

STATEMENT BY HIS EXCELLENCY DR. SHEEL KANT SHARMA, SECRETARY GENERAL OF SAARC.

**INAUGURAL SESSION
FIFTEENTH SAARC SUMMIT
COLOMBO, 3 AUGUST 2008.**

**Hon. Chairman;
Hon. Heads of State or Government;
Distinguished Representatives from Observer States and Organization;
Excellencies;
Ladies and Gentlemen;**

1. It is, indeed, a great privilege and honour for me to address the Inaugural Session of the Fifteenth SAARC Summit in this beautiful city of Colombo. I would like to begin with profound thanks to the Government of Sri Lanka for the warm reception and gracious hospitality extended to us and for the excellent arrangements made for the Summit. Our hearty greetings go to the Government and people of Sri Lanka on the Sixtieth Anniversary of Independence.

2. I warmly felicitate His Excellency President Mahinda Rajapaksa on his election as Chairperson. I am confident that his vast knowledge and rich experience would be invaluable in directing the work of SAARC. We are confident that under His Excellency's Chairmanship, the achievements of previous Summits would be greatly expanded.

3. Grateful tributes are due to the outgoing Chairperson His Excellency Prime Minister Manmohan Singh for steering the Association since April last year with keen personal interest and unwavering support. During his leadership, SAARC has made significant headways in diverse areas of its work to move from declaratory to implementational phase.

4. I would also like to extend a warm welcome to Hon'ble Ministers and the high representatives of Observers at the Summit.

Excellencies;

5. The Fifteenth Summit is taking place at a time when our region copes with a fast evolving global context. Internationally, increase in food, fuel, fertilizer and commodity prices is constraining the growth rate of SAARC economies. The exorbitant rise in price of oil may also impact on globalizing trends in general eroding the benefits derived by South Asia. The countries of South Asia are also vulnerable to climate change issues. We are confident that the Fifteenth Summit would provide direction on the nature of our response to the existing and emerging challenges facing the Region.

Excellencies

6. I am happy to Report that since the Fourteenth Summit, SAARC has made remarkable progress in a number of important areas. I would briefly present them for Summit's consideration.

7. In regard to SAARC role in addressing the overarching goal of Poverty Alleviation, the SAARC Ministers of Poverty Alleviation agreed to provide specific leads during the Malé Meeting in May this year. These included speedier national implementation of SAARC Development Goals; their mainstreaming into national policy approaches; strengthened regional policy responses on poverty alleviation efforts; increased ODA assistance; better access to the markets and debt relief.

8. In line with the directive of the Fourteenth Summit to expedite project based cooperation, SAARC mechanisms are focusing on identifying regional and sub-regional projects. The SAARC Development Fund (SDF), as a key instrument in this regard, has now finalized its Charter and bye-laws. I am happy to announce that the meeting of the SDF Board last month already approved one project on women's empowerment, a project which aims at covering 7 SAARC States. There are a couple of other projects too pertaining to women and child health and education being pursued by SDF interim cell at the SAARC Secretariat.

9. Transport Ministers of SAARC Member States had identified several sub-regional, regional and pilot projects for improving intra-regional connectivity. The Inter-governmental Group on Transport has been mandated to develop transport and transit agreements. SAARC Regional Multimodal Transport Study (SRMTS) now includes Afghanistan also. The agenda of next Transport Ministers' Meeting may address implementing regional/sub-regional connectivity projects at an early date and early conclusion of transport and transit Agreements.

10. SAARC has continued to work on policy goals to promote and strengthen regional trade and economic cooperation. Trade under SAFTA has already commenced. The relevant mechanisms are focusing on reducing the size of Sensitive Lists and strengthening trade facilitation measures. Important steps for Harmonizing of Standards are also taken including by the agreement on SARSO. An Expert Group is expected to commence the negotiations on Draft Framework Agreement on Trade in Services in the next couple of months. The Inter-governmental Group on Financial Issues is also contemplating discussions on identifying specific steps by the Member States towards deeper economic integration.

11. The vision of His Excellency Dr. Manmohan Singh to establish the South Asian University, the Agreement on which was signed during the Fourteenth Summit, has rapidly moved towards implementation. Specific steps, including appointment of the Interim CEO of the project, identification of land for the University in Delhi etc. have been taken. This would give concrete shape to a regional educational institution to impart quality education to students from the SAARC Member States beginning in 2010. Along with good progress in the implementation of SAARC Tele-medicine Project and Model Villages project, this would contribute to some of the key objectives of the SAARC Social Charter.

Excellencies

12. On Climate Change, the SAARC Environment Ministers at their meeting last month in Dhaka adopted the Dhaka Declaration and a comprehensive SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change (2009-2011) with prioritized list of measures.

13. In the field of energy, the Regional Study on Energy Trade is due for completion in December 2008. The Expert Group on Energy Efficiency has finalized a road map, which,

inter alia, includes reviews of the national policies and legislation relating to energy efficiency and conservation; and developing and harmonizing standards, testing procedures and appliances. The SAARC Regional Centre on Energy is also keeping up good work on promoting studies and exploring and devising steps for regional cooperation.

14. The SAARC Interior Ministers at their Second Meeting in August 2007 took a number of important decisions to address the menace posed by terrorism, drugs and human trafficking. They underlined proactive steps and operational cooperation amongst Member States. The signing of the instrument on mutual legal assistance at this Summit would also reinforce SAARC legal corpus for combating terrorism.

15. SAARC approach to the issue of Food Security is a comprehensive one aiming to develop a mix of short term and long term responses and regional/sub-regional projects. As we operationalize the SAARC Food Bank to provide immediate relief in food crises, the Colombo Declaration on Food Security emphasizes urgency of action on multiple fronts.

16. Pursuant to the directives of the Twelfth Summit, a SAARC Regional Strategy on HIV and AIDS has been developed. In this context, two eminent personalities from the region, Ms. Shabani Azmi from India and Mr. Sanath Teran Jayasuriya of Sri Lanka, have agreed to be SAARC Goodwill Ambassadors.

Excellencies;

17. The Association should, now more than ever, focus on pursuing tangible project-based cooperation in economic, social and infrastructure areas. The SAARC Development Fund has enormous potential in this regard as it offers divers avenues which need to be harnessed with care and speed and constant focus on peoples of South Asia. The measures taken and the steps announced at this Summit can demonstrate SAARC's ability to muster its own regional self-help to deal with the challenges. This would be a compelling factor for raising SAARC's profile internationally and adding value to SAARC's outreach.

18. This is my first SAARC Summit and I am grateful for the trust reposed and the kindness shown to me personally. It would be my endeavour to maintain and upgrade the current momentum in SAARC activities and their orientation towards action on the ground and to ensure that the Secretariat implements directives of the Summit and other SAARC bodies.

Thank you.

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