

Leaders urged

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succeed because the people of this region are now ready for it. "There is no option left."

Morshed stressed making the third decade of saarc a decade of implementation, saying, "We have made many important pledges and commitments. Now it is time to demonstrate action".

Slow progress of Saarc is the failure of the leadership and not of the common people, he said. "We are captive in the hand of India-Pakistan rivalry".

Morshed noted that whether regional cooperation in South Asia will have an accelerated pace depends not only on the governments alone. The leadership of civil society, professionals and business community must also play a vital role to attain this.

Awami League leader and former minister Tofiq Ahmed underscored cooperation within the country as well as the region. "As an independent country, we should have good relations with India but we have to be firm while discussing bilateral issues," he said.

He said the leader of the opposition in parliament was not properly invited to the ensuing summit. "She was invited through a card as in the case of any other member of parliament," he regretted.

Former state minister for foreign affairs Abul Ahsan Chowdhury suggested that parliaments of Saarc countries should dedicate one day a week to the resolution of Saarc-related issues. Increased people to people contact could force the governments to go for effective cooperation, he thought.

Managing Director of Grameen Bank Dr Mohammad Yunus urged the Saarc leadership to turn the region into a hub of prosperity from a hub of poverty.

The renowned economist, who moderated the dialogue, said there is an infrastructure of regional cooperation but it lacks meaningful content. "We have to bring that content for making it effective."

In the context of the present global political and economic situation, a platform like Saarc is necessary, and it is giving its leadership an opportunity to sit together and discuss, he pointed out.

Despite the failures of Saarc, it is no less important that the leaders of this region are sitting together, Yunus said. "Otherwise, they would not have seen each other's face".

Explaining the position of Bangladesh in Saarc, he observed that it would be a crossroad to other member countries.

Reaz Rahman, foreign ministry adviser, in his keynote speech said, "The predominance of politics over economics is the key challenge for Saarc."

South Asia is brimming with confidence and Saarc countries want to maintain a momentum towards broadening and deepening regional cooperation, he said.

Debapriya Bhattacharya, executive director of the CPD, said, "The South Asia region is haunted by a two headed dragon -- poverty and terrorism ... The twin headed dragon which is spitting fire in the form of poverty and terrorism has to be slain with goodwill and vision."

Rejoinder

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none gave her threat phoning at her Dhaka residence. There was no panic among the employees and adequate security measures have been taken in the station, she added.

OURREPLY
The report was based on information from the sources inside the radio station and similar reports were also carried by five other national dailies.

Official sources said Deputy Regional Director Ashraf Kabir following the threat issued a notice on November 6, seeking additional precautionary security measures at the entrance of the station.

The Deputy Regional Engineer at the station Bhaskor Dewan, who was in charge of regional director for the Eid holidays, admitted the issuance of the notice while talking to The Daily Star yesterday.

Regional integration, national unity and social justice are necessary for achieving success in this regard, he pointed out.

Former secretary Asafuddinowla said meetings and discussions will not bring any substantive result if India backtracks on forging cooperation.

Former secretary general of Saarc Q A M A Rahim said the Saarc secretariat was never given necessary powers to take up projects and implement those. "It also lacks logistic support and team spirit".

He suggested giving the secretariat a clear mandate for its functioning. "Unless you are serious, the secretariat would not be serious."

JSD leader Hasanul Huque Inu said only five per cent cut in military spending of this region can save \$ 8 billion a year.

Workers Party leader Rashed Khan Menon said Saarc is not functioning properly because it is yet to come out of the 'mindset of 1947'.

Shaheen Anam of Manusher Janno said Saarc can take up the issue of human trafficking in the region. Thousands of women and children are being trafficked from Bangladesh and Nepal, she regretted.

Other speakers included lawmksr GM Quader, Abu Hena and Faruq Khan.

Japan vows

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"outstanding leadership will make this memorial meeting a resounding success with a number of splendid results".

Recalling Khaleida's visit to Tokyo in July, Koizumi said: It is truly delightful to be a witness of a drastic development in the recent relationship between Japan and the Saarc member states embodied by your visit to Japan.

He congratulated Bangladesh government for hosting the 13th summit on the association's 20th anniversary.

"I should also like to note that calling for economic integration and strengthening cooperative relations in Asia is now rapidly progressing, and in this regard, I welcome that SAARC is contributing greatly to the regional stability and development in South Asia," he said.

The Japanese prime minister expected good outcomes from the summit meeting with regard to the increase of welfare, economic and social development and enhanced cooperation amongst the Saarc member countries.

Japan has been supporting Saarc through the Japan-Saarc Special Fund under the premises that the development of South Asia is integral for the prosperity of Asia in its entirety.

"Japan hopes that Saarc will continue to play a pivotal role in bringing prosperity to South Asia and Asia as a whole," he said, adding by the very same vein, Japan remains committed to continue promoting cooperation with Saarc and its member countries.

"These claims continued during the period covered by this report. However, many such reports have not been verified independently, and there also has been violence during important Muslim holidays. The government sometimes has failed to investigate the crimes and prosecute the perpetrators, who are often local gang leaders."

However, there were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Due to the increased attacks on Ahmadiyyas, it said, the US government made religious freedom a central point of discussion in the meetings with the prime minister, the foreign minister, the law minister, the home minister, and several other ministers started in December 2003 and continued throughout this reporting period.

It said during the previous reporting period, the US embassy encouraged Jamaat-e-Islami to reiterate publicly its position that it supports tolerance and minority rights in the context of an attack on a religious minority member. Jammata-e-Islami demurred until April 2005, when it released a public statement condemning attacks on religious minorities and the use of violence.

"During the previous reporting period, the embassy also successfully encouraged the leader of a major political party to condemn the attacks on Ahmadiyyas."

"Religion exerts a powerful influence on politics, and the government is sensitive to the Muslim consciousness of its political allies, Jamaat-e-Islami and the Islami Oikya Jote, as well as the majority of its citizens," said the IRFR.

"Although the government states that acts of violence against members of religious minority groups are politically or economically motivated and cannot be solely attributed to religion, religiously motivated violence was a continuing problem."

It said the generally amicable relationships among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist minorities experienced discrimination by the Muslim majority, and the year was marked with harassment of Ahmadiyyas.

"The acute animosity between the two mainstream political parties often leads to politically motivated violence and sometimes heightened societal tensions between Muslims and Hindus," according to the report.

It said since the 2001 elections, religious minorities reportedly have continued to be targeted for attacks, which has led to the requirement for guards to be present at church and temple ceremonies. Reportedly, incidents include killings, rape, torture, attacks on places of worship, destruction of homes, forced evictions, and desecration of items of worship.

AL to skip

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(7:00pm), Sheikh Hasina is scheduled to meet Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and she has meeting programmes with leaders from Bhutan and Nepal on the same day. Besides, Hasina is scheduled to meet Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka today.

Asked about the fate of Hasina's meetings with Saarc leaders, Saber said, "These are in doubt."

He said, "Sheikh Hasina has good relations with Saarc leaders and they would be able to realise the reasons behind Hasina's stay with the munga-affected people."

Asked about her extended stay in the munga-affected area, Saber said, "A terrible situation has been prevailing in the area. At this moment she can't return to Dhaka, leaving the munga-stricken people in a helpless situation."

Hasina reached the northern part of the country on Tuesday to visit the munga-affected Rangpur, Kurigram, Lalmonirhat and Nilphamari. She has been distributing relief goods among the victims.

Asia's top

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ity services against JJ -- which was suspected in another deadly bombing on the resort island of Bali last month.

Karni Ilyas, an Indonesian journalist who said he accompanied a police anti-terror unit when it entered Azahari's house, told ANTV channel that Azahari was dead.

"The body was in pieces but his face could still be recognised by two members of the anti-terrorist unit from Jakarta," Ilyas said. "He blew himself up together with the house."

A spokesman for President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono said: "It could not yet be confirmed that Azahari was in the house." Police could not be reached for comment.

Azahari and his Malaysian compatriot Noordin Mohammad Top are wanted for key roles in the October 2002 attacks on Bali nightclubs that left 202 people dead, as well as last month's attack and several other deadly blasts.

Ilyas said people at the house in Batu, some 700 kilometres (400 miles) east of the capital Jakarta, fired shots when police ordered them to come out, wounding one policeman. The fugitives then blew themselves up.

Reaz says

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Saarc members states to give such 'observer' status to other countries since the Saarc charter does not contain any guideline on the issue.

The advisor said it will not require to amend the Saarc Charter to grant observer status to any country.

Afghanistan and China have expressed their willingness to have links with the Saarc.

Presently, the Saarc has given observer status to some international organisations under the UN system with which the forum has made agreements to support its activities.

ACC becoming

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The UK intends to raise its aid to Dhaka over \$200 million, but it may not be possible if better governance is not assured and corruption is brought not curbed in Bangladesh, he told reporters.

This was the Bangladesh-born British envoy's first visit to Sylhet after he suffered injuries in a grenade attack at the shrine of Hajrat Shahjalal on May 21 last year. He came to the city and returned to the capital under bearded up security measures.

\$300m regional

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voluntarily donate, but they will have to contribute on the basis of their GDP or forex reserves. Contribution will also be sought from external sources including the multilateral donors and affluent people across the globe.

The fund will have a permanent office and staff, and both concessional and non-concessional loans will be handed out from it.

Under another accord styled the Saarc Limited Multilateral Agreement on Avoidance of Double Taxation and Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters, researchers and academicians of the region will get tax waiver.

Again, an understanding may be reached among the seven South Asian countries to clamp down on financial crimes, particularly money laundering. Sources said a system will be developed to detect smuggling through hundi and any attempts to take money out of a country and gather in another.

Four agreements are scheduled to be signed at the summit with a view to implement the South Asian Preferential Trading Agreement (Safta). One of them is aimed at avoiding double taxation. The Saarc countries already have bilateral treaties in this regard. Now the multilateral agreement will allow freer exchange of information and ultimately help better implement the Safta.

Implementation of the Safta has figured prominently in the meetings of the different technical and expert committees working to find ways and means to bolster commercial and economic co-operations among the South Asian nations. However, the committees did not find creating a regional economic union likely in the near future. Such a possibility will arise only when Safta is fully implemented, they maintained.

Safta still on track

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was taken after the experts' committee failed to break the deadlock even after 11 rounds of negotiations.

Meanwhile, considering the deadlock over major issues and the time required for groundwork of the enforcement of Safta, the government officials concerned ruled out its timely kick-off on January 1, 2006.

The official said it will be too optimistic an approach if the foreign secretaries and ministers pushed the draft strongly; the summit can then decide to move ahead with the agreed implementation plan.

The rules of origin and sensitive list of products and revenue compensation mechanism of Safta negotiation are the three major issues over which the member states differ.

During the 11th meeting of the experts' committee in Kathmandu last month, the members, however, had resolved the issue of technical assistance to the least developed countries (LDCs), the fourth outstanding issue of the Safta accord.

But since then the developing members of Saarc have not further responded to the LDCs' call to exempt the products of their export interest from their sensitive lists.

The Saarc members have also failed to reach an agreement on the formula and coverage of revenue compensation mechanism.

The least developed members stand firm that the revenue compensation be made effective from the third year of Safta enforcement until the final year of tariff liberalisation programme. However, the developing partners have argued to limit it for three years only.

The previous meeting of the

Leaving narrow

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national interests for larger regional advantages are necessary to make Saarc effective, said its former secretary general QAMA Rahim.

"The member countries of Saarc should not retain the objective of securing their own interests. They should see regional interests above the narrow national interests to strengthen the culture of cooperation," Rahim said in an interview with The Daily Star at his residence yesterday.

Referring to making decisions, Rahim said Saarc suffers from a slow decision-making process as every member sticks to its own interests. Besides, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) can hardly implement its decisions.

"There is lack of regional cooperation to implement the decisions of Saarc, which also does not have a mechanism to execute those. It depends on whether a member country will work to this end or not," the former secretary general pointed out.

"What is the benefit of making decisions if those are not implemented?"

Focusing on the execution of decisions, Rahim said there should be a certain mechanism in this regard. "A provision should be introduced by amending the Saarc Charter to ensure the members' accountability so that none fail to implement the decisions."

He said the only solution is the Saarc nations' commitment to implementing the jointly taken decisions irrespective of their national advantages. All members have to agree before taking a decision that they will implement it, he added.

Citing the example of the Saarc

Safta key to effective

FROM PAGE 1
Abul Hasan Chowdhury, former state minister for foreign affairs.

"By putting economic cooperation on the fast track without belittling bilateral arrangements, significant benefit can be achieved through implementing the Safta accord," the former state minister said in an interview with The Daily Star yesterday.

Abul Hasan also stressed the needs for collective efforts to combat regional terrorism, to remove mistrust among the Saarc countries and to expand the organisation in future aiming at making it a strong regional body.

"As each and every aspect of our economic, social and cultural life is related to our interaction with our neighbours, the menace of terrorism has to be faced unitedly. India and Pakistan should be encouraged to pursue the peace dialogue in this respect," he said.

He expressed his view that discussion of the bilateral issues, although not permitted by the Saarc Charter, can have a positive impact on the forum through which contentious matters can be settled.

Saarc countries should not be overwhelmed by the past failures and frailties, he further said.

"Saarc has to evolve from a mere annual gathering to an action-oriented organisation. The possibilities are immense...each of the country belonging to Saarc can contribute significantly towards creating a better future in the region," he added.

On existing mistrust among the Saarc countries, the former state minister noted that lack of interest and

experts in October ended in a deadlock with Bangladesh not agreeing to a proposal of Pakistan, suggesting a cap on the compensation to be paid by India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan to the LDCs in the region.

In addition, the commerce ministry has offered to allow import of three million garment pieces comprising shirts and trousers from the LDCs by fixing a tariff rate quota. The quota will be on tariff lines, which are in the sensitive list of India and utilised primarily by Bangladesh.

Starting as a political association, the Saarc adopted economic cooperation on its agenda in the early 1990s and evolved a Saarc Preferential Trading Agreement (Safta), signed in 1993.

However, progress has been very slow because of a positive list approach on exchange of tariff preferences, small product coverage, narrow margins of preferences and inability to address non-tariff barriers.

Bangladeshi trade experts said only after Safta becomes operational will it be possible for Saarc to emerge as a meaningful regional organisation like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

If implemented, the Safta could hugely increase trade among the seven nations. Presently the Saarc nations have less than five percent of their trade among themselves while the ASEAN nations share 26 percent and the European Union 65 percent, they added.

The Safta committee of experts will meet again in Kathmandu from November 27 to December 1 in a last-ditch attempt to save the treaty.

Convention on combating terrorism in

1987, he said all members have ratified it, but all of them did not enact legislation to implement the Saarc Charter.

"Had all the members implemented the Convention on combating terrorism wholeheartedly, terrorism in South Asia could not reach the current level."

Narrating his experiences of serving the Saarc for three years, the immediate past secretary general said every member country wants to protect their own interests and expects from others. "We speak regionally but act nationally. We have to move from national to regional level."

"Regional cooperation is not a zero subject, it is a win-win position for everybody."

Rahim, who was involved with Saarc from its very beginning, said there is no alternative of Saarc for South Asia.

Saarc was formed with the expectation of removing mistrust, suspicion within the member states, but it is still a far cry.

Referring the people's perception of Saarc, he said there is a misconception in people's minds that Saarc is a regional organisation like the EU.

"But it is not true. Saarc is merely an inter-governmental organisation where each member has full sovereignty to implement any of its decision."

"But comparing to a true regional organisation within the sphere of cooperation, Saarc members do not wholeheartedly share the cooperation."

more painfully, the lack of trust among the citizens of Saarc states will not wither away through the ritualistic annual meet of the Saarc leaders.

"The fog of mistrust will gradually clear up when more and more communications will take place among the peoples of the Saarc nations."

Abul Hasan also believes that the Saarc leaders will find an adequate response to the prevalent climate of mistrust and misunderstanding.

"What is critical is the time factor, we do not have the luxury to wait for decades," he observed.

Referring to the role of India in making the forum effective he said, "In my view, as the biggest country of the Saarc region in terms of size, population and economy, India should play a more committed role for the advancement of Saarc."

On expansion of the Saarc, the former state minister said he strongly recommend that the Saarc leaders consider linking China in the form of Saarc plus one.

"In fact having China as a full member of Saarc will make it the strongest regional organisation in the world, given the increasing volume of trade between the Saarc countries and China. It would be highly sensible to institutionalise the reality," he said.

Referring to the opposition parties' rescheduling of their political programmes, he said it is also commendable that the opposition parties took a thoughtful decision to hold their grand rally at a later date. "Such unity is one of the pre-requisites of making Saarc an effective regional organisation."

DMP revises

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use Gabtoli-Savar Mausoleum road to use Abdullapur-Ashulia-Bypail-Nabinagar or Abdullapur-Gazipur Intersection-Kaliakoir road from 6:00am to 11:00am on November 12 as Saarc leaders are due to visit the National Mausoleum during that time.

On November 13, during the programmes at the state guesthouse Padma, no vehicles except those bearing Saarc stickers, will be allowed to ply the Old Elephant road, Monsur Ali Sarani and part of Holy Family Hospital road from 11:00am to 1:00pm.

During the programmes at the Bangabhaban on the same day, vehicular movements will be restricted from Police Bhaban crossing to Kakrail crossing Razmoni Police Hospital crossing Dainik Bangla to Rajuk crossing from 1:00pm to 2:30pm.

The same day, no vehicles will be allowed to ply on Nakhapalpa Road from 3:00pm to 7:00pm during the programme at International Conference Centre at the prime minister's office.

On November 13 and 14, vehicular movement will be restricted on both sides of the VIP road 20 minutes before the VVIPs set off for their respective countries.

Saarc parliament

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Regional Cooperation (Saarc) to boost its activities for the sake of the region's common people.

Chowdhury, also president of Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh (BDB), believes Saarc may play a significant role in accelerating regional cooperation by strengthening ties among its members like the European Union (EU).

He made these observations while talking to The Daily Star at his KC Memorial clinic in Baridhara in the capital yesterday.

He said there is a vast opportunity of increasing economic cooperation among the Saarc countries. An economic goal should be planned to enhance trade and commerce in the region so that no country faces loss in this process.

He however said the countries, which are economically lagging behind, should be given more opportunities.

He also suggested formation of an advisory committee, which will help design the industrialisation of the region in a coordinated method. He expressed the hope this will also create new job opportunities for the South Asian people.

The BDB chief also emphasised the need for coordinated efforts to check terrorism in the region. An extradition agreement is essential to fight terrorism, while the border security should also be modernised to this end.

He said the heads of Saarc government and state should make annual visits to the regional forum's countries to resolve the outstanding bilateral issues.

Moreover, there should be frequent visits by ministers, lawmakers, politicians, businesspersons, artists, and even students of the Saarc nations to other member countries.

He said this may help ease bilateral tension, which often cannot be made through diplomatic channels. Besides, people-to-people interaction will create better understanding among the countries.

A former cabinet colleague of both late president Zia and Prime Minister Khaleida Zia, Chowdhury said a parliament of Saarc countries can discuss poverty, terrorism, trade and commerce, and other issues and take effective measures in this regard.

Terming late president Zia the dreamer of Saarc, he said, "We must give credit to the person who deserves it."

Manmohan

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by a Saarc Investment Area and move on to deepen it further by forming a Saarc Customs Union and then gradually transforming it into an economic union".

Stating that energy cooperation presents an immense potential in South Asia, Manmohan called for "South Asian Energy Dialogue" comprising experts academicians, environmentalists, bureaucrats and NGOs to examine it in detail and suggest measures to exploit the same.

He said there were many spheres like education, healthcare, tourism, manpower and disaster management in which cooperation could be realised and exploited to benefit the people in the entire South Asian region.

Manmohan said the regional economic integration would also make Saarc member countries, especially the smaller ones, more attractive destinations for third country investments by obviating the constraint imposed by a small domestic market.

"Studies have shown that the opportunity cost of non-cooperation for South Asian countries has been substantial and the regional economic integration in South Asia could generate billions of dollars of new income, employment, trade, and could help the region in its fight against poverty," he added.

Reiterating that the South Asian neighbours had two common enemies in terrorism and poverty, he said, "No country can now afford to say that another's enemy is its friend".

"One must ensure that our neighbours are also our friends. But, as they say, it takes two hands to clap," the Indian prime minister said.

EU-UN team decries

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tions to the government to end the unacceptable situation at the camps.

European Union Ambassador Stefan Frowein, Netherlands Ambassador Kees Beemsterboer, French Ambassador Jacques-Andre Costilhes and Development Adviser to EC Delegation in Dhaka Graham Tyrrie were among the EU diplomats in the team. While UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Senior Desk Officer for Asia and the Pacific Ayman Gharabeh and UNHCR Representative in Dhaka Christopher Beng Cha Lee were among the United Nations high officials.

They visited the two refugee camps at Kutupalong in Ukhia and Nayapara in Teknaf on Tuesday.

"Several thousand teenager boys and girls have nothing to do. They just roam around in the camps. This is a misuse of human resources and equivalent to depriving them of basic human rights," Head of EC Delegation Frowein told Shoyebur Rahman, a joint secretary at the Ministry of Food and Disaster Management.

An entire family of some 10 to 15 people lives in each of the 10 by 12 feet shanties walled with plastic sheets that is highly hazardous to health, he said, adding, "If a fire breaks out, it may cause a catastrophe. The situation is not acceptable."

Presently 20,780 Rohingya refugees are living in the two camps. And a total of 236,599 Rohingyas have been repatriated since 1992, when an influx of them began from Arakan in Myanmar following religious and political persecutions.

At the meeting, Christopher Lee said though the UNHCR had offered funds for improving the housing standards for Rohingyas, the government turned it down, arguing that semi-pucca or permanent structures would encourage the refugees to stay on here permanently.

RRRC Rahman, on the other hand, claimed the government did want to repair the houses but the UNHCR did not release the funds for that.

In response to the claim, Lee said the donors are not interested just in repairing the houses, which are harmful to health and environment, but in opting for accommodations of better standards.

He also regretted that the UNHCR has kept on offering \$300,000 to provide housing, water and sanitation facilities to the 6,000 unregistered Rohingya refugees living in Teknaf for at least two years, but the government has not made any response.

At a press briefing at Chittagong Shah Amanat International Airport, the EU ambassador said fund is never a

problem: "The most important thing is a positive will on the part of the government. If it recognises the problems and is ready to solve them, fund would not be a problem."

Explaining the lack of schooling facilities for the refugee children, the RRRC said teachers in the Burmese are scarce and the education systems and syllabuses of the two countries are quite different.