Saarc Summit

Afghanistan into the association and for allowing China as an observer or a dialogue partner of Saarc. The Dhaka summit has brought unprecedented media attention as about 300 foreign journalists are already in Dhaka to cover the event.

As Saarc is entering its third decade, the leaders are optimistic about reaching an agreement about the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), the first step in the evolution of Saarc as a regional trade bloc and an economic union.

Under the SAFTA accord, India. Pakistan and Sri Lanka, the region's largest economies, have until the end of 2008 to reduce their tariffs to somewhere between zero and five percent. Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and the Maldives have until 2016 to do so. However, each country will be able to maintain a "sensitive list" of products on which tariffs will not be reduced.

The agreement would bring to fruition the idea of a free trade area that was first envisaged in Dhaka in 1985 when the group was formed. Considering that SAFTA was seen as a non-starter at one point in time, the current moves are quite significant -especially in view of political gains foreseen in terms of peace in the

South Asia, home to 1.5 billion people (a quarter of the world's population) is moving to boost regional trade by emulating the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the European Union (EU).

Annual trade among the seven countries is \$5.0 billion which may rise to \$14 billion once restrictions are removed, the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry estimates.

Trade among the ASEAN countries is 29 percent, among the EU countries it is 63 percent while it is only four percent among the Saarc countries though the region has immense pros-

Seventy percent of trade among the South Asian countries is dominated by India, which is barely a five percent of the region's total trading. Saarc members have a 450 million strong middleclass, bigger than the combined population of the USA and Canada or of the

Saarc members have reached a consensus that regional economic integration is more about finding an engine of growth rather than just promoting trade. Political leadership of Saarc is now determined to make SAFTA operational from January 1, 2006.

On the eve of the Saarc summit in Bangladesh, economists here said regional economic integration could generate billions of dollars in new income, employment and trade. Creation of a free trade area is necessary for economic integration and for promoting the region as a trade bloc,

Regional economic cooperation and integration will also make the member countries, especially the smaller ones, more attractive destinations for third-country investments by removing the constraints imposed by a small domestic market.

Economic integration of South Asia could also help the region fight against poverty, the economists observed. The World Bank estimates about half the world's 1.1 billion poor, who earn less

than a dollar a day, live in South Asia. By removing trade barriers, SAFTA will lead to an estimated tripling of the intra-regional trade. This will make South Asia's internal trade more respectable compared to its existing marginal four to five percent share in similar trading by making it possible to trade directly rather than through third countries. It will also lead to cost savings for the region.

A common Saarc transport policy to facilitate movement of goods should also be in place, experts said. The association should take steps to improve communications by roads, railways, waterways, and by air.

Officials here said the 13th summi is expected to provide fresh impetus to gional cooperation with specific focus on implementation of previous commitments and on plans of actions adopted over the past two decades.

Dhaka, the birthplace of Saarc, is hosting the summit for the third time with several proposals for revitalising the association to tackle some of the major challenges of its third decade.

In the context of urgency for economic integration, the 13th Saarc summit will be an important landmark in the history of the seven-nation group as it will culminate in signing of key agreements among the member

It is expected that the summit will provide the member states with a unique opportunity to have a fresh look at the rich and comprehensive Saarc agenda and to prioritise Saarc activities focusing on areas considered vital for achieving the charter objectives that will contribute to tangible improvement of lives of the teeming

The regional grouping now has a number of important prospective agreements ready to be signed, which include customs cooperation, avoidance of double taxation, investment protection and setting up of a Saarc Arbitration Council.

The leaders are likely to endorse Dhaka's proposal of consolidating different funds under Saarc under the umbrella of Saarc Development Fund (SDF) which will have different outlets. one of which will be Saarc Poverty Alleviation Fund. India has already committed to contribute 100 million dollars for the fund. Officials said a Media Development Fund would also be established under the SDF.

In addition to making formal speeches at the summit on November 12, Saarc leaders will have the opportunity to sit together for several times, mainly during the retreat on the concluding day on November 13.

The retreat is considered as one of the most interactive part of the summit as the heads of state and government will sit together with open agendas from 10:30am till 1:30pm.

After the retreat, all the seven leaders will go to Bangabhaban to pay a courtesy visit to President Prof Iajuddin Ahmed.

The leaders will also meet the new Saarc Chairperson Prime Minister Khaleda Zia individually at her office in the afternoon of the first day of the summit when they will discuss bilat-

Saarc leaders have a packed schedule with a number of bilateral meetings being worked out around the summi schedule by the member states.

Khaleda Zia's meetings with her Indian and Pakistani counterparts will be crucial since they will discuss a whole gamut of bilateral issues.

The Indian prime minister is likely to have meetings with Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz and his Bangladeshi counterpart Khaleda Zia

The summit will adopt a Dhaka Declaration that has been prepared through intensive consultations by senior officials, foreign secretaries and foreign ministers of the member countries for the last four days.

The first Saarc summit was held on December 7-8, 1985 in Dhaka, the second was on November 16-17, 1986 in Bangalore, the third was in Kathmandu on November 2-4, 1987, the fourth was in Islamabad on December 29-31, 1988, the fifth was in Malé on November 21-23, 1990, the sixth was in Colombo on December 21 1991, the seventh was in Dhaka on April 10-11, 1993, the eighth was in New Delhi on May 2-4, 1995, the ninth was in Malé on May 12-14, 1997, the 10th was in Colombo on July 29-31, 1998, the 11th was in Kathmandu on January 4-6, 2002 and the 12th was in Islamabad on 2-6 January, 2004.

Sher-e-Bangla Nagar in the capital to

pay homage to the late president prior

containing the excerpts of letters sent

by Ziaur Rahman to the six other

South Asian heads of state and gov-

ernment proposing floating a

Nepal initiated the proposal to

establish the Saarc Award, which also

carries a gold medal and a letter of

citation, during the 11th Saarc

Summit in Kathmandu in January

South Asian individuals and organisa-

tions to undertake programmes and

activities complementing the efforts

of Saarc; encourage individuals and

organisations in South Asia contrib-

uting to the improvement of the

conditions of women and children:

and honour outstanding contribu-

 $tions\, and\, achievements\, of\, individuals$

and organisations within the region in

the fields of peace and development

poverty alleviation, environment

protection and regional cooperation.

The award aims to encourage

regional body for cooperation.

They will jointly unveil a plaque

to the inaugural ceremony today.

Chairperson of the 12th Saarc Summit and Pakistan Prime Minister

Shaukat Aziz. Ziaur Rahman in the early 1980s took the initiative to set in motion the process of regional cooperation aimed at promoting overall progress

The seed of regional cooperation sown by the late president continues to grow with the intensification of the

Saarc process. His vision and unremitting efforts at mobilising public opinion in the

tion of Saarc in December 1985. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) will remain a testimony to Ziaur

Rahman's vision and foresight in all times to come. Saarc Secretary General Chenkyab Dorji will read out a citation at the

award distribution function. Sources said the family of the late

president have decided to donate the \$25,000 award money to the Ziaur

Rahman Foundation.

Pak PM

According to the official, Pakistan's visions include evolving mechanisms for confidence building measures, preventive diplomacy, peaceful settlement of disputes and setting up of a Saarc regional forum to discuss security issues.

Pakistan has already circulated concept papers among member states on certain steps required to make the Saarc process more vibrant and meaningful These pertain to the strengthening of Saarc Secretariat and the holding of oneday Saarc Summit with one executive session and retreat.

Other proposals are on project cooperation with the participation of two or more member states in social sector and review of decisions, their implemen tation and impact on regional cooperation by the Saarc Ministerial Troika

The Pak PM will advocate establishing a Saarc Poverty Alleviation Fund with \$300 million contributions from member states, a Saarc Cancer Hospital and a Saarc Medical University, the source said.

The PM is also likely to reiterate the need to establish a Saarc dialogue partnership on the lines of the Asean Regional Forum with interested countries such as China and Japan and with other regional groupings like the Gulf Cooperation Council, Asean, and the EU.

Pakistan is also likely to draw attenion on building linkages between the central banks of Saarc countries to promote coherent fiscal and monetary policies in the region.

The official said Pakistan has made ubstantial contribution to strengthening the Saarc process and to enhance its international profile during its chairman ship. On Pakistan's initiative the UN General Assembly accepted Saarc as an observer in December 2004.

Pakistan was instrumental in the adoption of Saarc Social Charter, signing of South Asian Free Trade Area, Additional Protocol on Terrorism and initiation of Saarc Energy Forum, he

FMs agree

form a \$300 million fund for poverty alleviation, with India reiterating its previous commitment to donate \$100 million to the fund.

There will be an umbrella fund styled Saarc Development Fund containing the existing South Asian Development Fund the proposed poverty alleviation and other funds, the Saarc FMs decided.

The meeting was going on at Dhaka Sheraton Hotel when this report was filed at 9:45 last night with Bangladesh FM M Morshed Khan in the chair.

Lyonpo Khandu Wangchuk of Bhutan, Dr Ahmed Shaheed of the Maldives, Ramesh Nath Pandey of Nepal, Khurshid M Kasuri of Pakistan, Anura Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka and State Minister for External Affairs of India E Ahmed were the other council members present.

The meeting discussed implementation of the South Asia Free Trade Area (Safta) by the January 1, 2006 deadline, Saarc Social Charter, Saarc Visa Exemption Scheme and expansion of visa categories, which now numbers 23. The progress in ratification and implementa tion of Saarc conventions and instruments, conferment of the Saarc Youth Award 2003 and evolving a vision for the third decade of Saarc were also on the

The council scrutinised the Saarc secretary general's periodic analytic reports with comments and recommendations of the Saarc Standing Committee, the report of the 31st session of the Standing Committee comprising the foreign secretaries as well as reports of various ministerial meetings.

Earlier, the council had met in an informal meeting on Thursday

Saarc snippets

FROM PAGE 16

however, using the bulletproof Mercedes cars provided by the Bangladesh government.

PLANTS HAVE GROWN

Seven Saarc leaders sowed seven plants on the National Mausoleum premises in Savar in Dhaka on December 7, 1985 when the curtain rose on the First Saarc

Summit in Bangladesh. The seven Bottlegrass plants have

now grown into large trees. Four among the seven leaders -- Sri Lankan president Julias Richard Jayawardhane, Pakistan president Ziaul Hag, Indian prime minister Rajiy Gandhi and Nepal King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev -- have meanwhile

nassed away. Among the three others, now in power is President of the Maldives Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who has attended all the Saarc summits.

The Saarc leaders are visiting the National Mausoleum today to pay homage to the country's martyred freedom fighters. But this time there are no such plans of sowing plants like the orevious Dhaka summit in 1993.

SAARC AWARD Late president of Bangladesh Ziaur Rahman has posthumously been selected as the first recipient of the Saarc Award. His eldest son Tarique Rahman receives the award today on behalf of the family.

The award will be presented during the inaugural session of the 13th Saarc Summit at China-Bangladesh Friendship Confe-rence Centre today. The award includes a gold medal,

CULTURALEVENTS

Eminent Bangladeshi artistes Sabina Yasmin, Shakila Zafar and Mahmuduzzaman Babu are scheduled to perform today following the state banquet at China-Bangla-desh Friendship Conference Centre.

A dance performance led by Deeba Khandokar also includes in the cultural

Baby Naznin performs at the cultural function following the lunch tomorrow at National Guesthouse Jamuna, while a dance performance by Sharmila Bandapadhaya, Deepa Khandokar and Shafigur Rahman, and Minu Haq is also included.

Homage to martyrs

initiative to set the process of regional cooperation in motion in the early 1980s. Zia's unremitting efforts at mobilising public opinion in the South Asian region for institutionalised cooperation culminated in the formation of Saarc in December 1985.

After placing wreath at 10:40am. the leaders will unveil a plaque of excerpts of letters sent by Zia to the then six heads of state and government with proposal to float a regional body for cooperation. The plaque structure will be set up

on the mazar premises, from where it will be shifted permanently to the Zia Museum being constructed adjacent to the graveyard. The Saarc leaders will move to the

Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre (BCFCC) for the inaugural session, which is scheduled to begin at 11:30am. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, foreign minister, adviser for foreign

protocol will receive the Saarc lead-The 140-minute opening will begin with playing of the Bangladesh anthem followed by photo session

affairs, foreign secretary and chief of

and recitation from the Quran. Pakistan Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, the current Saarc chair, will then formally declare the summit open

The Saarc leaders will adopt agendas for the Dhaka summit before announcing the Saarc Award 2004. which goes to Zia for his outstanding contribution to the birth of Saarc.

After the inaugural address by Khaleda Zia, the Pakistan prime minister convenes the formality to elect new Saarc chairperson for the summit. Shaukat Aziz will then declare Khaleda Zia as the new chairperson before requesting her to take

The Saarc leaders from Bhutan,

India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka will address the inaugural session, which is to be concluded with a statement by Saarc Secretary

Bilateral meetings will be held before the banquet to be hosted by the Bangladesh premier at the BCFCC

General Lyonpo Chenkyab Dorji.

The banquet scheduled for an 8:30pm start, will be followed by a

On the second day, Saarc leaders will have a retreat at the state guesthouse Jamuna where they will sign agreements. They will have their lunch at the

Jamuna followed by a cultural show

featuring country's leading singers,

dancers and musicians. The Saarc leaders will also pay a courtesy call on President Iaiuddin Ahmed at the Bangabhaban at

The concluding session, chaired by Khaleda Zia, will begin at 4:00pm at the International Conference Centre (ICC) inside the Prime Minister's Office. The session will adopt reports on 25th and 26th sessions of the council of ministers and the Dhaka

The new Saarc chairperson will also address a press briefing.

The summit winds up with vote of thanks to be given by India Prime Minister Manmohan Singh after the $concluding \, statement \, of \, Khaleda \, Zia.$ State-run BTV and Bangladesh

Betar will air both opening and concluding sessions live. The heads of state and government will leave Dhaka in special and

commercial flights on Monday. Meantime, a fair of Bangladeshi traditional products will be held at the State Guesthouse Padma for the spouses of the Saarc leaders on

Leaders arrive

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 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 nonour, Khaleda introduced Bangladesh ministers, diplomats and dignitaries at the presentation line. Two girls presented bouquets to the King and

After the ceremony at the airport was over, the Nepalese monarch and his entourage were chauffeured to Hotel

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reached Dhaka at 6:15pm to a ceremonial welcome for his maiden participation to a Saarc Summit. Manmohan flew in a special flight with his wife and was also received by Bangladesh PM Khaleda Zia at the VVIP

Hasina

FROM PAGE 1

and Pakistani prime ministers had been rescheduled for November 13 after the summit meetings, AL sources

"Hasina might meet all the seven Saarc leaders. But till now, only meetings with the leaders of India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bhutan have been finalised. We are trying to arrange meetings with the presidents of Maldives and Sri Lanka as well," said a top AL leader.

"We are hopeful that the leader of the opposition will be able to meet almost all the Saarc leaders between November 13 and 14," Saber Hossain Chowdhury, political secretary of Sheikh Hasina, told The Daily Star last

Regional co-operation among the Saarc countries in the fight against terrorism, poverty alleviation, infrastructure development, among others, would be discussed at those meetings

PM to hold

According to sources, other Saarc leaders will also hold bilateral talks on the sidelines of the two-day summit begin-The prime ministers of India and

Pakistan will meet in the evening. The Indian premier will also hold a bilateral meeting with the Sri Lankan president Manmohan Singh had a bilateral

meeting with the Bhutanese PM at the Dhaka Sheraton Hotel yesterday eve-Pakistani PM Shaukat Aziz is due to hold bilateral meetings with the President of the Maldives, PM of Bhutan,

President of Sri Lanka and the King of

Sri Lankan President Kumaratunga is due to meet the Bhutanese PM, the King of Nepal and the President of the Maldives.

President of the Maldives Maumoon Abdul Gayoom was scheduled to arrive

at 10:35pm while President of Sri Lanka

Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga

in a special flight at 12:30 last night. About 40,000 security men from police, Rapid Action Battalion (Rab), Bangladesh Rifles, Armed Police Battalion, President's Guard Regiment, Special Security Force, intelligence agencies and the forces have been tasked with ensuring foolproof security for the Saarc leaders and 10 venues of the

Security men kept many roads off-

limits to the people and vehicles vesterday. They cleared the road from the ZIA to Sheraton about half an hour each time before a Saarc leader started from the ZIA. A good number of law enforcers were on guard in the lanes leading to the road and kept vehicles and pedestrians "We're having the road closed 20 nutes before the VVIPs start moving

minutes after the guests leave," Deputy Commissioner (north zone) of traffic police Firoi al Mujahid told The Daily But many people at different points were barred to move much earlier before

And we open it for public again in 3-4

near the ZIA-Sheraton road said they the Saarc leaders did pass. "I was kept waiting at Farmgate police box for 55 minutes," said a reporter of a Bangla $daily, who \, was \, going \, to \, his \, Karwan \, Bazar \,$

The security men forced different offices, shops and business firms to keep their shutters down. They did not allow anyone to go out of their office during the movement of the Saarcleaders.

Many of the city dwellers kept themselves confined to their houses while some others took train to move in the

"The city has in fact been turned into a no-go area," Abul Khayer, a contractor, said after arriving at Airport Railway Station from Kamalapur to meet his

sister in Uttara. Many others however were prepared to take the trouble of communication for the sake of a safe and successful summit "It will be to our credit if the summit passes off peacefully," said one at

Sumptuous meals

FROM PAGE 1 zarda and Dhakai shahi firni.

The snacks menu at Bangabhaban when the Saarc dignitaries meet the Bangladeshi president tomorrow are pati shapta pitha, black and green grapes, salmon tart, quail egg, fish finger, chicken shaslik, chicken samusa, white chocolate, brown chocolate and chocolate brownies. The menu at the Saarc Retreat at

the state guesthouse Iamuna will be mixed green salad with shrimp, smoked hilsha, garlic toast and bread roll as starters while the main course will be chicken polao, mutton malai curry, shami kebab, king prawn bhoona, rui fish fry, parata, steamed rice, dal, salad, borhani, mixed vegetaworking very hard to fulfil the condibles and alu bokhara chutney. The desserts will be curd, mala

chop, puli pitha, bhapa pitha, pati shapta pitha, gur shondesh, kacha golla and fruit platter decorated with papaya, pineapple, grape, kiwi, cherry, strawberry and honey dew. Tea, coffee and betel leaf will also be served.

Protocol

FROM PAGE 16 which would enable Saarc countries to "work together on the legal side as well", a foreign ministry high official

The additional protocol, which is comprehensive in nature and enables member countries to take measures to prevent and suppress financing of terrorist activities, was adopted at the Islamabad summit in January 2004.

Faced with the scourge of terrorist acts, South Asian countries, including India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal, have taken initiative to jointly combat terrorism. The August 17 countrywide blasts in Bangladesh and October 29 deadly blasts in New Delhi have apparently $added\,to\,their\,anti-terrorism\,drives.$

Bhuiyan holds FROM PAGE 16

Tuesday announced the cancellation of its Tk 68 million finance to three government projects "after investigations found evidence of inappropriate and collusive bidding practices that violated the procurement norms agreed between the World Bank and Bangladesh". The bank also asked the government to refund the amount and to take appropriate action against the officials responsible.

But, responding to queries from reporters yesterday, Bhuiyan said "The irregularities in the bidding process of the MSP were actually detected by the LGED [Local Government and Engineering Department]. The LGED officially communicated this finding to the World Bank, as the LGED did not have the authority to cancel the tender and call a fresh one without the bank's permission.

"In its first letter," Bhuiyan elaborated, "the LGED suggested floating a fresh tender. But the bank did not give the permission. The LGED in another letter to the bank sought the permission again, but in vain. This was why transparency in the procurement process could not be ensured." So, the minister said, the WB is equally responsible for the breach of procurement guidelines.

He said his ministry has already clarified its position on the issue in an official letter to the WB, adding any official proven involved in the alleged irregularities will be duly punished.

Essentials prices

FROM PAGE 16 Hatirpoolkitchen market.

Green chilli was selling at Tk 80 per kg at Hatirpool market yesterday. At Palashi market, it sold at Tk 60 yesterday against Tk30 to 35 in the previous days.

In some markets, local variety onion sold at as high as Tk 50 to Tk 56 per kg yesterday against Tk 28 to Tk 32 only on the previous day. Indian variety onion was selling at Tk 42 to 45 against Tk 24 to Tk28 a day before. Prices of cucumber and tomato

remained the same as last week while beans were selling at Tk 40-45 against Tk 20- 24 per kg yesterday, patal at Tk 20-25 against Tk 14-16, potato at Tk 12-15 against Tk 8 -10, okra at Tk 32 -40 against Tk 24- 26, carrot at Tk 24 -30 against Tk 15 - 17 and cabbage and cauliflower at Tk 25 -30 per piece

against Tk 10-12 previously. Fish prices, especially of hilsha, ruhi

and katal, have also increased. The price of coarse rice however

remained as before. Meat prices have also risen. Broiler was selling at Tk 85 per kg vesterday against Tk 80 on the day before. Beef sold at Tk 125 to Tk 135 a kg and mutton

at Tk 160 to Tk 170 a kg vesterday. The fresh price hike has hit hard the middle and lower middle class and poor people, already experiencing a crippling effect price spiral on their day-today life during the Ramadan.

Cabinet body

who heads the body. "We will finalise the amendments at our next meeting

on November 14," he added The cabinet's approval of the PPL is one of the conditions the WB imposed for the \$200 million DSC tranche, AWB board meeting in Washington, DC on November 17 is scheduled to decide whether to sanction the tranche or

The proposed law was tabled at a cabinet meeting on November 2. The meeting did not pass the draft but formed the subcommittee to further scrutinise its clauses

However, a high-level meeting source said, though an official handout claimed that the cabinet meeting has approved the PPL in principle, the government's real intention is to drag its clearing process indefinitely and the subcommittee was formed with that specific aim. Sources said the WB has come to

know of this covert government

intention and told a number of ministers that it would not sanction the DSC instalment, unless the cabinet approves the law in time. In response, sources in the subcommittee said, the meeting was hurriedly called even on a Friday in a bid to fulfil the WB condition. "We are

legal provisions could be bypassed.

tions and hope to get the law approved by the cabinet by the end of this month," said a subcommittee mem-Another source said the amendments to the draft law would be such as to provide loopholes by which the

An agenda

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 meaningful changes to Saarc, then they should, for the first time, take personal and direct responsibility for bringing about some radical changes and reforms.

First and foremost, they should

commit themselves to meeting on a regular basis to monitor and expedite the decisions they take, which either never get implemented or are implemented in such a manner as to serve no useful purpose. They should agree to meet again in Dhaka for half a day in February or March next year and thereafter meet every three months to ensure that there is substantive progress. These meetings should be short businesslike meetings with a fixed agenda and should be free of all ceremonials and speech making. The heads will be presented a detailed progress report by the Saarc secretary general and will personally provide guidance, inputs and proposals for the future. It will, above all, be a decision-oriented meeting.

There will be one working session asting for perhaps three to four hours, which will be restricted to the heads plus Foreign Ministers and Foreign Secretaries. The Heads will arrive by 12 noon and leave for their respective capitals by 6:00pm.

Any problems which cannot be resolved at the ministerial or secretary level will have to be tackled by them rather than allowing these problems to stand in the way of serious progress. In other words, all the unresolved problems relating to Safta should be dealt with directly by the Heads. 2. The heads at the retreat should

agree to reconvene the group of eminent persons and ask them to give them an updated vision document, a five year plan of action, and finally a road map for converting Saarc into the South Asian Economic Union (SAEU). The action plan and road map should be the main subject of discussion along with making Safta more meaningful and effective at the half day summit meeting in March 3. It is equally important that the

heads agree in Dhaka to enhance the

powers and authority of the secretary

general and totally revamp the

Secretariat. A separate task force should

be set up to put forward concrete pro-

posal directly to the Heads at the March

meeting. Alternately, the standing

committee can be given this responsibil-

4. To demonstrate in a practical way their commitment to facilitating people to people contacts in the region the heads should agree here in Dhaka to do away with visas for citizens of the seven Saarc countries.

Alternately, as a first step they can all agree to follow the example of Nepal and Sri Lanka and agree that visas will be ssued on arrival. It makes no sense whatsoever to talk of regional cooperation and people to people contacts if we cannot adopt a more liberal and people

friendly visa policy. 5. It is equally important that the key issues relating to the development of common infrastructure facilities, including in particular a Trans South Asian energy grid should be taken up by the Heads directly, who should convene expert groups that will report back

to them.

6. If combating terrorism is to be a top priority task, as it clearly should be, then the heads must get their home ministers to meet periodically, as well as the heads of intelligence services. The issue of exchange of sensitive information and joint programmes must also be

In sum there is a great deal of issues that the heads can take up at the retreat. What, however, is of paramount importance is that they themselves must demonstrate their own personal commitment to the cause of regional cooperation. If, as they have been doing for the past twenty years, they simply rubber stamp declarations prepared by their senior officials, then clearly there will be very little progress

Dhaka could well be a critical turning

point for Saarc. Indo-Pakistan relations

have shown significant progress. In the

past, as every one knows, including the indians and the Pakistanis, the friction between the two countries was a major obstacle to progress. We are fortunate that the present chief executives of the two countries, Dr. Manmohan Singh and Mr. Shawkat Aziz, fully appreciate the benefit of, and are committed to, regional cooperation.

to create the mutual trust and confi $dence\,that\,is\,so\,necessary\,for\,progress.$ South Asia has the potential to grow as a region at 8-10 percent a year. Whether it realises this potential or not will depend entirely on the leadership shown and initiatives taken by the Heads themselves at the retreat tomor-

There cannot be a better time than this

rowat the Jamuna State Guest House. (Former foreign secretary Faroog Sobhan is the president of the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute)

Enact laws

The call was made on the closing day of the two-day Saarc Journalists Summit-II in the capital, organised by the South Asian Free Media Association (Safma) and held

at a local hotel. Participants at the conference said not government organisations (NGOs) and private sector companies should be made accountable and transparent in their

operations. In his keynote speech, Editor of The Daily Star Mahfuz Anam underscored rephrasing people's right to information. 'Our strength as journalists mainly come from the people but we have not been able to present before them the issue of access to information in the right perspective,"

The governments or big companies inherently do not like the media. So, the only means of its survival is the support of the people, which gives the media its right to gather information, Mahfuz Anam said dwelling on Access to Information at the conference titled 'Journalists Beyond

mechanism to gather information from the government," he said in the context of Bangladesh. He however congratulated the Indian government for enacting a law on right to

"But surprisingly, there is no official

For collecting information, journalists mainly depend on the sources willing to share it, which may be partially correct or even wrong. They provide it to serve their own purpose that may be a promotion or foreign trip, he told the session chaired by

eminent journalist Dileep Padgaonkar.

A major factor behind the escalation of

corruption in this region is that the media fails to play its due role as it does not have any official access to information, Mahfuz Anam thought. Speakers also said the NGOs run their activities with local or foreign funds in the

name of people's welfare and they must

have accountability. On the privacy of private companies, they said there could only be a kind of demarcation for them to provide information to the media.

The media will surely consider the issue of national security but that does not mean people will not enjoy access to information that they deserve in a democratic order, they said. Safma Indian Chapter's President KK

Katyal mentioned that contempt laws in various countries sharply violate the people's right to know, leading to widespread harassment of the journalists "The issue of contempt laws should be

reviewed seriously," he said. Safma Secretary General Imtiaz Alam urged all to be consistent on demanding that the Saarc nations should include its (Safma's) proposed Protocol on Information that seeks free movement of

journalists and media products within the Saarc countries. Prominent journalist Bhaskar Rao of India said multinational companies have a strong influence on the media. This is how the voice of the voiceless is not

properly reflected in the media. Country representatives -- Afzal Khan of Pakistan, NM Amin of Sri Lanka, Gopal Khanal of Nepal and Safma President Reazuddin Ahmed of Bangladesh also spoke on their respective country situa-

tion on access to information.

3 nations

Alam presided over the session at Shilpakala Academy auditorium. "We have decided that the journalists should be the mainstay of people to people contact in strengthening ties among the Saarc region," said

Morshed Khan. He said the last decade of Saarc would be the decade of implementa-

Pakistan Foreign Minister Khurshid

Bangladesh Foreign Minister M

Mahmud Kashuri said Pakistan wants that the visa regime for journalists should be liberalised. Indian State Minister for Foreign Affairs E Ahmed said India will support

the proposal for free movement of

iournalists in the Saarc region. Earlier, the second Saarc journalists' summit under the auspices of Iournalists beyond Frontiers adopted two specific proposals to be included in the current Saarc declaration.

The proposals are -- allowing

movement of journalists with 15 years

experience in any credible media organisations without visa and giving five years' multiple visa for the journalists with three years' experience. The summit proposed allowing both print and electronic media prod-

an apex body for the journalists in the The summit demanded restoration of fundamental rights, press freedom,

ucts duty free access across the borders

and demanded Safma's recognition as

right to know and freedom of expression, withdrawal of press censorship and recent changes made in the press laws, release of detained journalists and stoppage of victimisation of media $\,$ personnel in Nepal.

Tarique to receive wreaths at Ziaur Rahman's grave in

and economic development.

region in favour of institutionalised cooperation culminated in the forma-

The Saarc leaders will place floral