

Curtain falls on summit Roadmap for third decade Saarc drawn

53-point Dhaka Declaration adopted; Safta implementation from Jan 1; Saarc against 'double standards' in combating terrorism

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

South Asian leaders at the conclusion of the two-day summit here yesterday adopted a 53-point Dhaka Declaration, pledging to draw a roadmap for the next decade, slash trade barriers from next year to boost economic growth, and combat poverty and terrorism to reach the common regional goals.

They reached a number of new agreements on improving regional relations including expanding the group, creating a regional disaster management centre, implementing the South Asia Free Trade Area (Safta) from January 1 aiming at developing a regional trading bloc to eventually rival the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

The Dhaka Declaration promised speedy resolution of the unsettled

issues to ensure implementation of Safta from January 1, 2006, as agreed, as a first step towards evolving a regional economic union. "The launching of Safta would mark an important milestone on the road to a South Asian economic union," said the declaration.

Full text of the declaration on page 4

The Saarc leaders in the declaration committed themselves to accelerate cooperation in energy, transportation and communication links, further measures aimed at trade liberalisation, trade-facilitation measures including transit among the Saarc countries and parallel initiatives to dismantle non-tariff and para-tariff barriers.

The Saarc declaration warranted holistic unified efforts to combat

terrorism in the region. The assembled heads of state and government expressed their determination to unite in their efforts to prevent and fight every form of terrorism.

They agreed that terrorism violates the fundamental values of the Saarc Charter and the United Nations, and also constitutes one of the most critical threats to international peace and security.

The 8-page declaration says the leaders have expressed satisfaction at ratification of the Additional Protocol to the Saarc Convention on Suppression of Terrorism by all the member states. They called for putting in place effective mechanisms for its implementation.

The summit leaders recognised the years 2006 to 2015 as the Saarc "Decade for Poverty Alleviation"



PHOTO: STAR
Newly elected Saarc Chairperson Prime Minister Khaleda Zia addresses the concluding session of the 13th Saarc Summit yesterday. Indian premier Dr Manmohan Singh is also seen in the picture.

Says new chair

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

New Saarc Chairperson Khaleda Zia yesterday said the leaders at the summit have designated the coming 2006-2015 decade as the "Decade of Implementation" and proclaimed it as the "Saarc Decade for Poverty Alleviation".

The historic 13th Saarc Summit marks the beginning of a new phase, the third cycle of Saarc activities, the Bangladesh prime minister said while addressing a press conference as the new Saarc chairperson at the International Conference Centre.

"We have embarked on a great journey...it carries the hopes and aspirations of the common people of South Asia for a better life. We have agreed to draw a roadmap for the third decade of Saarc," she said.

The Dhaka Declaration adopted by

the summit contains major decisions aiming at two main objectives--to give a meaningful shape and focus to regional cooperation in South Asia and to make it a driving force for accelerated growth and progress in our countries, she said.

She said the summit has also put special focus on a set of important areas like poverty alleviation, economic cooperation, implementation of Safta, combating terrorism, disaster management and addressing social challenges.

The summit recognised poverty as the greatest challenge for the region and agreed on a comprehensive strategy, endorsing 22 Saarc Development Goals to be achieved in the next five years, Khaleda said. The summit leaders have given directives to implement the Saarc Plan of Action

for Poverty Alleviation, she added.

The PM said important decisions have been taken to enhance economic cooperation in the region and there will be special focus in key areas, namely communication, energy, environment, health and disaster management.

On the implementation of South Asia Free Trade Area (Safta), she said the leaders have decided to make all possible efforts to see the Safta agreement getting operational by January 1, 2006. Three agreements have been signed to facilitate trade among the Saarc countries and the member countries agreed to implement the agreements on Mutual Recognition of Standards soon, she said.

Decisions have also been taken to remove non-tariff and para-tariff

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Three major agreements signed

UNB, Dhaka

Saarc members yesterday signed three major agreements, all for facilitating intra-regional trade as the seven South Asian countries are going to launch a free trade area next year.

The accords are Agreement on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Customs Matters, Agreement on Establishment of Saarc Arbitration Council, and Limited Multilateral Agreement on Avoidance of Double Taxation and Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters.

Officials said the deals were struck at the state guesthouse Jamuna during the retreat of the Saarc heads of state or government.

The foreign ministers of the

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China, Japan to be Saarc observers

Leaders agree to make Afghanistan eighth member

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The leaders of Saarc have decided to welcome Afghanistan as the South Asian forum's new member and accord observer status to China and Japan.

Afghanistan will be the eighth member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc), launched in Dhaka in 1985 with founding members Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Bangladesh Prime Minister and new Saarc Chairperson Khaleda Zia yesterday formally announced the

decisions at a crowded press conference at International Conference Centre soon after the concluding session of the 13th Saarc Summit in Dhaka.

"I am happy to announce that the Saarc leaders have admitted Afghanistan as a full member of Saarc, subject to completion of formalities," she said.

"We have also decided to accord observer status to the People's Republic of China and Japan," she added.

"We are delighted to welcome Afghanistan to our group," Indian

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said at the concluding session.

"This is an appropriate recognition of the long-standing ties of culture and history that Afghanistan shares with us."

He also noted that China and Japan are to become observers of the Saarc.

The Saarc Standing Committee will prepare the modalities regarding membership of Afghanistan and observer status of China and Japan in April next year.

The Bangladesh premier said the modalities will be finalised by

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Shaukat for FTA with Bangladesh

UNB, Dhaka

Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz yesterday said his country would like to enter into a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Bangladesh.

"Pakistan is a free-trade country...we're open for trade and investment and it's where the two countries have great potential to develop," he told a select group of journalists invited for breakfast with him at Dhaka Sheraton Hotel.

Shaukat also stressed the need for making Safta functional within the scheduled timeframe but underlined that the interests and problems of the smaller countries of the region must be taken into consideration.

Asked about the question of repa-

triation of the "stranded Pakistanis" or the Biharis in Bangladesh, Shaukat said this was not discussed at his bilateral meeting with Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia.

"This is a complex issue... We see it as a humanitarian problem and agree that they are suffering," said the Pakistan PM.

Shaukat said his bilateral talks with Khaleda was very useful as they discussed measures for strengthening economic and trade relations.

SAARC HOSTAGE TO TENSION
The Pakistani prime minister said Saarc has become hostage to the tension between two giant neighbours -- one being his own country.

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Experts pin high hopes on Dhaka summit outcomes

RAFIQ HASAN

International relations experts, economists, politicians and business leaders expressed optimism about the future of Saarc as the just concluded Dhaka summit took a number of steps towards economic and social integration in the region.

They said the regional body seems to have taken a giant leap to bailing itself out of decade-long stagnation and move ahead with plans to change the fate of the 1.5 billion people living in the region.

They hoped that the deliberations made by the leaders would be

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Hasina meets Manmohan, Shaukat

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina held separate meetings with Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh and Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz at Dhaka Sheraton Hotel yesterday.

During the half an hour-long meeting with the Indian premier, Awami League (AL) chief Hasina discussed bilateral issues concerning mutual interests. They also discussed different

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PHOTO: AL
Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina meets Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, left, and Pakistan Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz at Dhaka Sheraton Hotel yesterday.

Next summit in India

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The next Saarc summit will take place in India, new Saarc Chairperson and Bangladeshi Prime Minister Khaleda Zia announced at the concluding session of the 13th summit meeting here yesterday.

She said that India has been offered to host the 14th summit and the seven-member grouping has welcomed it.

"We look forward to the next summit...we hope to meet again during our next summit to be held

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ANNOUNCEMENT

The Daily Star will publish tomorrow an exclusive interview of Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh taken jointly by The Daily Star Editor Mahfuz Anam and Prothom Alo Editor Matir Rahman in which the premier spoke elaborately on the gamut of bilateral and regional issues and ways of moving forward. This is the third in the series of exclusive interviews of Saarc leaders taken on the occasion of the 13th Saarc Summit.

