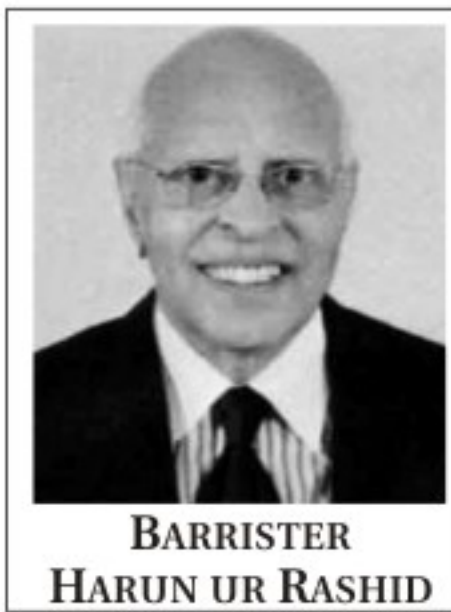


BOTTOM LINE

SAARC Summit in the Maldives: Time to re-invent the institution



FOUNDED in 1985, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) currently includes eight countries -- Afghanistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Pakistan.

The 17th Summit of Saarc will be held in Addu Atoll of the Republic of Maldives on November 10-11. The island country will be hosting the Summit for the third time, having earlier hosted the 5th and 9th meetings in 1990 and 1997 respectively.

The theme of the 17th Summit is "Building Bridges," which is appropriate both in terms of establishing physical connectivity within Saarc and holding political dialogues for building bridges for the benefit of common people.

Explaining the theme for the upcoming Summit, Maldivian President's Office representative and Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) youth arm President Shauna Aminath said: "The idea is to celebrate the differences that we have and use these to unite nations to build a better region. The Maldives is the lowest lying nation in the world, at the same time fellow Saarc member Nepal has the planet's highest points. So these are differences, but we want to use these as an opportunity to celebrate as a united force to build bridges of friendship, peace and security."

Saarc is specifically unique in that there are 100 different languages and ten major religions in the region. It accounts for 15% of the world's GDP. It covers about 4% of the surface area of the world but has one-fifth of the world's population. About 50% of the world's poor live in the Saarc region.

Although there has been rapid economic growth in the region, inequality among people has increased and spending for the social protection of the poor and marginalised people is the lowest in the world.

Saarc is asymmetrical in nature and India is dominant both geographically and in resources. It is a tension-torn region and India and Pakistan have fought three wars (1948, 1965 and 1971) with each other. The soldiers of both countries still face contested borders.

It is further complicated by the fact that India and Pakistan have different perceptions of security and as such they look to outside powers for their security. Violence by terrorists/extremists continues in almost all countries. A common policy against counter-terrorism has not been formulated. India and Pakistan have been circling each other on a number of issues-political and economic. Some say they are like un-reconciled Siamese twins.

Saarc is the least integrated region in the world with intra-regional trade at less than 5%, while it is 32% within Asean, 50% within European Union, and 68% in the US-Canada-Mexico trade bloc Nafta.

Real progress of Saarc has remained stalled due in part to hesitancy borne from historical legacies, differences and disputes.

For all these reasons, Saarc has been limping for the last 26 years. The successive summits had made several pledges which were never delivered to the people. The regional forum has been a consultative body and has not up taken any key collaborative project during these years.

At the Thimpu Summit in 2010, Bhutan's Prime Minister Jigmy Y. Thinley could not have put it more bluntly than when he told the Summit: "Some 200 meetings take place every year amongst Saarc countries but these meetings are not matched by results." How to make Saarc effective?

- Cultural diplomacy is needed to win the



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hearts and minds of the people of other countries and could be the initiator of forging unity and cohesion among Saarc nations. Bangladesh and India observed the 150th Anniversary of Tagore, and the renowned poets, musicians, philosophers and writers of the other Saarc countries could also be the focus of celebration within Saarc countries; Bilateral political and contentious issues should not cloud the collaborative issues of regional cooperation within Saarc for reduction of poverty of the people in the region; Political will and firm commitment of

- governments are vital since the absence of political will and bureaucratic complexities are the main reasons behind the lack of effective cooperation within Saarc;
- Regional connectivity through multimodal transport can boost intra-trade and investment and reduce poverty in the region. Connectivity should be seen as a service industry for the benefit of the region. India and China agreed long time ago to have physical connectivity for trade through Sikkim;
- The private sector, civil society and think-tanks across the region should be

involved in the Saarc meetings. Unless the private sector participates, the public sector alone cannot implement the promises made at summits; Energy, management of water resources, flood control, food security, effects of climate change, and tourism should be addressed through regional cooperation. Saarc has exploited only 12% of its hydroelectric potential and 88% of its potential remains unexplored (Bhutan has viable hydro-electricity of 23,000 MW and Nepal has capacity of 42,000 MW).

Some analysts say that despite territorial dispute between India and China, they boosted economic ties between themselves (bilateral trade will stand to \$60 billion per year within a few years). If they can do it, why can't India and Pakistan follow a similar path for the benefit of the people of the region?

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The founding principles of Saarc are self-help and regional solidarity. The importance of Saarc summits lies in reinforcing personal relationship among the top leaders, and such meetings create a beneficial political environment. The summits provide an exchange of shared perceptions and values, which are important factors in the growth of good neighbourly relations and success of regional cooperation.

Saarc, despite its difficulties, has come to stay, and because of its geo-strategic importance, the US, China, Iran, Japan, South Korea, Mauritius, Australia, Myanmar and the European Union have shown interest in becoming observer states.

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Role of Western media in Gaddafi's fall

RIFAT MUNIM

THE West-sponsored story about Gaddafi has sold very well. Obviously, the credit goes to the crafty storytellers, who with their relentless efforts have regaled us with the tale of yet another Arab dictator whose whims are as entertaining to readers as to the Western leaders. Although the task was a bit arduous in the beginning, things became easier for them, that is to say, for the Western media, when the Arab world got carried away by the so-called "Spring," the seemingly never-ending flow of which is yet to ebb. After that, the only thing left for them was to organise the narrative in a way so as to represent Gaddafi as a stereotyped villain who having stifled democracy for more than four decades set out on a killing spree.

Apparently, this narrative was and still is chronologically ordered, which is easy for readers to grasp; yet the lapses are too conspicuous to be overlooked. In other words, everything associated with the positive outcome of Gaddafi's rule both in regional and international contexts was selectively discarded. So the beginning where the story had originally started had to be rewritten starting from the middle or from anywhere that suited the taste of the Western readers and the interest of their leaders. As a result, much as Aesop's fable calls for a cathartic ending thereby punishing the malevolent fox, the tone of the story about Gaddafi in Western media inevitably demanded his dethronement thereby legitimising the West's uncalled-for intervention in the name of restoring freedom to the people of Libya. The rest is not silence, but a tale marked by the charade of neutrality.

This is not to say that the "Arab Spring" holds no promise in terms of political change. Nor is it to imply that Gaddafi was really a good ruler. Far from that, his outrageously eccentric feats, especially in harbouring political outlaws from the world over including those of the killers of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, are enough to make one stand against many of his weird policies. Nevertheless, this is to emphasise that the civil war that broke out in Libya was set in a completely different context where any arbitrary involvement of the West with the US at the helm and the Nato taking care of the rest has palpable political dimensions, the history of which traces back to as far as 1969. This is also to note that when such a highly politically charged story was told by the Western media, that difference in context and tenor was carefully obliterated and shown to be a natural extension of the Arab Spring where Western military intervention was necessitated

only by Gaddafi's burgeoning crimes against humanity.

Now let us take a look at some of those parts that were dropped from the story. In spite of Gaddafi's eccentricities compounded with his acts of brutality, he had done some remarkable things that ensured many of the basic rights every citizen in the world is entitled to. Consider his massive steps to nationalise all the local banks (for details, visit www.Qatarliving.com). Or for that matter, consider his contribution to give a definite shape to Opec, a major player in international oil market. Of all the heads of Opec's member states, Gaddafi was most

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dissident, causing much worry to Western leaders because they always knew if Libya refused to share its oil output with Opec, international oil price would jump several notches up the very next day. To make matters worse, no plausible pretext for military attack under the aegis of the United Nations could be found in Libya even along the furthest imaginary lines as had been found in Iraq. So the West had nothing more to do except for biding its time, waiting for its associated media wings to fabricate one more story like the non-existent weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Once such a cooked-up story was established, their unlawful military attack would find all its justification without ever revealing the ulterior motive: gaining full control over Libya's oil fields.

And the opportune moment struck as soon as people in their thousands took to the streets in Tunisia demanding democracy. All that the media needed to do then was show some real skills that they had mastered throughout the last couple of

centuries. They did show that skill by making us believe that it was for the best interest of the Libyan people that Gaddafi must be attacked and killed. Their skill has deluded us into believing that it was only Gaddafi who committed numerous crimes against humanity and not the indiscriminate air strikes of the Nato forces that killed many innocent people. Last but not least, their skill has made us oblivious of the fact that this altruism does not apply to Saudi Arabia or Bahrain even though there are more draconian laws and repressive acts to contain organised democratic movement in these countries. In fact, these countries bowed down to the US long ago, which is why democracy is not required there.

At this point, one must ask why close US ties with many despotic governments are not reported in Western media. On the other hand, see how brisk they are to warn readers of the premonition that in Tunisia the Islamist party after winning the democratically held election (which of course was their idea) may prop up Islamic fundamentalism. May be this is another splatter of altruism, which is too self-effacing to take into account their own crisis, the pitfalls of capitalism that has flooded the streets of the USA and other European countries with angry protestors.

In the final analysis, narrative of this story emerges as a pattern which is common in a whole range of West-sponsored stories. Take for example the one about Saddam Hussein, which has all the symmetries of a criminal dictator dancing defiantly on top of his oil resources. Going down the course of Western imperialism in the past two or three decades, one can fairly assume that this pattern will continue to be present in the fate of any future leader who is as defiant as Gaddafi or Saddam.

Again, this is not to say that the Libyan people do not deserve to elect their own government. But that is only for them to decide whether they will go for a spontaneously triggered mass uprising for democracy or not. In fact, it is purely a matter of political consciousness and when people naturally grow to be conscious of their democratic rights, nothing can stop a revolution. This is exactly what had happened in Bangladesh in 1990. We did restore democracy by throwing out a dictator; and we did not need anyone to make up a story or the Nato planes to come in marauding bands and kill innocent people.

Indeed, time has come for all to question the credibility of Western media.

The writer works in the Editorial Section, The Daily Star.

The amazing human hair trade



THE High Priests of Hair have defeated the secret wig cartel. Yay! The world can breathe a sigh of relief, and concentrate on fixing lesser problems, such as the global financial crisis.

If you're thinking: "What on earth is he wittering on about now?" you're in good company, as my boss and my wife use that line daily.

But the sad truth is that very few people follow the Asian human hair trade, although it's a fascinating industry, honest.

Quick introduction: Many years ago in India, someone hit one Lord Balaji on the head and left him with a bald spot. Sympathetic princess Neela Devi gave him the world's first hair transplant. It was 100 percent successful. (This was the point at which the present hair-challenged writer started following the story.)

The grateful Balaji suggested that people come to his temple, cut off all their hair and leave it on the altar for her. I imagine his market research team predicted a low take-up rate for this unattractive-sounding offer.

They couldn't have been more wrong. The researchers probably failed to add the all-important variable "human capacity for weirdness equals infinity" into their equation.

It turned out that the people of planet Earth had been waiting anxiously for someone to demand they make a pilgrimage to a temple where they hack off all their hair. The number of people arriving hairy and leaving bald grew and grew until there were long queues.

Today, the shrine in Tirumala, Andhra Pradesh, is one of the most visited places in the world (possibly even beating Charlie Sheen's bedroom). Thirty million annual visitors leave behind 300 tons of hair. (You know the problem, right, Charlie?)

Now here's where the drama comes in. Recently, a cartel of evil wigmakers made a secret deal not to bid against each other, causing human hair prices to plummet. Would the Hair Priests go broke?

No, this month, they got a computer and moved the auction to cyberspace. Auction income soared to a record \$28 million.

Anyway, let's help these guys. Can anyone think of a better marketing slogan for the Asian human hair trade?

Here are five ideas to start with: 1) The Lunatic Fringe; 2) The Best Little Hair House Not in Texas; 3) Shear Madness; 4) The Mane Men; 5) The Head-Masters.

For more, visit our columnist at <http://mrjam.typepad.com>