

# Manmohan's speech

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A series of other proposals and ideas that came up in the Indian premier's address include setting up of a South Asian University, a Regional Food Bank, holding of a South Asian Energy Dialogue, a South Asian Car Rally, daily air services among Saarc countries, hosting of a Saarc Centre for Disaster Preparedness, a Saarc Museum of Textiles and Handicrafts and developing a regional telemedicine network.

Expressing optimism about the proposed South Asian Free Trade Area (Safta) taking effect from the first day of next year, the Indian head of the government observed, "Even this will represent only a modest beginning in terms of our goal for regional economic integration."

He raised the question whether justice has been done to the initial blueprint for regional cooperation in first two decades of Saarc and then (Manmohan) said that the regional economic cooperation in South Asia has fallen far short of "our expectations."

Stressing the need for recharging and regenerating the arteries of transport and communications that bind the South Asian countries together, Dr Manmohan said, "We cannot be the crossroads of Asia but remain disconnected within our own region. Without the latter, the former is not possible, or at least, will be possible to a very limited extent." In this context, he reminded all that the ancient roads criss-crossed the subcontinent, and linked-up with the seaports, which were the gateways to the region.

If Saarc as a region has to recapture its role as crossroads of culture and commerce, how much more necessary is it for us to remove the barriers to the free flow of goods, of peoples and ideas within our own region," he added.

The deliberation by the Indian prime minister also emphasised the importance of the Saarc acting speedily for catching up with the dynamic Asia, which he says, is emerging in "our neighbourhood."

Referring to the Asean, he said, "We are clearly witnessing nothing short of an Asian resurgence based upon the rebuilding of the pre-colonial arteries of trade and commerce that created a distinct Asian identity in the first place."

## SOUTH ASIAN ENERGY DIALOGUE

Manmohan described energy security as an increasingly major challenge that the region is faced with and proposed for a South Asian Energy Dialogue involving experts, academics, environmentalists, officials and NGOs to recommend measures to tap the energy potential.

## REGIONAL FOOD BANK

Identifying food security as another major challenge, the India premier proposed for a collaborative project in the form of a Regional Food Bank which shall be used to meet shortages and losses caused by natural calamities in any Saarc member countries.

## SOUTH ASIAN UNIVERSITY

To create a centre of excellence, in the form of a South Asian University, Manmohan urged all seven members to pool their resources and observed,

"Wherever an enabling environment and world class facilities are made available to our talented peoples, they

excel."

He wanted the proposed South Asian University to become a forum where the academicians, scholars, researchers and gifted students, could work together in the service of human advancement. He expressed India's

readiness to host the university in next three to four years' time.

## ENHANCED AIR SERVICE FACILITIES

Manmohan stressed the importance of improved air connectivity amongst Saarc countries and said, "India is prepared to offer to all Saarc neighbours, on a reciprocal basis and without prejudice to existing rights, the facility of daily air services by designated airlines to our metropolitan cities Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Bangalore, Hyderabad and Kolkata, and as many services as they wish, to eighteen other destinations all across India."

He said his country is ready to offer the designated airlines of Saarc countries the facility to exercise fifth freedom rights, both intermediate and beyond, within the Saarc region, on a reciprocal basis.

## POVERTY ALLEVIATION FUND

Recalling India's offer of 100 million dollars contribution towards creation of a poverty alleviation fund, Manmohan expressed regret that no project proposal has yet been received. He, however, welcomed the decision to merge the different existing and proposed funds into an umbrella South Asian Development Fund, with different windows for different purposes.

Referring to a roadmap set out by a report of eminent persons' group on creation of South Asian Economic Union, the Indian prime minister mentioned last July's ministerial meeting's recommendation for establishment of a Saarc High Economic Council.

## TELEMEDICINE NETWORK

He suggested that a collaborative healthcare project involving a regional telemedicine network should be set up. "We would be happy to share our expertise in this field, by installing such a facility linking all Saarc countries."

## TEXTILE MUSEUM

Noting that South Asia possesses a very rich and living tradition of exquisite handicrafts and textiles, Manmohan said, "India would be happy to preserve and foster this valuable legacy by establishing a Saarc Museum of Textiles and Handicrafts."

## SOUTH ASIAN CAR RALLY

He also announced that India offers to hold a South Asian Car Rally in the run-up to the Saarc's next summit in India.

Earlier at the outset of his speech, Manmohan congratulated his Bangladesh counterpart on her election as new Saarc chairperson, and expressed appreciation to Pakistan, the outgoing chair.

In reference to last year's devastating tsunami and recent earthquake in the Indo-Pak subcontinent, the Indian premier expressed gratification at the acceptance of his country's offer to host the Saarc Centre for Disaster Preparedness.

The speech also made mention of Bangladesh's devising innovative approaches to reducing the impact of disasters through community involvement in planning and risk management. "The use of micro-credit both for pre-disaster risk reduction and for post disaster reconstruction and rehabilitation are cited as global best practices that are worthy of replication in other countries of South Asia."

## Economic union

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rich history and enduring experiences. Unfortunately, we remain deprived of the benefit of our own rich heritage."

It is a stark reality that the region has been mired in terrorism, drug trafficking, human trafficking and environmental catastrophes as well as unbridled spread of pestilent diseases like HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis, Gyanendra said.

He said the Saarc Social Charter must be integrated into the overall Saarc activities to promote an inclusive social development for all -- men, women and children.

"We believe that the signing of the four agreements on Promotion and Protection of Investments, Mutual Administrative Assistance in Customs Matters, Saarc International Commercial Arbitration Centre and Avoidance of Double Taxation will further strengthen the Safta regime with a positive bearing on the growth of intra-regional trade and investment," he noted.

"We need to revitalise the South Asian Development Fund (Safta) with required resources and appropriate technological and institutional design," the King observed.

It has become imperative that Saarc countries introduce and carry out parallel processes of economic integration and infrastructure development that will obviously require huge investments, he noted.

"We visualise it [Saarc] as an embodiment of South Asian identity. In order to promote people-to-people contacts on a larger scale, we must think of visa-free regime in South Asia along with a free trade regime."

He said that the proposed South Asian Development Fund (Safta) with required resources and appropriate technological and institutional design," the King observed.

"Our offer that Nepal serves as a transit point between India and China, the two largest emerging markets in the world, has been born out of our deep conviction that, in an era characterised by heightened competition to capture world markets and capital, increased trade and economic interaction between the two up-and-coming economic zones, facilitated by transportation and communication links, would provide a level playing field for both our neighbours to reap benefits of a promising global economic order," he added.

"Many countries and peoples around the world have learnt from our

## 1st Saarc Award

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summit began at the Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre (BCFCC).

The award carries a purse of \$25,000, a gold medal and a letter of citation.

The decision to confer the award upon the late president was taken at the 25th session of the Council of Ministers held in Islamabad in July this year.

Before the opening of the 13th summit, the Saarc leaders visited the grave of the late president and offered floral tributes.

Prior to presenting the award, the Pakistani prime minister described Ziaur Rahman as a great visionary, who took initiative in bringing all the South Asian nations under one banner to fight poverty and improve the living standard of the people.

Shaukat Aziz said the late president of Bangladesh wrote letters to all Saarc leaders in the early 1980s presenting his vision about the need for regional cooperation aimed at the overall prosperity of the region.

His [Zia's] vision came to reality through the establishment of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation in December 1985, the outgoing Saarc chairman added.

Saarc Secretary General Chenkay Dorji read out the citation, which stated that the late leader set in motion the process for the creation of the Saarc.

"The seed of Saarc was sown by late President Ziaur Rahman....Saarc will remain a testimony to his vision and foresight," he said, adding that the award is a recognition of the vision and initiative of Ziaur Rahman for establishment of the seven-nation forum.

Meanwhile, Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh in his summit speech said the vision of President Ziaur Rahman helped move forward the idea of Saarc. "It is only appropriate that we honour his memory at this summit with the first Saarc Award," he added.

## Hasina

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Prime Minister Lypono Sangay Ngendup

remained at the same hotel.

The schedule of Hasina's meeting with President of the Maldives Maumoon Abdul Gayoom is yet to be confirmed, AI office sources said.

## Martyrs

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Manmohan Singh, Nepalese King Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev, the Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz and Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga to the altar of the memorial.

They placed wreaths in a ceremonial way at 9:49am. A contingent of the armed forces played the last post while the Saarc leaders stood in solemn silence for a while as a mark of respect to the martyrs.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia arrived on the premises of the National Memorial at 9:10am and received the dignitaries from 9:31am to 9:45am.

From the memorial, they left for the mazar of late President Ziaur Rahman at 9:55am.

The South Asian leaders arrived at Chandrima Udyan at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar in the capital at 10:40am and paid tributes to the dreamer of the Saarc, late president Ziaur Rahman, by placing wreaths at his grave near the Crescent Lake.

A contingent of the armed forces played the last post as the Saarc leaders stood in solemn silence for a while showing respect to the late president Zia who first mooted the idea of regional cooperation in 1980 which eventually culminated in the launching of the Saarc in 1985.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) said its knowledge of the Liao Ning case was limited to media reports and information on the health ministry's website.

"That's all the information we have right now," said Roy Wadia, a Beijing-based WHO spokesman. "We're certainly keeping an eye on it through the information provided by the Ministry of Health."

The details of the three other suspected cases -- including a 12-year-old girl who died -- were being investigated Saturday by WHO experts working with Chinese officials, he said.

It could be at least one or two weeks before the WHO will be able to say with certainty if these are human cases of bird flu in China, he said.

To work out the modalities, Saran said the Saarc has decided to convene a special session of Standing Committee early next year.

Sources said the Saarc Charter at present did not have provisions of having an observer and as such some amendments might have to be made to make the adjustments.

The Saarc Council of Ministers meeting on Friday could not reach a consensus on inclusion of China, but there was unanimity on entry of Afghanistan into the Saarc.

"This Dhaka Summit will be remembered as a landmark event for we would welcome the brotherly country of Afghanistan to the Saarc family," Pakistani Prime Minister and outgoing Saarc Chairman Shaukat Aziz said addressing the inauguration of the summit.

On China, Aziz said, "We welcome the interest of our friend and neighbour" to be associated with the organisation as an observer or dialogue partner.

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## Khaleda for actions

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