

Opening remarks by EAM at the 33rd Session of the SAARC Council of Ministers

February 08, 2011



Your Excellency, Chairperson of the Council of Ministers

Your Excellencies, Ministers of Foreign Affairs of SAARC Member States,

**Your Excellency the Secretary General,
Distinguished delegates,**

It gives me great pleasure to be here in Thimphu for the 33rd Session of the Council of Ministers as part of the Inter-Summit Session. My delegation and I are deeply touched by the warm hospitality accorded to us by the Royal Government of Bhutan and greatly appreciate the excellent arrangements made for this Meeting. I am very pleased to be back in Thimphu and recall with appreciation the successful hosting of the 16th SAARC Summit here last April.

I wish to take this opportunity to also thank the Secretary General of SAARC, Dr. Sheel Kant Sharma, and his very able team of officers and staff for the excellent preparatory work done for this Inter-Summit Session and its preceding meetings.

As SAARC completes 25 years of its existence, the need of the hour is to identify ways and means for the Association to become a more dynamic component of the larger Asian resurgence, characterized by increasing inter-linkages and growing inter-dependence. We are, of course, fully committed to the SAARC processes. There has been progress in various fields in SAARC but I am sure my colleagues will agree that we face a continuing challenge to implement our agreed decisions. We need to move faster in executing the plans of action.

Terrorism is a very serious challenge facing the entire South Asian region. In this regard, I am very glad to note that the Third SAARC Home Ministers Meeting took place in Islamabad in June 2010. During the course of that meeting, important decisions were taken including the adoption of the Ministerial Statement on Cooperation against Terrorism. Other significant decisions, on the guidelines for the SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme and Standard Operating Procedures to prevent trafficking in women and children, were also taken. We fully support the decisions taken by our fellow Home/Interior Ministers in these areas.

I am glad to note that the Third SAARC Transport Ministers Meeting took place in New Delhi in November 2010 and discussed matters relating to the SAARC Regional Multimodal Transport Study as well as progress in the implementation of pilot, sub-regional and regional projects. I was also pleased to learn that a demonstration container train run is being planned, initially from Bangladesh to Nepal via India. This would hopefully show the potential for reducing freight costs in the region and give an impetus to trade. However, some forward movement is still required with respect to the two draft Agreements on Motor Vehicles and Railways for the enhancement of intra-regional connectivity in South Asia. I hope progress can be made with regard to these two Agreements.

I am pleased to note that our fellow Finance Ministers had their fourth meeting in Thimphu in August last year, where they considered matters of financial sector cooperation among our countries. I note, in particular, the

progress made on a draft Agreement on Promotion and Protection of Investments. This would be an extremely useful agreement to give a fillip to trade in the region and we look forward to its early finalisation so that it can be signed at the next SAARC Summit in the Maldives later this year. We also welcome the work being done by SAARCFINANCE to promote greater cooperation among the Central Banks of our countries, especially with regard to monetary coordination and harmonization of banking rules.

I am glad that SAARC Tourism Ministers met recently in Kathmandu and noted that Member States are taking necessary steps for tapping the vast potential in the tourism sector with due regard to its impact on society, culture and environment. Promoting intra-regional tourism through collective efforts will also contribute towards our shared vision of building a common South Asian identity.

I am particularly pleased with the progress achieved to establish the South Asian University in New Delhi. It is heartening to note that the University has started functioning from August 2010 and 50 students from all over the region are already studying at the University. I am also glad that in September 2010 the Steering Committee of the SAU finalized all the modalities of the University and plans are now in place to convene the first meeting of the Governing Board of the University. We look forward to greater participation of students and faculty from all across the region as we work together to make this University a world class institution that can contribute in a significant manner to the larger objectives of our association.

I am glad that the new CEO of the SAARC Development Fund (SDF) is taking a keen interest in the follow up to ongoing projects under the social window of the Fund. We look forward to more projects being developed by different Member States for the benefit of people at the grassroots level in our region. India will provide all necessary help to the SDF in furthering this institution for regional development.

I am pleased that trade under SAFTA is growing and has crossed \$ 1.2 billion. This is, however, still well below its potential. India is taking steps to reduce its sensitive lists, especially for LDCs and I hope this will encourage others to respond too. The signing of the SAARC Agreement on Trade in Services (SATIS) in Thimphu last year was a big step forward in broadening the scope of trade in SAARC from goods to also include services. I am glad to note that four SAARC Member States have already ratified SATIS and would urge Member States that have not yet done so to take steps to do so soon.

Mr Chairman, India remains fully committed to enhancing the prosperity of South Asia through implementation of social development projects. In this regard, I am pleased that projects funded by the Government of India in Tele-medicine, Tele-education, Rain Water Harvesting, Seed Testing Laboratories and Solar Rural Electrification are being implemented in some SAARC Member States. I must express my gratitude to my colleagues around the table for fully supporting these projects. In due course, we look forward to implementing these projects in all Member States who would like us to do so. I recall the ambitious Statement on Climate Change adopted by our leaders at the Sixteenth SAARC Summit at this very venue. I hope that all Member States will take urgent steps to ensure that the objectives of that Statement are implemented in full.

Mr. Chairman, it was particularly heartening to see that Bhutan presented a common position for SAARC at the COP16 in Cancun. Congratulations are also due to your leadership as SAARC was accorded Observer status to the UNFCCC Secretariat during COP16. This should spur us to work more closely to identify ways and means to tackle the challenges facing the region in the areas of climate change and global warming.

SAARC belongs to all the people of South Asia and we have to ensure that its processes are so focused. Demonstrating our commitment to make SAARC a people-driven process, India organized a series of cultural events since we last met here in Thimphu. I am pleased to say that the participation of people from all over the region in these programmes of folklore, heritage and music made them a great success. Indian delegations also participated actively in cultural events organized by other Member States during this period.

I am also glad that our proposal to create a South Asia Forum for the exchange of ideas on the future development of South Asia has been endorsed by all members. We now look forward to the early nomination of members to the Steering Committee of the Forum and to hosting the first meeting of the Forum in India before the 17th SAARC Summit in the Maldives.

Mr. Chairman, I wish to place on record our appreciation for the special efforts made by the outgoing Secretary General, Dr. Sheel Kant Sharma, to further regional cooperation during his very productive tenure. His deep personal commitment and belief in the potential of SAARC to contribute to the welfare of South Asians is an abiding legacy of his three years as Secretary General. I wish him the very best for his future endeavours.

Finally, I take this opportunity to felicitate Ms. Fathimath Dhiyana Saeed who has been nominated by the Government of Maldives as the next Secretary General of SAARC. We strongly support Ms. Saeed's candidature and welcome her warmly to the SAARC family. We look forward to working with her closely and are convinced that the Association will rise to even greater heights under her stewardship.

With these words I once again thank the Royal Government of Bhutan for the excellent arrangements made for this meeting and assure them of India's enduring support during their Chairmanship of SAARC.

Thank You.

Thimphu
February 8, 2011