

## Leaders should work

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change their mindset and make Saarc a more effective and functional body to use the platform for the welfare of about 150 crore people of this region.

"Mistrust and lack of commitment have been hampering smooth functioning of Saarc. Even after two decades of its formation the South Asian forum has failed to make any significant impact on improving people's lifestyle," he observed.

In an interview with The Daily Star yesterday ahead of the 13th Saarc Summit in Dhaka, Menon urged the South Asian leaders to identify the common problems of the region and work together to resolve the problems.

"Why will we keep us isolated when every corner of the world is being globalised?" he said. "We will have to look beyond our border."

Menon suggested that the South

Asian leaders should work with sincere political will to resolve the common problems of the region. He said traditional bureaucracy in the member countries is another obstacle to the flourishing of Saarc.

"But, our opportunity is more than that in the European Union as we have a common history, common culture. People of this region have been united for a long time," he said.

Referring to a comment of Bangladesh foreign minister about Saarc's future, Menon said, "I am also hopeful that the next decade of Saarc will be an era of implementation of the commitments the South Asian leaders have made so far."

About Saarc's failure, Menon said Saarc began its journey with mistrust among the nations and the conflicting relations between India and Pakistan

was another obstacle. "But, recent improvement in India-Pakistan ties is a great opportunity for Saarc," he said.

The Workers Party leader was however critical of the present government's "Look East" policy and said, "First we have to earn confidence of the close neighbours."

Menon also said regional co-operation is necessary for trade as South Asia is a big market.

About terrorism, Menon said, "All the countries in the area are faced with the problem." He said instead of blaming each other, the Saarc nations should make sincere commitment that they will go together in the fight against terrorism.

The Workers Party leader felt that the induction of China and Afghanistan into Saarc would help make the seven-nation regional forum stronger.

## Saarc should turn

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Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan envisages Saarc becoming an effective economic alliance like the Asean or European Union (EU) if friendship and cooperation intensify among the seven South Asian nations.

It may become an ideal model for eradication of poverty, rooting out terrorism, as well as regional trade and investment, he said while talking to The Daily Star regarding the future of Saarc at his official residence at Minto Road recently.

Terming late president Ziaur Rahman as the dreamer of Saarc, Bhuiyan said Zia thought of forming a regional platform for improving the lot of the poverty-ridden people of the region and their economic emancipation.

However, although little improvement has been achieved in the two decades of Saarc activities, as far as poverty alleviation in the region is concerned, Bhuiyan refuses to be despondent.

"If mutual trust and understanding can be forged among the member countries, Saarc will be able to reach the goal it was created to achieve," he said.

In this era of ever-increasing cooperation among countries, no nation--no matter how rich and big--can make a big stride towards development alone. One needs to nurture cooperation with its neighbouring countries to achieve political and economic development, the minister pointed out.

"If the European Union and Asean can capitalise on their increased cooperation, why can't Saarc? It is very much possible if we have unity and sincerity among us," he said.

Referring to the alarming rise of terrorism hindering the region's growth and development, the veteran politician said because of the geographical position of its member countries, Saarc can play a pivotal role in rooting out terrorism from this region.

Saarc will turn into a meaningful

association when regional trade and investment will pick up through the implementation of South Asian Free Trade Area (Safta). What is needed for that is a better inter-regional communication system, he said.

According to him, the region has great natural resources as well as manpower and if these resources are properly utilised, there is no reason why South Asia should not emerge as self-reliant.

Besides, Saarc provides a vast scope for increased cooperation in the field of social, cultural, educational, scientific and technological advancement of the region, he said.

Bangladesh believes that any bilateral problems can be solved through discussion and we can also take advantage of the possibilities the Saarc has opened up for resolving these bilateral problems, the ministers said.

## United efforts needed

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Saarc to combat terrorism as it has become the common problem for all nations in the region.

In an interview with The Daily Star yesterday ahead of the 13th Saarc Summit on Saturday, the key opposition leader observed that terrorism has plagued the region severely for the past decade, posing a big threat to the progress of the nations.

"Terrorism has no boundary.... It's a problem for Bangladesh, India, Pakistan as well as for the other countries in the region," Jalil said. The Saarc leaders should treat each other as good partners in the fight against terrorism, he added.

He expressed his apprehension that the process of regional cooperation will be destroyed if the seven nations failed to tackle terrorism unitedly through the forum of Saarc.

Jalil believes that the South Asian leaders should give the issue top priority and make additional efforts to tackle it,

otherwise it will hamper the spirit of the Saarc--regional co-operation for socio-economic development of the people in the region and mutual co-operation among the member countries of South Asia.

He said effectiveness of the South Asian body greatly depends on congenial relationship between India and Pakistan. He hopes that recent development in the Indo-Pak relationship would make a positive impact in the region's stability as well as help to make the Saarc a functional body.

If the South Asian leaders sincerely pledge to make the Saarc effective, Jalil believes it will have a positive impact on the welfare of the people as well as economic and social development and co-operation amongst the member countries.

Evaluating the last two decade's achievement of the Saarc, the senior leader said that it is unfortunate for the people of this region that the body failed to prove its

functionality.

"Mistrust among the nations is the main reason for which Saarc is yet to become a functional and effective body after two decades of its founding," he said.

Since no platform can be useful if its members do not trust each other, Jalil placed stress on the political will of the Saarc leaders to use the forum for overall development of the South Asian people.

The former commerce minister also sees a great opportunity of trade among the countries in the region and said, "Everything depends on political willingness and trust whether it is in the case of increasing regional trade or strengthening relationships among the countries."

The Saarc leaders should make commitment for meaningful cooperation, not merely hold summit meetings, he added.