

“LET US MAKE SOUTH ASIA THE GRANARY OF THE WORLD”: PM

Address of the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani,
at the Inaugural Session of the 15th SAARC Summit,
Colombo, 2 August, 2008

Your Excellency President Mahinda Rajapaksa,
Your Excellencies the Heads of State and Governments of SAARC Member States,
Distinguished Representatives of Observers,
Mr. Secretary General,
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great honour for me to represent the Islamic Republic of Pakistan at the fifteenth SAARC Summit. I wish to congratulate you, Mr. President, on your assumption of the office of the Chairperson of SAARC. We are confident that under your dynamic leadership, SAARC will move rapidly towards realization of its cherished goals. I assure you of Pakistan's full support to your endeavours in this direction.

We are thankful to the people and the Government of Sri Lanka for the warm welcome and the gracious hospitality extended to us since our arrival in this beautiful city.

I avail myself of this opportunity to express our deep gratitude to His Excellency Dr. Manmohan Singh, the Prime Minister of India, for providing excellent leadership to SAARC during the last one year.

I would also like to thank the Secretary General, His Excellency Dr. Sheel Kant Sharma, and his dedicated team, for their important contribution to the preparatory work of the Summit.

Excellencies, Ladies & Gentlemen

SAARC Charter bestows upon us the onerous responsibility to promote the welfare of the people of South Asia. The theme of the Summit, "Partnership for growth for our people" is a welcome reminder of our joint responsibility to place people at the center of the SAARC process. No society can realize its full potential without improving the socio-economic conditions of its people.

We must follow a comprehensive approach, paying urgent attention to poverty alleviation. We must also take steps to ensure full implementation of the SAARC Social Charter and the SAARC Conventions on Women and Children.

Excellencies, Ladies & Gentlemen

Economic development of South Asia is contingent upon assured and inexpensive availability of energy. The contemporary global fossil fuel crisis has exacerbated the need for the South Asia region to look for alternate energy sources. We must harness region's indigenous energy potential, particularly solar, wind, biomass and hydro energy. We should also envisage a net-work of intra-regional and trans-regional oil and gas pipelines. Within SAARC, an enabling environment for regional energy cooperation can be facilitated by concluding a regional framework agreement on energy cooperation.



The SAARC region is blessed with rich natural resources. A fifth of humankind lives here. We have a vast pool of talent. We have fertile lands and developed irrigation systems. Our societies are agrarian. We export agro based products to the world. Yet, the region faces food shortages from time to time. Sadly, the region has to look to the outside world for its food security. We must address this issue on priority. We should share and learn from best practices in the region and beyond, modernize our irrigation systems, use appropriate technology, and expand our agricultural research and resource base.

Let us make South Asia the granary of the world.

The contemporary global food crisis has underscored the need for SAARC countries to develop a comprehensive regional strategy to ensure food security. This is our common responsibility to the people of South Asia. Together with other Asian countries, we should consider launching a Greater Asia Food Security Programme.

Excellencies, Ladies & Gentlemen

Pakistan supports greater regional economic cooperation. In the last two decades, SAARC has made considerable progress in this area, including SAFTA. We must enable these arrangements to deliver real dividends and create a win-win situation for all. Towards this end, a number of steps can be taken including trade facilitation measures, elimination of non-tariff barriers, reduction of sensitive lists of member states, and strengthening of the existing transportation and communication links across the region.

Closer cooperation in the area of finance and banking is essential to promote economic and commercial cooperation in the region. Under the mechanism of SAARCFINANCE , the Governors of the Central Banks of the Member States can make solid contribution to improve macro-economic policy coordination. The SAARC Development Fund (SDF) could underwrite financial support for important development projects of mutual benefit to SAARC members.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Historically, the arteries of transport and communications have enriched this region. As we attempt to connect our region anew, a people-centered approach can ensure the success of our endeavours.

The rich civilizational and cultural heritage of the people of South Asia is our shared pride. Our arts and craft, cultural traditions, diverse landscape, and magnificent historical monuments are our invaluable assets. We must give priority to promoting tourism, including religious and third country tourism, in our region.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

Another pressing issue for SAARC is to enhance cooperation in the field of environment. In this regard, the Dhaka Declaration of the SAARC Environment Ministers is a welcome step. We must take appropriate measures to preserve our environment, including the glaciers of Himalayas and Karakorum, which are the largest source of fresh water in the region.

We must also encourage a move towards project-based cooperation under SAARC. The focus should be on implementing regional and sub-regional projects in the agreed priority areas. Each Member State could take one or two projects as "lead country". We may also involve SAARC Observers and other international development institutions in these efforts. Public-private sector collaboration should also be another venue to achieve our development objectives.

The world is facing today the menace of extremism and terrorism, which has challenged our entire value system and impacted our socio-economic development. Though Pakistan has suffered the most, terrorism afflicts all countries of our region. It is our joint responsibility to rid our region of this scourge. We need to fight terrorism individually as well as collectively. The

forthcoming meetings of the SAARC Police Chiefs and Home/Interior Ministers in Islamabad later this year should focus on strengthening regional cooperation against terrorism. We welcome the finalization of the text of the SAARC Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters.

In an interdependent, fast globalizing world, no regional grouping can hope to function in isolation. SAARC should develop positive links with the adjoining regions and beyond. We must adopt an inclusive approach. We should be open to mutually beneficial interactions, especially with our larger Asian neighbourhood. Such linkages and interdependencies would create a win-win support system.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

I take this opportunity to extend a very warm welcome to the representatives of the SAARC Observers present here in this meeting. We look forward to their valued contribution towards SAARC programmes, activities and projects. We also welcome the interest expressed by Australia and Myanmar to be associated with our organization as Observers.

As we seek to evolve modalities to associate observers with the work of the Organization, we should consider the option of granting "dialogue partnership" status to those Observer states which wish to deepen their relationship with SAARC for mutual benefits.

Excellences, Ladies & Gentlemen

SAARC has to its credit some notable achievements. We can justifiably take pride in the progress we have made thus far. However, we cannot be complacent. We must recognize in all candidness that the gap between the promise of SAARC and the reality of its accomplishment remains wide. We need concerted efforts to build on areas of convergence. Let's minimize divergences and augment complementarities for the greater good of the people of this region. Pakistan for its part will spare no effort to translate the vision of the SAARC Charter into a reality.

Greater economic integration is inextricably linked to the creation of requisite political climate of peace and stability. SAARC meetings provide a good opportunity not only to deepen trust and understanding but also create the enabling environment for resolution of political disputes and outstanding issues. We believe that the imperatives of South Asia's socio-economic development demand greater political commitment to build on convergences and resolve our differences.

Pakistan and India are engaged in a peace process. Since the induction of elected government in Pakistan, the peace process has registered noteworthy progress. Success of the process will augur well for the region and SAARC.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is time to place people at the center of the SAARC processes. Our people are our greatest strength. If SAARC becomes relevant to the lives of our people, we could be assured of our success.

As we look ahead, let the Colombo Summit be remembered as the turning point in SAARC's history. Let this Summit infuse new dynamism in SAARC. Let us pledge to lay a solid foundation of mutual cooperation and trust.

I am confident that the Colombo Summit would provide a fresh impetus to reinvigorating regional cooperation in South Asia.

I thank you.
