

# Unite to fight

As a stakeholder in the climate change challenges, Saarc may emerge as an effective force for negotiations in the next round of climate talks in Cancun by forming a strong climate group with those who share many of its socio-economic realities.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

THE Bhutanese capital Thimphu is all set for hosting the 16th Summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc), slated for April 28-29, aiming to set up a green South Asia. The theme of this year's summit is "Conservation of Environment and Climate," which was decided during Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to Bhutan in November. This year's summit is of special significance as the regional grouping completes 25 years of its existence.

This is for the first time that Bhutan is holding a summit. It will also include observers from China, Japan, European Union, Republic of Korea, USA, Australia, Mauritius and Iran. Bhutan had skipped the opportunity to host the Saarc summit three times because of lack of infrastructure and logistic support.

Only two deals -- the Saarc agreement on trade in service and the convention on cooperation on environment -- will be signed at the Thimphu summit. The agreement on the Saarc convention on cooperation on environment

was finalised at the experts' committee meeting in Thimphu held in March.

The agreement on Saarc natural disaster rapid response mechanism has been dropped, though it was announced earlier that it would be included in the agenda. The permanent secretariat of Saarc Development Fund, with initial fund of \$300 million, will also be inaugurated during the summit.

Saarc, a regional economic and political grouping of eight South Asian countries, was established in 1985. In terms of population Saarc is the largest of any regional groups, with around 1.5 billion people. The regional alliance pledged to alleviate the grinding poverty in the region. Since then, repeated efforts were made to materialise this main objective of the Saarc. But due to various reasons it could not make substantial progress towards poverty alleviation.

Bhutan will request other Saarc members to accept its development philosophy of "Gross National Happiness" as a possible development model for the region. The former monarch of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, announced this philosophy a few decades ago.

"Bhutan measures the well-being of its citizens with Gross National Happiness instead of Gross National Product as happiness should take precedence over economic prosperity for the genuine well-being of the people," he said.

The climate change issue will dominate talks at the 16th Saarc summit. Climate change brought about by global warming has posed a mortal threat to most of the South Asian countries because of their geographical location, low elevation from the sea, high population density, poverty and overwhelming dependence on nature.

Melting Himalayan glaciers and other devastating climate change impacts pose a direct threat to the food security of more than 1.5 billion people in South Asia. Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Afghanistan are particularly vulnerable to falling crop yields caused by glacier retreat, floods, draughts, erratic rainfall and other climate change impacts.

Himalayan glaciers, the vast stores of fresh water, are the main source of irrigation, drinking water and energy for one-third of the people of the world. The rivers discharging the waters of these glaciers may die soon, as the glaciers have been retreating at a rate of nearly 10 metres every year.

The glaciers have created about 7,500 glacial lakes in India, Nepal, Bhutan and Pakistan, and increased flood risk for downstream Bangladesh. These glacial lakes contain millions of cubic metres of water and may burst anytime, washing away crops and infrastruc-

tures. A one degree Celsius rise in temperature might cause as much as 15 percent of our land to go under water, which would trigger mass migration northwards and increase pressure on lands and resources and loss of livelihood for about 40 million people. Nepal, where livelihoods hinge on the precarious balance of nature, faces accelerated glacial melts and irregularity of monsoons. Bhutan, with its fragile ecosystem, is very vulnerable to the threats posed by climate change. Other Saarc countries are also facing the devastating impacts of climate change.

Maldives is the most vulnerable country, with the risk of being fully submerged due to rise in sea level caused by global warming. The Maldives government held an undersea cabinet meeting to highlight the grave threat they face due to global warming. The Nepal government also held a cabinet meeting in the mountains to draw world attention to the climatic catastrophe awaiting them.

Experts on climate change from the Saarc countries drafted an action plan comprising seven thematic working areas to battle the impacts of climate change. The development partners of the Saarc countries also agreed in principle to provide grants for creating a regional climate change fund.

To enhance cooperation to tackle the climate change impacts, Saarc countries decided to set up 50 weather monitoring stations in Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan to carry out a study on weather patterns in the region. But no tangible development has been achieved in the last two years.

As climate change will be at the top in the agenda in the Thimphu summit, Bangladesh should emphasise the climate refugee and water management issues in the summit. The impact of climate change is likely to be devastating on water and food security. So, the leaders of the South Asian nations should have a common position on these issues.

An agreement for regional cooperation on water and food security should be signed at the summit.

The economic future of South Asia and Saarc's ability to overcome poverty now face serious challenges because of the ever-mounting crisis of inevitable climate change. So, there is a definite need for urgent and united action to address the adversities of climate change, which threaten the very existence of a significant portion of humanity in the region.

As a stakeholder in the climate change challenges, Saarc may emerge as an effective force for negotiations in the next round of climate talks in Cancun by forming a strong climate group with those who share many of its socio-economic realities.

It is now twenty-five years since the idea of a regional forum in South Asia was conceived. There are so many people who may argue that the regional body has done practically nothing in the last twenty-five years, and cannot promise anything better in the future. Let us not be that pessimistic.

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# Comedy found in North Korea!

A regular comedy show has been discovered in North Korea. Yes, even in the least funny part of Asia, serious attempts are being made to generate laughs.

The finding is a major boost to this column's campaign to prove that the conventional wisdom that says Asians are not funny is untrue.

Ready for some big-time laughs? Here we go!

The North Korean show is called "It's So Funny," and the Reuters news agency, who discovered the existence of the show, quoted some of the dialogue.

Male soldier: "I feel better and look more handsome because I have been taking medicine made from beans. If we soldiers see beans, we become happy. Ha ha ha."

Female soldier: "If we farm in the way The General tells us, we will become happy. Ha ha ha."

Are you laughing yet?

No? Smart readers will have spotted something missing. Yes, that's right, there's no actual humour involved.

That's true. But give them time. It's not easy. They've only been working on it for a couple of decades.

Now I know what you are thinking. You may have suspicions that the curious lack of humour in this humorous dialogue reveals the true purpose of the skit: to deliver the bad news: there is nothing to eat except beans.

This may be correct. Reporters asked Kim Yong, a defector who escaped from North Korea, to make a comment about the show.

He said he heard the bean jokes before. He said: "They are still talking about beans. The country hasn't changed at all since I defected 20 years ago." (I am not making this up.)

In other words, beans have clearly dominated the menu for at least two decades.

To paraphrase Monty Python's "Spam sketch", the scene at the North Korean army canteen must be something like this.

General: "What's on the menu?"

Waitress: "You can have egg and beans; beans and egg; bacon, egg and beans; or beans, bacon, beans, egg and beans."

General: "Have you got anything without beans?"

Waitress: "Why don't you have bacon, egg and beans?"

General: "But that's got beans in it."

Waitress: "Yes, but it's got less beans than beans, bacon, beans, egg and beans."

But having said that, I can confirm that there IS genuine humour in North Korea.

It's just unintentional, that's all. For example, there used to be a magazine called North Korea Weekly, which was published once a month.

And then there are the news releases. Whenever Dear Leader Kim Jong-Il does anything in public, we're told that the forces of the universe respond. A typical line is: "A magical display of rainbows appeared spontaneously over the stage where he performed the ceremony."

What this really means is that there was a ghastly rainstorm which totally spoiled the ceremony but the guy writing it up knew that he would be executed on the spot unless he found a way to make it sound like a good thing.

But on the other hand, the North Korean comedy troupe deserves some praise. I think there should be a reward for comedians who manage to steer clear of clichés.

The "It's So Funny" team from North Korea have been joking about beans for 20 years and it's extremely likely that they haven't made a single reference to flatulence.

You must admit, that's pretty impressive.

For more high powered comedy series, visit our columnist at [www.vittachi.com](http://www.vittachi.com).



PALASH KHAN/DRINK NEWS

# Nuke the nukes!

At this critical juncture we cannot afford to have a nuclear race. Who will keep these racing nations away from their wrong paths? Obama alone cannot do so, but he has at least initiated something that his predecessors never had. He deserves global thanks.

MD. MASUM BILLAH

HAVING succeeded in bringing radical change in the age-old healthcare system at home, President Barack Obama has cast his glance at international issues. The stated reason of the 47-nation summit is to keep nuclear arms out of the hands of terrorists. But there is a second equally important reason -- to convince powerful states like China to impose a

new round of sanctions on Iran, which is believed to be working towards producing nuclear arms.

Nine countries in the world possess nuclear weapons and thirty-eight other countries store or produce enriched uranium and plutonium. It is reported that there have been 18 cases of weapons grade uranium theft since 1993. Authorities point the finger at Russia, the former Soviet republics and Pakistan. Many heads of states partici-

pated in the summit. North Korea and Iran did not because the envisaged preventive actions will be pretty much against them.

The Israel prime minister said that he would not be able to give satisfactory answers regarding the nuclear stance of his country. Peaceful world leaders want Israel to get rid of its nuclear arsenal. If it is not done, Iran also will not do so.

By signing the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty with the Russian Federation on April 8 in Prague, President Obama opened up relations with the Russian Federation, which signals a turning point in the foreign policy of the Obama administration.

By holding the summit of 47 heads of states and government, the president has made significant progress towards achieving a nuclear-free world. No president had ever held such a summit on nuclear security since talks on reduction of nuclear arms began in 1970s.

This was the biggest ever gathering of heads of states and governments convened by an American administration since the establishment of the United Nations in 1945. The summit on nuclear security was the continuation of the historic Security Council summit hosted by President Obama on September 24, 2009 in the United Nations.

Apart from the five permanent members the ten rotating non-permanent members of the council, except Gaddafi of Libya, attended the summit. It adopted Resolution 1887 unanimously, which is committed to the goal of a world without nuclear weapons and to ensure nuclear safety and security.

The nations participating in the Washington summit agreed to swap information to prevent illegal nuclear materials trafficking and supported the implementation of strong nuclear security practices.

The initiative bore some fruit. Several states have agreed to surrender their nuclear materials. For example, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich declared that his nation would get rid of its inventory of highly

enriched uranium. Obama expressed pleasure with this decision because it would greatly help international efforts to keep these materials out of the hands of terrorists.

But Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, in an interview with Russian national daily Izvestia, described the nuclear security summit as the "most unarguable. The issues that united us were so obvious -- nuclear terrorism and cooperation in countering countries that are trying to obtain technologies by illegal means."

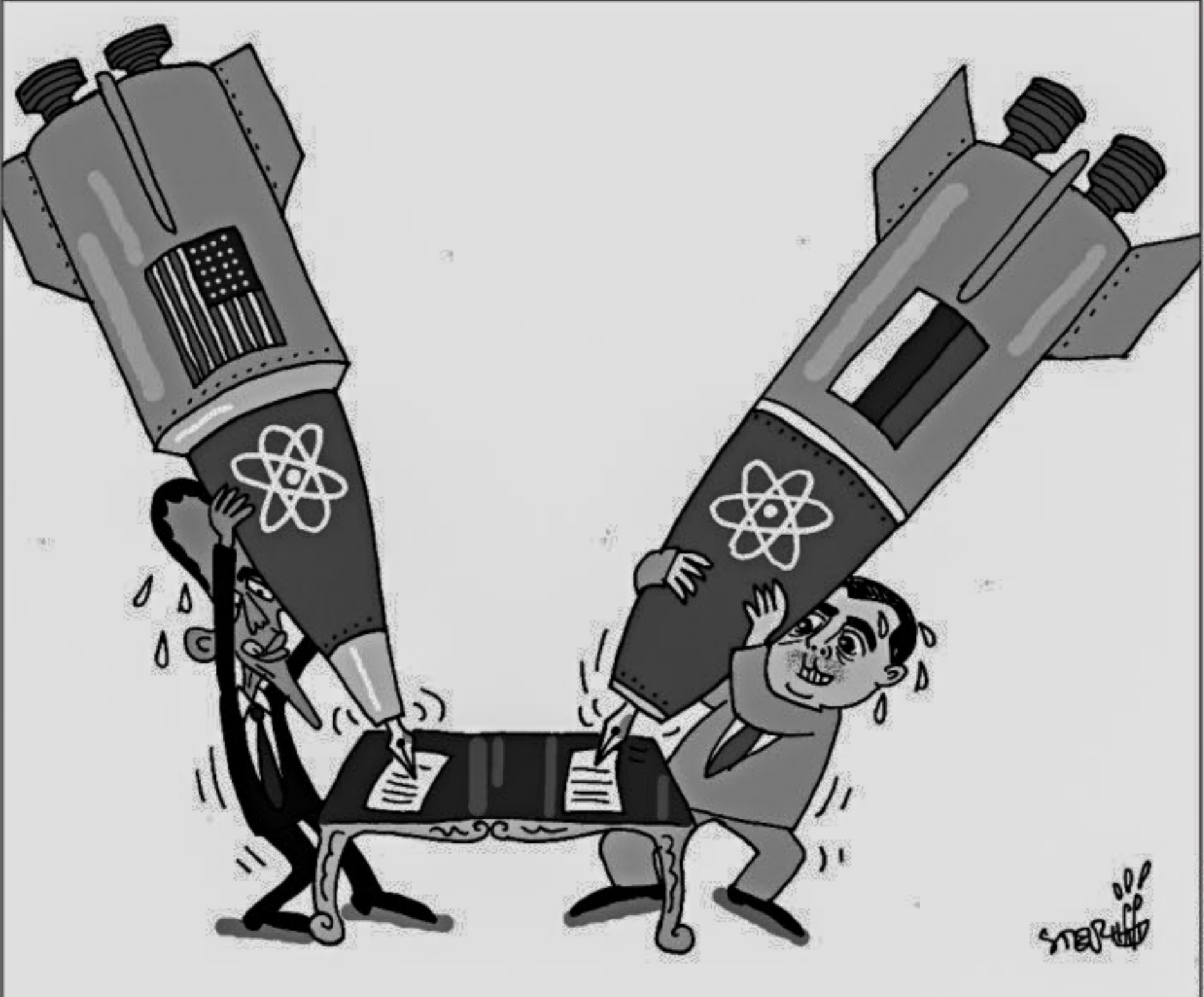
The participating nations welcomed and joined President Obama's call to secure all vulnerable nuclear material in four years as they work together to enhance nuclear security. We must take into account that the world possesses so many nuclear weapons, but still about half of the world's population goes to bed hungry. Lakhs of children die without treatment in Asian, African and Latin American countries.

Environmental hazards have engulfed the entire globe, threatening our existence on this planet. At this critical juncture we cannot afford to have a nuclear race. Who will keep these racing nations away from their wrong paths? Obama alone cannot do so, but he has at least initiated something that his predecessors never had. He deserves global thanks.

France, China, Britain, Israel, India and Pakistan are known to have nuclear weapons, while the United States and Russia hold 90 percent of the world's nuclear arsenal. Incidentally Israel, India and Pakistan have not signed the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, but they participated in the summit.

We have reason to have doubts about the security of nuclear materials. A review of the progress or failure of this summit will be undertaken in the second summit to be held in Seoul, South Korea in 2012. Let us see how successful it turns out to be.

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