

A vision for South Asia and Union: Opening minds, opening borders

NURUL HUDA

JOURNALISTS representing both print and electronic media from eight member countries of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) met at South Asian Free Media Association's (SAFMA) 8th South Asian Free Media Conference on "A vision for South Asia and Union: Opening minds, opening borders," in Amritsar on January 6 and Lahore on January 8-9, underlining the historical, social and economic ties across South Asian borders.

In response to the demand of journalists at the opening ceremony in Amritsar to allow free movement of media persons within the region, Indian External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid said that his country would consider granting multiple visa to journalists from Saarc nations. His words of assurance were hailed and applauded by the media persons attending the function.

The Indian external affairs minister made it categorically clear that he would soon take up the matter to sort out multiple visa issue. He said that the new India-Pakistan visa regime, which was operationalised in December last, would also facilitate media persons to visit each other's countries. The new pact, which replaces a 38-year old visa regime signed in 1974, is related to visitor, business and pilgrim visas, and covers the facility of entering and exiting from immigration check posts and also exemption from reporting to police.

Salman Khurshid said he would love to see people taking breakfast in one country, lunch in another, and dinner in a third country of the region following simplification of visa process. This attitude of a senior Indian politician is expected to go a long way in paving the way for further simplification of visa formalities for the people of the region to travel among Saarc countries, whether for business, education, tourism or medical treatment.

Pakistan Prime Minister Raja Pervaiz Ashraf,

speaking at the SAFMA conference on January 8, emphasised the need for dismantling political barriers for economic development of the region. "When minds are open, borders don't matter much. Let there be no visa restrictions on journalist," he said at the governor's house. The political leadership of South Asia, he said, should show courage, flexibility and statesmanship, dismantle political barriers and resolve inter-state conflicts for laying the foundations of a regional economic take off. He said: "There is immense scope for collaboration in the spheres of culture, sports, tourism, education, research, human resource development, poverty alleviation and environment among the Saarc member countries. The region has peculiar challenges, which could be tackled effectively by developing home-grown solutions."

The Pakistan prime minister said that it was in this context that diversity among the member countries needs to be employed to accelerate the process of development through greater connectivity. Calling for collective efforts to tackle the challenges faced by the region, he said conflict over disputes must give way to reconciliation, connectivity, openness and regional cooperation. The collective well



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to people contacts, including businessmen and media persons, he said.

The function was attended by senior journalists of Saarc countries and office bearers of SAFMA, including Secretary General of the organisation Imtiaz Alam and Punjab Governor Makhdoom Ahmad Mahmood.

Earlier, addressing the conference at Pearl Continental Hotel, Lahore, Pakistan Muslim League President Nawaz Sharif urged the West to be more supportive to the development of South Asia, not through aid but through fairer rules of trade and engagement.

Lauding the role of media he said that it has

being of the peoples of South Asia, he said, could not be left at the mercy of one country.

He said: "We need to resolve all political and economic issues with an open mind and sincerity of purpose." He also stressed the need for Saarc to develop a comprehensive and holistic regional strategy to counter poverty and other challenges. He said: "History would not forgive us if we continued to be bogged down with narrow consideration." The Saarc visa exemption scheme has been instrumental in promoting people

changed dogmatic views and led to providing an enabling environment for peace to take its course. Emphasising the need for fairer global trade regulations for South Asia, he said the past decade was a decade of disappointments as far as strengthening global peace was concerned. He said: "In the past 10 years, the United Nations has been avoided, bypassed or pushed to adopt a narrow ill-defined agenda."

About the massive potential of resources, both human and natural, in South Asia region that have not been utilised, he said: "The inability of India and Pakistan to resolve their issues has not allowed Saarc to live up to expectations." Due to the same reason, South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) has fallen short of its goals, he said, adding that this region consisted of 23% of the world's population, yet accounted for only 2% of trade. He said he strongly believed in establishing better ties with India, according to a report published on January 9 in *The News*.

Referring to climate change, he said the manner through which climate change has transformed environment and impacted on glaciers in the Himalayas, Karakoram and Hindukush mountains, which feed the mighty rivers, has highlighted the urgency for cooperation in the region to monitor glaciers and scientifically study the monsoon patterns. The challenge emanating from this development, he said, strengthens the urgency for initiating meaningful cooperation amongst the countries of the region, *The News* said in its report.

The delegates of SAFMA, in a resolution adopted at the end of the conference, urged the governments of Saarc countries to grant journalists, writers, artistes and academics two-year multiple entry visa while extending the scope of Saarc visa sticker. The demand for raising voice against killings of journalists, social activists and rights campaigners was another important point of the resolution.

The writer is a senior journalist who attended the SAFMA Conference in Amritsar and also in Lahore.

Is China enough?

JOSE L. MACHINEA

FOR many countries in Latin America, demand from China has been essential to maintaining high GDP growth rates over the last decade. But will Chinese demand for commodities be enough to sustain high prices for the region's exports in the coming years?

During the last two decades, four factors combined to generate a sharp increase in world demand for commodities: rapid growth in global GDP, increasing urbanisation in developing countries, a rise in population at

variables must be taken into account: demand growth, technological change, investment, and the commitment to confront global warming, among others. Bearing in mind such complexity, let's consider only some determinants of demand that are linked to increased income.

Two factors appear to be the most important: China's growth rate in the coming years, and whether its growth will be sufficient to maintain high levels of global demand for commodities. Even if it is, the impact is likely to be different for agricultural exporters (the

In the medium and longer term, the expected and hoped-for increase in China's domestic consumption should be the most dynamic element of demand, with export growth continuing to slacken and investment remaining except for brief periods below 50% of GDP. This is not guaranteed, however, as progress in establishing social insurance crucial to increasing consumption has been relatively slow, while monetary transfers to families (such as those that have been implemented in Brazil, Mexico, and elsewhere in Latin America) might not be feasible, given the logic of China's political system.

Even if China sustains rapid growth, it is unlikely to repeat in the next 20 years the extraordinary decrease in poverty witnessed in recent decades. The reason is simple: of the 400 million people living on two dollars a day in 2008, it is possible that "only" 300 million remain. Moreover, the rate of China's population growth is close to zero, and will turn negative before 2025. As a result, fewer people will cross the poverty line, although more will see their daily earnings grow from two dollars to five, and from five dollars to ten.

That trend will have a differentiated effect on demand for cereals and soy relative to other products that are more closely linked to higher incomes, such as foods containing higher-quality protein, metals, and oil. In terms of the latter products, China might continue to be decisive for global demand growth.

This is why, in order to maintain food prices in the medium term, other countries or regions will need to start reducing poverty at rates similar to that of China in the recent past. Bearing in mind the differences in their productive structures, sub-Saharan Africa and India appear to be the best candidates, given that they accounted for 1.4 billion of the world's poor in 2008 and 60% of global population growth.

Will India and sub-Saharan Africa which grew at annual rates of 7.3% and 5%, respectively, during the last decade assume the role that China has played in recent years? It seems unlikely, but without them it is difficult to foresee high prices for commodities and food, in particular over the next two decades. In that case, there will be less time left for the countries that have not taken advantage of the current bonanza to lay the foundations of sustainable growth.

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Weep Bangladesh weep

NAWSHABA KHATOON

WEEP for those precious hands which the flames turned to ashes, weep for the frantic bodies that leaped to the ground for a maimed disfigured life, weep for the shivering kid who will never find its mother's warm bosom, weep for the cruel command of conscienceless authority, who preferred the safety of matter to man. Weep for my dear university colleagues whose unquestioned patriotism led them blindfolded to the Mirpur wilderness and who could not see their freed country. Weep for the two women, one elderly and another young, clinging to each other as the bright hot flames approach them stealthily, until they became discernable, half burnt corpses. Weep with Biswajeet's people. In this land of half truths we may never know what really happened, but weep because his parents will never see, hear or touch him again.

Weep in joy for the boy who reached his parents in one piece for life is priceless. Hype about ransom does not matter. Weep for Sagar and Runi who at death's door helplessly saw little Megh watch the gruesome scene from such close quarters. Weep for Ahsanullah, the teacher who had killers and ruffians as his students. Weep for ailing Bangladesh because doctors like Yunus and Kamal Husain were not summoned. The maladies ate up its core but the interpreters were made to sit idle for undefined reasons. Demos groaned but the chosen made merry.

Weep for our politicians who have forgotten the basic lessons in grammar, the necessity of using the second or the third person, singular or plural is now not in their repertoire. They live in a child's world of "I." Living in a country of injustice, corruption, lies and half truths my natural tears have dried up. I weep for my Bangabandhu, the dreamer, the visionary, the patriot whose fresh gushing blood could not wash the sins of the nation. Weep for me, an old disillusioned woman to whom sublime words like "accountability" and "transparency" have become ridiculous.

Coming to simple arithmetic, a bull and a bull make two bulls. With the omission of a few alphabets it makes "Bulbul" the skylark, the singing bird that poet's have and still are raving about. It also reminds me of the deadly Spanish bull fights, but the difference is that both the ostensibly honest bulls are on the same side.

Weep for the Padma bridge which may remain a historic dream. I weep from my heart, but the younger generation, weep till your tears of sorrow turn into those of joy, till no unprotected, insurance-less labourer dies because of the avarice of his employer and the tacit indifference of his government. Till no household help succumbs to torture and fake accidents, till no old beggar with gnarled hands or the beggar girl with lymphoma or leprosy taps your car window for a paltry sum of two, ten, or twenty taka and spoils your air-conditioned drive to a party.

The writer is a retired Professor, Dhaka University.



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rate of 800 million people per decade, and a significant decrease in poverty. With the exception of global population growth, China has been the most dynamic country in all of these respects.

For example, the number of Chinese living in poverty fell by 650 million over the last two decades. Moreover, China accounts for half of the global increase of 1.5 billion people earning between \$2-13 a day in the past 20 years.

But should we expect what happened from 1990 to 2010 to continue in the coming decades? To answer that question, several

members of Mercosur and some Central American countries) than for exporters of minerals and oil (Mexico and other South American countries).

Moreover, although fiscal and monetary stimulus in China can compensate in the short term for weaker export demand, this will not be enough to sustain demand growth without economic "normalisation: in the developed countries. As we know, this is far from assured in Europe; nor is it evident in the United States and Japan that is, countries that account for roughly 45% of Chinese exports.

