

Day starts with paying homage to martyrs

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The seven Saarc leaders get the twice-postponed 13th Saarc Summit rolling today, amid tightest-ever security arrangements, paying homage to the martyrs of Liberation War at the National Mausoleum.

The heads of state and government of the Saarc member countries will arrive at the National Mausoleum by 9:30am and lay wreath to pay tribute to the war heroes, who embraced martyrdom to liberate Bangladesh from the oppression and misuse of the then Pakistan government in 1971.

They will then travel to the mazar of former president Ziaur Rahman at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar to pay respect to a leader who took the

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Tarique to receive award for Zia

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Late president Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh is the first recipient of the prestigious Saarc Award for his outstanding initiative for regional cooperation in South Asia.

The decision to confer the award posthumously upon him came at the 25th Session of the Council of Ministers held in Islamabad on July 20-21.

The award will be presented to one of the family members of the late president during the inaugural session of the 13th Saarc Summit today.

Tarique Rahman, elder son of Ziaur Rahman, will receive the award on behalf of the family from

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Saarc Summit starts today amid high hopes



PHOTO: AFP

From left: Prime Minister Khaleda Zia receives Indian premier Manmohan Singh, Pakistan premier Shaukat Aziz, Nepal King Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev and Bhutan premier Lyonpo Sangay Ngedup at Zia International Airport yesterday.

REZAUL KARIM

Leaders of seven South Asian countries will begin a two-day summit in Dhaka today to ratify plans to reduce trade barriers starting from January and to promote economic development in the region which is home to half the world's poor.

The stage is set for today's opening of the twice-deferred Saarc Summit which is expected to outline a "new vision" for addressing most challenging issues like terrorism, poverty alleviation and regional cooperation, and chart out a roadmap for economic integration of the South Asian countries.

Leaders will figure out ways to pull

millions of people out of abject poverty, create a regional trade bloc, combat terrorism and deal more effectively with the region's natural disasters. They will also form a vision for Saarc in its third decade.

Dhaka is ready to hold the 13th summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) comprising Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka amid tight security.

The city has been put under a thick security blanket through deployment of 40,000 police and army personnel. It has donned a festive look as the main thoroughfares from Zia International Airport to Sheraton

Hotel have been decorated beautifully with flags of Saarc countries, banners inscribed with welcome slogans and portraits of the leaders.

The annual summit, largest gathering of South Asian leaders, was originally scheduled to take place on January 9-11, but it was cancelled after last December's tsunami disaster that battered three Asian countries -- India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Rescheduled for February 6-7, it was postponed again at the last minute after India pulled out citing security concerns in Bangladesh and the Royal coup in Nepal.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, who will hold the Saarc chair for the second time today, is expected to emphasise

the importance of a new commitment from Saarc countries in dealing with issues like poverty alleviation, economic integration and natural disasters, while pointing out that this region not only has shared boundaries and a history of civilisation but also a shared destiny.

The 13th summit is bringing Prime Minister of India Dr Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of Pakistan Shaukat Aziz, President of Sri Lanka Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, President of the Maldives Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, King of Nepal Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev, Prime Minister of Bhutan Lyonpo Sangay Ngedup and Prime

Minister of Bangladesh Khaleda Zia to the same table.

Gayoom is about to make history by his presence in all the Saarc summits since 1985. The Sri Lankan President will be making her farewell appearance as her term ends through November 17 presidential polls.

Saarc countries are strongly pitching for the Dhaka Summit to send out a clear message that there must be "zero tolerance" for terrorism in any form or manifestation.

Strengthening collective efforts to combat the scourge will be high on the agenda during the summit deliberations. Recent terror strikes in Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka have brought home the urgent need for

working together to deal with the challenge.

Cooperation in the aftermath of natural disasters will also figure prominently on the agenda of November 12-13 summit.

South Asia has been hit by two of the world's worst natural disasters in less than a year. The December 26 tsunami largely affected three countries while the massive Kashmir earthquake just over a month ago is estimated to have killed more than 85,000 people in Pakistan and in Indian Kashmir.

Efforts are also on to include

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PM to hold 6 bilateral talks

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister (PM) Khaleda Zia will have six bilateral meetings with the Saarc leaders. Other Saarc leaders will also have bilateral meetings on the sidelines of the 13th Saarc Summit.

On the first day of the 13th Saarc Summit today, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia will meet the Indian PM Manmohan Singh at 4:00pm. She will also meet Pakistani PM Shaukat Aziz at 4:45pm and Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga at 5:30pm.

The Bangladeshi PM will meet the Nepalese King Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev at 7:15pm, the Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom at 8:00pm and the Bhutanese PM Lyonpo Sangay Ngedup at 8:45pm tomorrow.

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Sumptuous meals await dignitaries

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Host Bangladesh has arranged about 100 delicacies, mostly Bangladeshi cuisine, for the Saarc leaders during the summit today and tomorrow.

The menu for the banquet for the Saarc heads of the state and government to be hosted by the prime minister of Bangladesh today at Pan Pacific Sonargaon Hotel includes giant prawn, smoked salmon cocktail, avocado salad made of lettuce, cherry, tomato and cucumber.

The main courses are kachchi biryani, chicken tikka, mutton rezala, jali kebab, parata, rumali roti, borhani and fresh green salad, while the desserts are pineapple

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FM's reach consensus on Safta implementation

Draft Dhaka Declaration finalised; China, Afghanistan issues unresolved

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Saarc foreign ministers last night finalised the draft of Dhaka Declaration of the 13th Summit, focusing on renewed efforts for economic integration and combating poverty and terrorism in the region.

The declaration to be approved by the summit leaders tomorrow was

finalised after intense discussions by the foreign ministers of the seven South Asian nations' forum at Sheraton Hotel.

Briefing newsmen at 11:00pm at Sonargaon Hotel Media Centre, Bangladesh Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan said Saarc Council of Foreign Ministers reached a consensus on launching South Asian Free Trade

Area (Safta) as scheduled in January 2006.

Necessary political guidelines will be given to the Committee of Experts (CoE) to resolve three outstanding issues -- sensitive items list, rules of origin and revenue compensation mechanism

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Summit to chart forward looking actions: PM

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia yesterday said the 13th Saarc Summit will seize the opportunity to chart a forward looking course of action to realise the shared aspiration of a peaceful, progressive and prosperous South Asia.

"For Bangladesh, the 13th summit of the seven-nation grouping marks the commencement of a third cycle of summits in which the focus will be on implementation rather than declarations," the prime minister said in a message on the occasion of the two-day Saarc summit beginning here this morning.

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Enact laws to ensure people's right to info

Ask South Asian journo's

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prominent journalists of South Asia yesterday called upon the Saarc governments to enact laws to ensure people's right to information as a major step toward attaining good governance, transparency and consolidating democracy in this region.

They also called for scrapping Official Secrecy Acts in some Saarc countries formulated during the British rule on the plea of security. Such acts contradict the very concept of democracy and any laws on right to information.

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Pak PM to offer peace building proposals

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister (PM) of Pakistan Shaukat Aziz, who arrived in Dhaka yesterday to lead Pakistan's delegation at the 13th South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (Saarc) Summit, is carrying several proposals to revitalise Saarc.

An official of the Pakistan delegation told The Daily Star yesterday that the Pak PM is expected to share Pakistan's vision for the grouping with other South Asian leaders before handing over the chairmanship to Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia.

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Leaders arrive to a tight security capital

SHAMIM ASHRAF

A hushed Dhaka adorned with coloured lights, flags of Saarc countries and portraits of their leaders yesterday welcomed six Saarc heads of state and government amidst unprecedented security effected for the 13th Saarc Summit beginning today.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia greeted the Saarc leaders at the VVIP terminal of Zia International Airport (ZIA). Second top security alert remained in force at the airport guarded by security men from different forces and agencies.

The capital with many of its roads and intersections smartened up for the summit turned desolate as security men stopped movement of pedestrians and vehicles on and around the road from ZIA to Dhaka Sheraton Hotel each time a head of state or government arrived and was about to leave the airport for the hotel.

Bhutanese Prime Minister Lyonpo Sangay Ngedup was the first to arrive in Dhaka at 2:45pm. He was presented with a bouquet at the foot of the ramp.

Pakistan PM Shaukat Aziz flew in a special flight and arrived at the ZIA at 4:45pm, an hour behind schedule.

Khaleda welcomed the Pak PM and his wife Rukhsana Aziz as they entered the VVIP terminal.

Bouquets of flowers were pre-

sented to him and his wife and a 21-gun salute heralded the arrival before he was presented guard of honour.

After the introduction ceremony at the presentation line, the Pakistan premier set off for Sheraton in a motorcade guarded by smart security force with a security helicopter circling above.

Red carpet was rolled out also to welcome King of Nepal Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev as a special flight carrying him touched down at the ZIA at 5:36pm.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia received the monarch of the Himalayan kingdom and Queen Komal Rajya Laxmi Devi Shah as they got off from a special flight of Royal Nepal Airlines at the VVIP tarmac at about 5:36pm.

After the gun salute and guard of honour, Khaleda introduced Bangladesh ministers, diplomats and dignitaries at the presentation line.

Two girls presented bouquets

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An agenda for tomorrow's closed door retreat

FAROOQ SOHBAN

I would like to table a modest proposal as to how the gathered heads of state and government can truly move Saarc

from the talking shop of the past twenty years to the entity we had all hoped that it would become, a transformational engine of growth and cooperation for the entire region.

Whether Saarc will start with a new vigour will depend on what happens during the retreat tomorrow morning when the heads of delegations along with their foreign ministers meet in a closed door session without any fixed agenda at the Jamuna State Guest House.

This is the one and only opportunity for the leaders themselves to demonstrate their commitment and willingness to breathe fresh life into Saarc. If they are sincere and really do want to bring about some

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PHOTO: AFP

The foreign ministers of the seven South Asian nations stand hand in hand prior to the Council of Ministers meeting in the city yesterday.

Hasina to meet some leaders

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina will meet a number of leaders of Saarc countries on November 13 and 14.

Awami League (AL) sources said the details of the meeting schedule would be finalised after the party chief returns to the capital this evening. Hasina, now on a visit to the country's Monga-affected northern region, will leave Rangpur at nine in the morning and arrive in Dhaka at about 7:00pm today, a close aide to AL president said.

For the visit to northern districts, her meetings with the Indian

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Initiate steps to end poverty, violence

Gujral, Asma issue statement for regional rights body

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

South Asians for Human Rights (SAHR) urged the Saarc heads of state and government to initiate measures to eliminate poverty and violence and, for accountable systems of governance which will promote democracy and human rights.

"Saarc countries must emerge from the legacy of persistent poverty, deprivation, illiteracy. Gender, caste

and social inequalities and discrimination, which have been further aggravated by authoritarian, militarist and sectarian tendencies must be addressed seriously," the SAHR, a regional network of activists working for human rights at the regional and national level, yesterday said in a statement.

On the eve of the 13th Saarc summit, the statement signed by

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PHOTO: STAR

Dhaka City Corporation cleans the road in front of Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre, the main venue for the 13th Saarc Summit, yesterday.