three-day summit is set to start amidst an alarming political climate in the region the worst since the SAARC was formally launched through its first summit in Bangla-

Hopefully, leaders of the seven countries are sharing the same dais in Kathmandu when this column is read by admirers of the SAARC, first such regional forum in South Asian region, which has so far come across a bumpy road but a produc-

Despite the deteriorating bilateral ties between two main members of the grouping, India and Pakistan, their leaders are now in the capital of Nepal belying scepticism that perbasic question wh the event will finally be held or suffer another inordinate delay delivering a big blow to the forum.

In fact, the situation along the Indo-Pakistan border is so explosive

that some quarters feel flaring up of a war is only a matter of time. There is reason for such an impression because never before since the SAARC came into being such belligerence between the two South Asian hostile neighbours prevailed Even the Kargil conflict which forced a long delay of the current summit had not escalated to an extent that is being witnessed now even though two countries were engaged in

skirmishes along the Kashmir sector of the border at that time. However, two countries have also the record of coming back to normality even from the brink of a war though the current conditions are far more dangerous. But the bottom line is that Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf are attending the SAARC summit disnissing speculations that the event

may not at all take place this time.

They deserve great appreciation from the well wishers of SAARC and those who would like the see this region free from tensions and hostili

India should be complimented as its leader finally made it to Kathmandu. No doubt, uncertainties about the summit surrounded mainly about Indian participation and hence PM Vaipavee deserves commendation. His country may or have not have enough reasons to call for an postponement of the 11th the very fact that it is now there amidst worsening ties with Pakistan reflects New Delhi's commitment to the SAARC.

India is the biggest country in the grouping and its attitude impacts the forum. Gen. Musharraf too deserves compliments since New Delhi imposed ban on using its air space by Pakistani planes although it said special permission to Musharraf's aircraft for travelling to SAARC

summit over India is no problem. However, Islamabad could have used this as a pretext for staying away from the summit blaming India for creating bottlenecks. Bangladesh conceived the SAARC idea and it was immediately welcomed by all the smaller nations of the region while India and Pakistan took time to give their consent. At that time, some quarters felt that two countries were "dragging their feet" on the proposal but it was not unusual to weigh the pros and cons of the idea before giving the nod. True, both took long time before saying "yes" but they fully supported and cooper-

ment by late Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi. In her message condoling the death of president Ziaur Rahman, she had described the SAARC as a "statesman-like

vision" by the Bangladesh president. In the first summit in Dhaka, the elderly statesman of Sri Lanka late Junius Javewardene described the SAARC as a great idea but cautioned all about the bumpy road ahead. Unquestionably, the path is strewn with many obstacles but it is still being negotiated with seriousness - not abandoned. There is no denying that bilateral problems among the member states more particularly India-Pakistan bitter ties often queer the pitch of the progress of the SAARC. Nonetheless, it is laudable that two main members have upheld the very essence of the forum whose progress may not be satisfactory but certainty small when considered against backdrop of the resource constraints and other problems including political instability and bickering in the region.

Admittedly, very few pragmatic persons expect anything spectacular from the grouping. It cannot be like the ASEAN or the GCC since this region is mired by many negative indicators both at economic and political planes. But the integrated has given concrete results in many crucial areas covering economy, culture, sports, agriculture etc. This is no mean achievement.

The current summit is to take a number of decisions to bolster cooperation in the field of trade of commerce etc. Various programmes in different areas also helped forge "People-to-People" contacts. Seven countries share many commonality of the past and their coming closer is admired by the more than a billion living in the region. Any setback to the SAARC comes as a bad news for them as it adversely jolts the

Indeed, the very fact that the 11th summit is taking place is in itself is a big shot in the arms for the SAARC. It is all the more noteworthy as the event brushed aside all scepticism about its occurrence on the scheduled time. Bilateral problems do exist historically and can possibly not be swept under the carnet. It is a reality. It is also true that this situation does affect the SAARC. But what is needed that such problems must not come down heavily on the SAARC which is the embodiment of the collective hopes of the vast multitude living in the area.

Zaglul Chowdhury is senior special correspondent

## Saarc: a slow boat to nowhere?

Without India's leadership, SAARC will continue to drift aimlessly. And for India to lead, it must come up with unilateral measures that will accelerate the process of regional economic integration.

C. RAJA MOHAN

S THE leaders of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) gather in Kathmandu this weekend, the expectations of a substantive outcome from their deliberations are very low. Neither the region nor the world is biting its fingernails about the declaration that will emerge out of the 11th SAARC summit. Nepal, the host nation, which has had the misfortune of managing this much-postponed summit, will heave a sigh of relief that it is over and done with. The media will be more interested in the "body language" of Indian and Pakistani leaders than in the abracadabra of SAARC officialese.

The story of the 11th SAARC Summit is unlikely to be very different from that of the 10th summit in Colombo in July 1998. Then, as now, the South Asian political leaders met under the shadow of Indo- Pakistan tensions. In 1998 too, everyone was pleased that the SAARC summit took place despite the Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests that May. If worries about a nuclear flashpoint dominated the region then, those have become a reality now. This SAARC summit takes place amidst a looming prospect of a military confrontation between India and Pakistan that could escalate to the nuclear level

Must SAARC remain satisfied with the fact that the leaders get to see each other once in a while and sign on some trivia that their officials manage to cook up? Compared to similar organisations elsewhere in the world, the record of SAARC in promoting regional integration has been dismal. The SAARC summits have become expensive talk shops with little effect on the lives of one and a quarter billion people in the region.

Take for example the discussion at SAARC this time on "poverty alleviation". How credible can the political elite of the subcontinent be when they mouth collective statements on eradicating poverty - a promise made a long while ago to their own national constituencies but not kept? Poverty of ideas and timidity of action are the real problems before the SAARC. To be sure there have been many ambitious slogans - a regional free trade area by 2001, a customs union by 2010 and, catch your breath, an economic union by 2020! In

the typical subcontinental fashion of ritualising everything, these dates are doled out without any seriousness of purpose. Having missed the deadline of 2001 for a free trade area (agreed in 1997) the 11th SAARC summit now wants it by the end of this year. A free trade area involving India and Pakistan which have just downgraded diplomatic relations and snapped transportation links? Just forget about it. The SAARC is going nowhere. It will begin to go somewhere only if India takes charge. Can the Prime Minister, Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee, make the 11th SAARC summit somewhat different from the previous

Mr. Vajpayee must unambiguously point to the failures of the SAARC over the last two decades. In speaking to the SAARC, Mr. Vajpayee is addressing the entire region. He has the status to proclaim that India will no longer stand for the current stagnation in the

SAARC process Second, Mr. Vajpayee must signal that India is ready to take the leadership role in the SAARC. In the early years of the SAARC, it was argued by many that New Delhi must maintain a low profile in the organisation. It was suggested that if India as the largest nation took the initiative, the others would get

If Mr. Vajpayee cannot muster that political will, the 11th SAARC summit will end up as just another forgettable ritual among the South Asian leaders.

ones? Mr. Vajpayee is right in the middle of one of the most serious national security crises ever faced by India. The crisis involves a fundamental redefinition of relations with one of its largest neighbours in the SAARC. No one will blame Mr. Vajpayee if he does not come up with big ideas on regional cooperation. His domestic constituencies will be quite happy to see Mr. Vajpayee talk tough on terrorism and just look through Gen. Pervez Musharraf. But Mr. Vajpayee can do better. Even as he keeps the political focus on terrorism in Kathmandu, Mr. Vajpayee can push forward regionalism in the subcontinent by

putting out four messages. First, Mr. Vajpayee must do some blunt talking on what the crisis means for the subcontinent as a whole - that cross-border terrorism and regional cooperation do not go hand in hand. Mr. Vajpayee must speak plainly on the threat that religious extremism and violence pose to all nations of the subcontinent. Cooperation in combating terrorism is not a political favour one nation is doing another, but in the national interest of every country in the region. He needs to emphasise that unless this scourge is rooted out forthwith, the region will find its dreams for peace and prosperity shattered. At the same time, uncomfortable. India's strategy of lying low has not worked. It has led to a mindless drift. If the SAARC is to become productive, India has to take the lead. No one else will. Pakistan's approach to regionalism has made it abundantly clear it has no interest in the collective advancement of the region. The smaller countries are in no position to set the

agenda for the SAARC. On the core economic issues before the SAARC, Pakistan has been the slowest camel that has set the pace. It has been more interested in bringing its bilateral dispute with India over Kashmir into the SAARC ambit than in trade liberalisation. Pakistan's basic line in the SAARC is that there can be no economic progress unless political issues are resolved. This approach, is the exact opposite of what the other regional organisations have successfully adopted - expand economic cooperation despite political differences. Pakistan's refusal to benefit from regional cooperation has beggared itself. It should no longer be allowed to hold the rest of the region back.

Third, Mr. Vajpayee should proclaim India ready for a "two-speed" SAARC. Mr. Vajpayee goes to Kathmandu davs after down-grading the relationship with Pakistan.

He needs to demonstrate at Kathmandu that India is prepared to advance economic integration in the region with Pakistan if possible and without Pakistan if necessary. The smaller countries of the region have increasingly seen the benefits of a regional market and are frustrated that integration is not taking place. To prevent regionalism from being held hostage by Pakistan, India must get going with those who are ready. The SAARC charter permits sub-regional cooperation that involves two or more countries. There are serious possibilities for rapid movement among India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan on the one hand and among India, Sri Lanka and Maldives on the other. Pakistan can join this process whenever it is ready to put commerce above politics. Finally, Mr. Vajpayee can develop a credi-

ble strategy for transforming the region only on the basis of a strategy of unilateralism, which can be both negative and positive. Just as he displayed India's negative unilateralism by downgrading ties with Pakistan, Mr. Vaipavee must show he is capable of positive unilateralism in relation to the other neighbours. The best way of demonstrating this will be for Mr. Vajpayee to offer duty free access to goods from the least developed countries of the SAARC. This would mainly benefit Bangladesh at this stage, since Nepal and Bhutan already have that access to the Indian market. There is a separate trade treaty with Sri Lanka. Since the summit is taking place in Kathmandu, Mr. Vajpayee must publicly proclaim India's desire to renew the trade treaty with Nepal on reasonable terms for mutual benefit, and a vision to modernise and transform the bilateral economic relationship. Without India's leadership, the SAARC will continue to drift aimlessly. And for India to lead, it must come up with unilateral measures that will accelerate the process of regional economic integration. If Mr. Vajpayee cannot muster that political will, the 11th SAARC summit will end up as just another forgettable ritual among the South Asian leaders.

Courtesy: The Hindu of India.