

Saarc should seek observer status at UN: Maldives

PTI, Islamabad

The Maldives yesterday made a strong plea for security cooperation among Saarc countries and asked them to seek observer status in the United Nations as a regional grouping.

"As we are signing the protocol against terrorism, is it not possible to have regional security cooperation also as a common interest rather than a contentious issue," asked Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom while addressing the 12th Saarc Summit here.

He also suggested that Saarc nations should collectively seek an observer status in the United Nations in order to "enhance credibility as a regional grouping".

Terrorism and drug trafficking had the potential to "cripple any nation" and cause extensive human and material damage, he said expressing support for the additional protocol on terrorism.

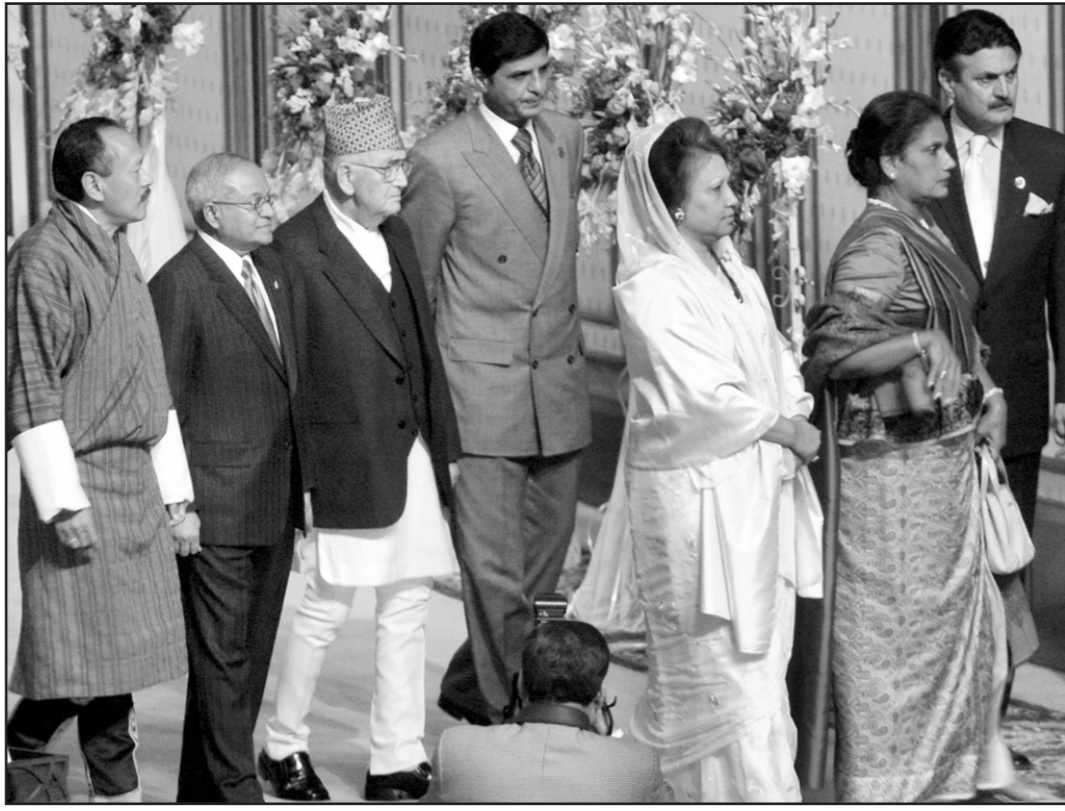


PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga (2-R), Bangladeshi Prime Minister Khaleda Zia (3-R), Bhutanese Prime Minister Jigmi Thinley (L), Maldivian President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom (2-L) and Nepalese Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa (3-L) enter the venue of the opening ceremony of the 12th Saarc summit in Islamabad yesterday. The 12th Saarc summit opened with Pakistani Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali delivering the inaugural speech, professing optimism that the 18-year old forum could be reinvigorated in its first summit in two years.

Nepal hails Indo-Pak peace moves

AFP, Islamabad

Nepalese Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa yesterday hailed the ongoing India-Pakistan peace overtures as encouraging.

"We have been very encouraged by the positive developments that have recently taken place in improving relations between India and Pakistan," Thapa said in his speech at the inauguration of the 12th summit of the seven-nation South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) in Pakistan's capital Islamabad.

"We welcome significant overtures and initiatives taken by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and President Pervez Musharraf in this direction."

"Nepal believes that improvement of relations between India and Pakistan will lead to relaxation of tension and help strengthen the Saarc."

Pak PM calls for end to South Asian tensions

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali urged an end to tensions in South Asia here yesterday, saying they had hampered the region's economic progress in his opening address to a landmark summit.

"Greater economic integration is inextricably linked to the creation of requisite political climate of peace and stability," he told the opening of the 12th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) in Pakistan's capital Islamabad.

"It is a stark reality that political differences and disputes have held back prospects of economic cooperation in South Asia."

"We subscribe to the vision of global multi-dimensional cooperation in South Asia, but we must realize that that this vision can only be transformed into reality if we are

able to overcome our differences and disputes and create a climate of mutual trust and confidence."

Saarc, founded in 1985, groups Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka and is home to 1.4 billion largely poor people.

Jamali made no direct mention of Pakistan's decades-old rival neighbour India, nor did he mention Kashmir, the disputed Himalayan region at the core of their 56-year old rivalry.

Tensions between the nuclear powers are blamed for holding back intra-Saarc cooperation and development.

Optimism is running high that thawing ties between India and Pakistan and a newly-struck agreement on establishing a South Asian free trade zone will set Saarc on a new path of progress during this summit.

Chandrika says

Thaw in Indo-Pak ties impetus for Saarc

PTI, Islamabad

Sri Lanka yesterday said the reduction of tension between India and Pakistan has provided renewed impetus to regional Association for economic development.

"Reduction of tension between the two larger states in our region gives us great strength," President Chandrika Kumaratunga said in her address to the 12th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) Summit here.

"We should be able to overcome disputes and create an atmosphere of trust," she said while complimenting Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee for his statements that Saarc nations should put aside their differences and continue to strengthen mutual cooperation.

Stressing the need for increased

Replace mistrust with trust: Vajpayee

PTI, Islamabad

Regretting continued "mutual suspicions" and "petty rivalries", Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on Saturday asked the Saarc countries to be sensitive to each other's security concerns and make bold transition from mistrust to trust to ensure development and peace in the region.

"Mutual suspicions and petty rivalries have continued to haunt us. As a result, the peace dividend has bypassed our region," Vajpayee said addressing the 12th Saarc summit at Jinnah Convention Centre here.

Asserting that any joint endeavour needed mutual trust and confidence, he said "for many decades, South Asian countries, which have a complex and troubled colonial legacies, have been unable to forge an integrated economic understanding circumventing political differences."

He observed that history "should not shackle us" and said "We have to look forward now with a collective approach in mind."

"We have to change South Asia's image and standing in the world. We must make the bold transition from mistrust to trust, from discord to concord and from tension to peace," he said.

Vajpayee said because of mutual rivalries and inadequate coordination, smuggling, drug trafficking, money laundering and gun-running flourished across "our borders" and said there was a need to jointly tackle these problems.

He made a special mention the "courageous action" of Bhutan to launch a military operation to flush out Indian insurgents from its soil.

"I would like to draw attention to courageous action taken by His Majesty the King of Bhutan and his government against insurgent groups, which were trying to use

Bhutanese territory to launch terrorist activities in India.

"It is an outstanding example of sensitivity to the security concerns of a neighbour which is at the same time in the direct long-term security interest of Bhutan itself," he said.

Vajpayee said development of greater economic stakes in each other would naturally result in greater sensitivity to the concerns of each other.

"This would pave the way for more ambitious, but entirely achievable, goals such as free trade area and economic union, open borders and common currency for the region," he said.

Vajpayee referred to deepening regional cooperations in Africa, Latin America and Caribbean besides Europe uniting to emerge as the world's most powerful economic grouping.

"We have to learn appropriate lessons" from these. He said closer

home, the Asean countries have found it possible not to allow their political problems to come in the way of economic cooperation.

"All these examples remind us that national economics should triumph over political prejudice in South Asia."

Reminding that "our forefathers (had) fought side by side transcending religious, regional and linguistic differences against colonial oppressor in the first war of Independence in 1857", the Prime Minister said "perhaps India, Pakistan and Bangladesh can together celebrate" the 150th anniversary of that uprising "in remembrance of our joint struggle against a common adversary."

Expressing satisfaction on agreements reached on terrorism, Safta and Social Charter, he, however, said "We should be candid in accepting that the expectations with which Saarc was created have not been fulfilled in the measure of potential."



PHOTO: AFP

NASA Administrator Sean O'Keefe view some of the first images arriving from Mars after the landing of the Mars Exploration Rover Spirit on Saturday as they watch from the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California. The rover will explore the surface of the planet.

Foreign pressure ups on Lanka to quit fighting

AFP, Colombo

International pressure is mounting on Sri Lankan leaders to end their power struggle that has led to a freeze on foreign aid and stalled peace negotiations with Tamil rebels, diplomats here said Sunday.

The United States directly asked President Chandrika Kumaratunga and rival Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to resolve their differences and revive foreign-backed efforts to end three decades of ethnic bloodshed.

The US ambassador here, Jeffrey Lunstead, delivered separate letters from Secretary of State Colin Powell to the president and prime minister which said "a speedy resolution of the current impasse is needed," US embassy spokesman Bruce A. Lohof said.

"He urged the two leaders to work together to resolve the dispute," the spokesman added.

The European Union and Japan, two key players in raising international aid in support of Sri Lanka's peace drive, have also urged the two leaders to end the two-month-long crisis and resume negotiations with Tamil Tigers, diplomatic sources said.



PHOTO: AFP

US Capitol Police Officers man a vehicle checkpoint one block from the US Capitol (Background) Saturday in Washington, DC. Security has been stepped up since the US government heightened its nationwide terror alert on December 21, 2003.

All insurgent top guns nabbed: Bhutan

PTI, Islamabad

Bhutan who has launched a military operation to flush out Indian insurgents from its soil, yesterday said all terrorist leaders had been apprehended and called for the immediate implementation of the new protocol on suppression of terrorism in the region.

The Additional Protocol to the Regional Convention on Suppression of terrorism to be signed during this summit should not only be given effect but also implemented to eliminate the menace, Bhutanese Premier Lyonpo Jigmi Thinley said here.

Addressing the 12th Saarc summit, he said the recent attempt to assassinate Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf was a rude reminder of the need to root out terrorism.

He said "all leaders (of those who had launched insurgency in Indian states of Assam and West Bengal) had been apprehended, others had surrendered or were finding their way out, hopefully to live peacefully in their own country."

Thinley lamented that little had changed since the original Saarc convention on terrorism was inked

and the people were facing the scourge and pangs of insecurity too often and in too large numbers.

He said that the operation launched against three insurgent groups spreading terror in North-eastern India followed a painstakingly long and frustrating dialogue with them for six years.

"Ultimately military action had to be taken on December 15 last against all three groups to flush them out", he said.

The Bhutanese Premier regretted the casualties during the mopping-up operation but said comfort can be drawn in the creation of a safe and secure environment and contribution made in eradication of the evil of terrorism.

Thirteen camps in the dense jungles on Indo-Bhutan border were training insurgents, storing arms and launching attacks in Assam and West Bengal. They were trying to create misunderstanding and affect relations between the two countries, he said.

Insurgency had impeded trade, led to closure of large industries and inhibited development, he said adding that the insurgents were resorting to threats, coercion and extortion and their activities had led to tragic loss of many lives.

Twice-canceled BA flight lands in US

REUTERS, Washington/London

Twice-canceled British Airways Flight 223 landed safely outside Washington late on Saturday, as British officials warned more flights may be called off to prevent another Sept. 11-style attack.

The British Airways flight from London, which had been delayed for three hours Saturday due to extra security procedures, landed without incident at Washington's Dulles International Airport around 9:15 p.m. EST.

"It landed as normal," Tom Sullivan, spokesman for Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority, said of Flight 223, which had been canceled Thursday and Friday due to intelligence information. "It's good ... that those folks have been able to get to the Washington area at last."

Arriving passengers said security was extremely tight at London's Heathrow airport before their departure, but the flight itself aboard the Boeing 747 jumbo jet was uneventful.

"I think it was ... safer in the world today because they took all the security measures," passenger Adriana Eftimie told local NBC affiliate WRC upon her arrival at Dulles airport.

Pak media slams govt for putting Kashmir issue on backburner

PTI, Islamabad

Even as Saarc leaders celebrate landmark agreements over free trade and terrorism, the focus of the Pakistani media remains on Kashmir, with several dailies saying that India has succeeded in putting the issue on the backburner.

"The ego has landed" read the headline on the front-page column in the local daily The Nation, while referring to Prime Minister AB Vajpayee's arrival after the five-year tumultuous relationship between India and Pakistan, which saw many ups, and down.

Sounding highly critical of Pakistan for "conceding too much" to facilitate Vajpayee's visit Pakistan for the Saarc summit, it said "India, by sending Vajpayee and agreeing to attend the Summit has certainly gained a lot."

The Saarc being a multilateral organisation restricts member countries from raising bilateral issues "to India's delight." Thus trade, tourism, cultural ties and people to people contacts are focus of the discussions, and Kashmir, which is the "core issue of Pakistan is on the backburner", the newspa-

per said taking a hardline view against India.

"In fact Pakistan's foreign policy makers are groping for a better reason to celebrate the arrival of Vajpayee, who so far is in no mood to hold meaningful bilateral dialogue with Pakistan. The price India extracted from Pakistan to attend the Saarc summit is huge", The Nation said while expressing fears that the Kashmir issue would be put in a cold storage.

"In return, New Delhi has made Islamabad to announce a ceasefire on Siachen and LoC and restore air, rail and road links. This is in addition to agreement on terrorism control and pledge to launch efforts for poverty control", it said.

The newspaper editorial in the same mode took a dim view of the agreements reached on the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (Safta) and an additional protocol on terrorism.

Referring to the Friday attack by militants on Jammu railway station in which four Indian security personnel were killed, it said the attack was a "grim reminder" that peace cannot be restored between the two countries without solving Kashmir issue.



Britney Spears ties the knot

REUTERS, Pasadena

Pop star Britney Spears has married a childhood friend during an apparently impromptu wedding ceremony Saturday in Las Vegas, two published reports said.

Spears married Jason Alexander at the Little White Wedding Chapel on the Las Vegas strip early on Saturday, according to online reports by the Las Vegas Review Journal newspaper and People magazine.

Both publications said Spears was walked down the aisle by a Palms Hotel bellman.

Blast at sports hall in Philippines: 10 dead

AFP, Cotabato

At least 10 people were killed and 40 wounded when a bomb tore through a packed sports hall in the southern Philippines yesterday, officials said.

Authorities said the home-made explosive device exploded in the town of Parang, Maguindanao province and was apparently planted by political rivals of the local town mayor, Vivencio Bataga, who survived the attack.

"The mayor was wounded but he is fine. I saw 10 people dead," said town councilor Gaudencio Teves, adding that 40 others were rushed to different hospitals.

Many of those injured by shrapnel and the stampede that followed were children and women, police said, while a man believed to have planted the bomb was among the fatalities.

Regional police chief Isnadij

Batala said no-one had claimed responsibility for the bombing, but ruled out involvement of Muslim separatists and the Al-Qaeda linked Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) terror group.

"This is something political. Bataga survived similar attacks in the past," Batala said. "Bataga is believed to be the target."

Bataga is a former army colonel who is seeking re-election in the May 2004 polls, and police said he survived at least three attempts on his life last year.

Bataga is also reportedly a staunch anti-insurgency campaigner in Maguindanao, where Muslim separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) rebels operate, officials said.

Bloodied shoes and mismatched slippers and other debris littered the gymnasium floor, as local Red Cross officials appealed for blood donations, Teves said.

Afghans agree on new constitution

AP, Kabul

Afghanistan's constitutional convention agreed yesterday on a historic new charter, its chairman said, overcoming weeks of division to hammer out a compromise meant to bind together the war-ravaged nation's mosaic of ethnic groups.

Just a day after warning the summit was heading to humiliating failure, council chairman Sibghatullah Mujaddedi told the 502-delegates meeting under a giant tent in the Afghan capital that last-ditch diplomacy secured a comprehensive deal.

"We are very happy that all the members of the loya jirga have reached a very successful agreement," Mujaddedi said.

He gave no details of how an impasse over whether to grant official status to minority languages, an issue which brought the meeting close to collapse, had been

solved.

But he said a new draft of the document would be distributed to the delegates shortly and that US-backed President Hamid Karzai would arrive later Sunday to wind up the convention.

The convention began on Dec. 14 with delegates taking up a 160-article draft constitution presented by Karzai's government in November.

The final accord is expected to give Karzai the strong presidential system he had been insisting on.

Karzai has argued strongly for a dominant chief executive to hold the country together as it rebuilds and reconciles after more than two decades of war. He said he would n't run if he didn't get his way.

US and UN officials worked tirelessly to broker a backroom agreement to bolster a peace process begun after the ouster of the Taliban two years ago.



PHOTO: AFP

An unidentified Egyptian father of a stewardess who perished in the Flash Airlines Boeing 737 crash in the Red Sea off the coast of Sharm el-Sheikh, cries at the Egyptian Red Sea resort's airport on Saturday. Scores of Egyptian family members arrived here to check on the fate of their loved ones following the crash of a charter plane carrying mainly French tourists into the Red Sea shortly after take-off from Sharm el-Sheikh early in the morning. All 148 people on board were killed.