

13th SAARC Summit

Time to deliver on the promises

THE curtain rises on the 13th SAARC Summit today, almost nine months after its original schedule, having been postponed twice. As we welcome the leaders of the other South Asian countries to Dhaka, we do so with a great deal of anticipation and hope, as do the 1.5 billion people of the region, on the deliberations of the next two days and see whether this organisation, after twenty years of its existence, will actually transform into deeds all that it has so long promised to deliver.

The agenda for the leaders is indeed heavy, not so much because of the number of issues that it contains but because of the nature of the issues themselves. Poverty, disaster management as well as terrorism are high on the list and just as it should be. Being held in the backdrop of two very severe natural disasters that have affected almost all the countries of the region, and the spectre of extremism and terrorism, the glaring realisation is that our fate is intertwined and resolutions of common problems require common approach.

The problems that face the region are well known, and the leaders know even better how to tackle those. No problem is insurmountable, more so when they have been identified and plans of action have been formulated, in most of the cases. Thus, if they do not come to be implemented, it will not be due to any fault of SAARC but of the leaders' lack of political will and less than full commitment to make it efficacious.

It is not the time to rue what has not been achieved but to resolve to attain what the founding fathers set out to achieve. South Asia is one of the most densely populated regions of the world with the highest incidence of poverty that has taken an endemic proportion. But we also are a region with enormous potential and resources that need to be harmonised and shared. For the region this is a historic event, which our leaders must seize upon, and address the issues directly, leaving aside old mindset and doubts and suspicions, if any.

For South Asia this can be a turning point in the history, if the leaders chose to make it so. Let the organisation be reinvigorated by the promise of a new dawn that beckons the region and where the people are willing to give their best to reach.

It is to the posterity that we will be held answerable should we fail to rise to the demands of the day.

Women and how they fight poverty

Some inspiring tales

A story appearing in the Star Weekend Magazine of destitute women salvaged from the morass of abject poverty to a level of decent living cannot but catch our attention. These were women abandoned to their fate by their husbands or were victims of polygamy or child marriage. The story of Mehra, Shahbanu and Rashida are examples of how, a very small amount of subsidy in cash and kind, provided under the scheme of "targeting the ultra poor" of a renowned NGO of Bangladesh, helped generate income for those once classified as the ultra poor and make them self-sufficient.

Nobody is poor of his or her own volition. It is lack of opportunity and access to resources that consigns one to poverty. And that given half a chance and a little bit of monetary stimulus the poor can work their way out of the poverty trap has been superbly demonstrated by these women. There are many such people waiting for a little support to break the shackles of poverty.

Our rural poverty is in essence endemic and hence requires continuous intervention of the entire community, particularly the affluent section of the population. In this process a broader understanding of the problems faced by the beneficiaries in their context will pave the way for a sustainable all-round development. The bulk of the rural poor are women who need more assistance than any other group to come out of the poverty trap.

Problems faced by the rural poor, particularly women in this region are identical. This is where SAARC could come forward with a comprehensive strategic intervention programme by creating a common fund to deal with the ultra poor, especially for empowerment of the disadvantaged women. Improving upon the rights and privileges of women leading to sustainable all-round development will also go a long way in enhancing SAARC's usefulness, something that has been in question too frequently.

Reaching consensus on many of the issues, high on the agenda of the current SAARC Summit may be difficult due to their linkages to various political cross currents, hence "time and resources" invested in this common platform encompassing common interest of the region have potentials of high returns.

Let there be a common approach to a very common problem that has the potential to stunt all other developments in the region, if not addressed urgently.

On a flourishing SAARC



QAZI KHOLIQUZZAMAN AHMAD

INDIAN Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has, in his P. N. Haksar Memorial Lecture on 9 November last in Chandigarh, called for improved physical connectivity of the regional countries through improved transport facilities of all types as well as for energy cooperation to exploit the immense energy potential existing in the region for the benefit of all the regional countries (The Daily Star, Dhaka, 10 November 2005). These are two absolutely key infrastructural elements needed to help build economic and socio-cultural cooperation in the region. His comments are indeed very far-sighted in the context of putting cooperation building in the SAARC region on a sounder foundation.

In so far as transportation is concerned, the SAARC countries are very poorly served even by airlines, while the other modes of transportation such as road, rail, and water remain either non-existent or extremely limited across the regional countries. In so far as

energy is concerned, this regional countries still depend on biomass fuel to a very large extent; and the consumption of commercial energy remains extremely limited, which is, of course, consistent with the low level economic development in the region. The following statistics are self-explanatory in this regard. As of 2001, per capita commercial energy consumption was 153 KgOE (Kilogram of oil equivalent) in

One study published in 2000 jointly by Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad (BUP), Dhaka; Centre for Policy Research (CPR), New Delhi; and Institute for Integrated Development Studies (IIDS), Kathmandu dealt with both the issues elaborately. The group had earlier (1994) proposed the establishment of a regional power grid. There are also various other studies conducted by the same group as

promoting movement of both people and goods. But, before such an integrated regional transport system can be meaningfully developed, it is essential that the SAARC countries act on decisions taken in several SAARC Summits that people to people contact is essential for the success of SAARC and should, therefore, be widely promoted. This calls for immediate easing of visa requirements, the

resolved, South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA), even if it comes into force, will remain severely constrained from operational point of view.

On the energy issue, South Asia has a huge hydroelectric potential in addition to other sources of energy. In the case of hydroelectricity, the theoretical potential in the countries of the region is an estimated 229,000 MW, of which

Nepal and Bhutan, the existing hydropower potentials offer tremendous scope for boosting the economies of the two countries, which can be realised through exploitation of these potentials and exporting hydro-electricity.

India and Bangladesh, for example, would greatly benefit by importing hydropower from Bhutan and Nepal. In both India and Bangladesh, power supplies are very limited in relation to the demands and the situation will, unless addressed adequately, surely worsen in future in response to increasing population and expanding economic activity and social development. If the exploitation of hydropower potential in Nepal and Bhutan are taken up as a SAARC initiative, the regional countries will thus benefit hugely.

Will the 13th SAARC Summit act on so important a call made by the Indian Prime Minister in the context of boosting regional cooperation among SAARC countries? Indeed, cooperation in transportation and energy is an essential building block if the region has to move on, as suggested by Dr. Singh, to implement SAFTA and complement it by SAARC Investment Area and further deepen regional cooperation by moving on to SAARC Customs Union and then on to SAARC Economic Union.

Dr. Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad is President, Bangladesh Economic Association (BEA).

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Bangladesh, 357 KgOE in Nepal, 423 KgOE in Sri Lanka, 456 KgOE in Pakistan, and 515 KgOE in India. For a global perspective, one may note that the per capita commercial energy use, as of the same year, was 495 KgOE in Vietnam, 899 KgOE in Costa Rica, 2,168 KgOE in Malaysia, 3,127 KgOE in Spain, 3,982 KgOE in the UK, 5,740 KgOE in Sweden, and 7,996 KgOE in the United States (World Bank, World Development Indicators 2004, pp. 140-142).

Studies have been conducted by Track-II (by academics and experts outside the governments in the regional countries) on both of these issues, making purposeful and practical recommendations.

well as by other groups. It should not be difficult to develop doable proposals on the basis of the data and analyses already available, supplemented by further research as may be necessary.

In so far as transportation is concerned, what is necessary for the authorities of the regional countries is to decide to connect the countries and act. While there are situations where one or the other mode of transport may be used to connect two or more countries, the eventual best approach would be to create integrated multi-modal linkages, which will make the system of transportation more efficient and cost effective,

aim being the withdrawal of visa requirements soon. Also, customs formalities must be simplified and standardised to facilitate movement of goods.

Despite the South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement (SAPTA) adopted in the 7th SAARC Summit in April 1993, the intra-SAARC trade remains just about four per cent of the total international trade of the regional countries. I would argue that one of reasons of this tardiness is the physical bottleneck in terms of lack of facilities and arrangements for easy movement of people and goods across the countries. Unless these issues are satisfactorily

only about 15 per cent is now exploited. The potentials in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are extremely limited, which have already been mostly utilised. On the other hand, the potential is large in the other regional countries. For example, the theoretical potential in Nepal is over 83,000 MW, while in Bhutan it is 30,000 MW. The currently estimated economically feasible potentials in the two countries are respectively over 43,000 MW and 20,000 MW, while only about one per cent in Nepal and about three per cent in Bhutan have so far been harnessed. In Pakistan and India, also, much larger parts of the potentials remain unexploited. In

Energy cooperation in South Asia

MONZUR HOSSAIN

SOUTH Asia comprises over one-fifth of the world population, nearly half of which is gripped below the poverty line. The region is afflicted by political instability, violence, racial discriminations, religious bigotries, environmental degradation, skyrocketing arms race, and trade gap and conflict. Ensuring peace and development in this region will tend to make ASIA a prosperous one in the world. With this vision, despite the existing overwhelming problems, seven nations of this region, namely Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka congregated under the umbrella of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in December, 1985. Nonetheless, bilateral disputes among the countries make the objectives far reaching. Though various small initiatives on economic cooperation are on the way, a new area of cooperation "energy cooperation" has been identified that can facilitate greatly the endeavor of

economic cooperation as well as ensure peace in this region. India and Pakistan's ever-growing industrial development makes them a viable market for energy trading.

Particularly, South Asia struggles to get out of low-growth equilibrium and achieve above or equal to six percent GDP growth

South Asian region is a land of potential power resources, which, if properly harnessed, would change the economic landscape of the region. The richly endowed natural resources such as water potential of Nepal, Bhutan, India and Pakistan, the natural gas of Bangladesh and Pakistan, and

or by importing from third-party countries using the territory of SAARC neighbouring countries. This framework requires a greater cooperation among the South Asian countries, which can be achieved especially under the SAARC framework. In the context of developing energy markets, power trading in the region calls

through Pakistan to India; transporting gas from Myanmar to India through pipeline on Bangladesh should be brought to an early and successful conclusion. As a part of negotiations, as is disclosed, Bangladesh seeks permission to use India's National Electricity Grid to import hydro-electricity from

SAARC summit in Dhaka on November, we hope that the member states can explore the possibility of energy cooperation in this region in light of greater energy security of this region, and draft a framework on it which can be a basis of ensuring peace and prosperity of this region in future. It is also not an ambitious expectation that energy cooperation might make the countries interdependent on each other, which will ultimately strengthen the relationships among the respective nations.

With the greater scope of energy cooperation, all the south Asian nations, if properly envisaged, will likely be benefited through economic development and establishing peace in this region, which ultimately will make South Asia a prosperous and peaceful area of the world. Nonetheless, what is needed is to cooperate on energy trading in a just manner so that each country could be benefited by reducing trade gap between the countries.

Monzur Hossain is a Ph.D candidate at National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies, Tokyo, Japan.

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rate. To foster the economic growth, one of the biggest challenges that this region face is the growing demand of energy. During the last decade, the energy consumption has been doubled to 9 percent than the preceding decade in South Asia. It is anticipated that the demand of energy will again be doubled by the end of this decade. How this growing need of energy can be met?

the coal of India are in abundance for the generation of power which can be of tremendous benefits to the region. Located in close proximity to the Persian Gulf and Central Asia, South Asia has the advantage of importing gas and oil from these countries too. India's and Pakistan's growing need of energy can be met either by importing available energy from neighbouring SAARC countries

for establishment of high voltage interconnections between the national grids of the countries of the region. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh should also cooperate closely in establishing gas pipelines in South Asia for transporting gas from Iran, Qatar, Turkmenistan and even Myanmar.

Specifically, the ongoing official negotiations on transporting oil and gas from Iran

Nepal and Bhutan. Pakistan already gave a green-signal to India that it would cooperate to use its territory to transport oil and gas to India through pipeline from Iran or other central Asian countries. The ongoing different bilateral initiatives on energy cooperation give it a shape of multilateral cooperation, which can be solved under the umbrella of SAARC.

At the backdrop of the 13th

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Visa for Saarc countries

The Pakistan High Commission in Bangladesh has stopped issuing visas to Bangladeshi nationals for reasons best known to them. Previously, between 25 and 40 visit and business visas were issued per day, but there is no tourist or visit visa applications are being entertained.

Government of India (its High Commission in Bangladesh) has been issuing 3000 to 5000 visit Visas (free) on a daily basis five days a week. Due to regular people to people interaction and easy access to all parts of India, business, trade and commerce and economic ties, cultural ties have increased so much between Bangladesh and India. At this given time 10,000 patients are getting health services by Indian hospitals and clinics, 35,000 students are studying in different institutions of India. All of them are paying service charges and tuition fees in foreign currency. India is selling products worth more than one billion dollars to Bangladesh and thus gaining economically due to

liberal Visa regime.

We would like that Pakistan should also maintain good friendly and brotherly relationship with Bangladesh and more so being the current Saarc Chairman should provide easy access to their country and allow the public to know each other's country. This way cultural ties and economic ties will develop in the days to come and Pakistan will be benefited economically, too.

Pakistans present Visa policy is not as friendly in the eyes of the people of Bangladesh. The Pakistan High Commission may start issuing more tourist and visit visas to people whose families are divided between the two countries, and to those who want to visit Pakistan for sightseeing and to see their friends and well wishers.

We the people of Saarc member countries would like to have visa-free arrangement amongst seven Saarc member countries so that we can enter each other's territories without any hassle just the way the European Union and Asean member countries have no visa requirements for category wise Visa Free visit. Such facility should be opened for general public

without any restriction.

The initiative may come from Pakistan being the current Chairman of Saarc. Those who are regular bona fide travellers may get 5-year Multiple Entry Visa and those above 60 years of age may get free entry that is without Visa.

It may be mentioned here that Indians have got free access to visit Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka, all Saarc member countries.

Syed Jafar Gulshan, Dhaka

Saarc premonition

The lack of unity and presence of invisible walls within the Saarc members, specially the neighbours, is a misfortune haunting us all for decades. Looking at India, for example, its relations with its four neighbours needs to be enhanced, it is possible, if goodwill prevails over the entrenched political stalemates. The effects of the partition of British India is being revealed each succeeding generation. The cumulative effect is uncomfortable.

Now India is going to be a big target for relocation of factories and offshore offices; and it is facing

energy crisis. Hence perhaps the big Tata group is seeking to establish its big presence in energy rich Bangladesh. Our gas pipeline expansion projects are in tatters due to lack of investment proposals. The Asian highway routing from East to West is also under debate.

Bangladesh (born 1971) has also its late-coming hiccups. Bangladesh is surrounded on three sides by powerful India; and India is concerned with its transport, communication and logistics problems with NE region. India and Pakistan are saddled with the Kashmir problem, (it is hoped that the recent earthquake would inject some humanitarian aspects in the political solutions).

The Saarc conference in Dhaka should create an opening for the stalled and frozen negotiations.

A Mawaz, Dhaka

Cable TV viewers

Ershad Kamol's column on the subject gives a background of the Cable Distributors' conflict. We the unfortunate viewers are the uncalled for sufferers. This has resulted in

curtailment in our viewing options thanks to the fight of the titans!

However Pavel Rahman from Paltan hits the nail on the head when he says that despite lack of available channels, the cable operators are not decreasing line rent. This is the crux of the issue. While the titans fight the ordinary viewers suffer, and even have to pay for it!

I wonder like the consumer society, if we the viewers can have area-based societies eventually to create pressure on cable operators. We could set guide lines for a mutual contract between viewer and cable operator where we declare that we pay the rent for compulsory coverage of say twenty channels of our choice. If the channels chosen are not available then we will deduct the proportionate amount to the number of channels not available. This could be a realistic approach, which will in turn mobilise the cable operators to take appropriate measures with the distributors to ensure viewers' coverage. Without this I believe the viewers' sufferings will continue.

S.A. Mansoor Gulshan, Dhaka

Plea for a national identity card

Bangladesh could avoid many of her problems if she could introduce a national identity card for each and every citizen. In many western countries this identity card is a must and it is also used almost as a passport. In Sweden an identity card (issued mostly by banks, post office etc.) is more dependable than the national passport. A Swedish driver's licence, however, is the most important of all the identity cards. There is also a national identity number without which a person is non-existent in Sweden. The national identity number helps authority and other organisations to identify a person and using this number all business and social deals are executed. For example, when one visits the hospital or the health care centre the first question the clerk asks: "What is your identity number?"

The identity number could help the country to find out the exact number of people the country has and where they live. Carrying this

identity number should be also obligatory so that any suspicious person can be challenged and fond out what he or she is. The objective of this suggestion is not to propose for Bangladesh to turn into a police state but to get her organised without which there cannot be any law and order and no social or economic progress in a congenial way.

Introducing an identity card should not be costly considering the benefit it offers. Within a month this job can be done with nationwide drive.

Tayeb Husain Lund, Sweden

CEPZ and mobile network

CEPZ is earning foreign exchanges and contributing in the national economy to a great extent. So, it is desirable that every part of it would be in the uninterrupted network coverage of all mobile operators. All workers and officers always hope that they can keep themselves in close contact with others by using their mobile. And when we cannot keep contact with our dearest ones

our mind is filled up with sorrow that we are out of reach from them. A reputed mobile operator, claims that their subscribers do not need to climb up a tree to get mobile network but sometimes we need to use ladder to grasp its network. Another one professes that it is clearly ahead. But how it is ahead? Keeping its network busy or error in network connection or giving no network coverage? It would be exaggeration if we tell about other operators!

We work at YPL which is situated in sector -7 of CEPZ. Hardly we get connection to talk to our nearest ones using our mobile staying in our office room. It is very regretful for us. We call upon all mobile operators to look into the matter why their networks cannot reach upto our office room or why their signals are very weak. We would like to be free from all kinds of troubles regarding mobile network as early as possible. It is expected that they will find out the solution to this kind of problem soon.

Ashram CEPZ