



Speech of:

H.E. Sheikh Hasina

Honorable Prime Minister of the People's Republic of Bangladesh
at the Inaugural Session of
THE SIXTEENTH SAARC SUMMIT

Thimphu, Bhutan
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**Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim,
Mr. Chairperson, Your Excellency
Prime Minister Jigmi Y. Thinley,
Honorable Presidents and
Prime Ministers of SAARC Member States,
Distinguished Delegates and Observers,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Good Morning and Tashi Delek,

It was in November last year, when I was here in the serene, picturesque Kingdom of Bhutan, on a bilateral visit. The magnificent hospitality and the complete sense of peace that I experienced at that time left me with a lingering desire to return. To my delight, I am here now again, having a similar sensation, and relishing the rare and unique experiences, once more.

Today morning, I have immense pleasure in warmly congratulating the Kingdom of Bhutan for the immaculate arrangements on its first ever SAARC Summit, and also Prime Minister Jigmi Y. Thinley on his assumption of its Chairmanship. I firmly believe that under his wise and able leadership of the Summit proceedings, in the peaceful ambience of the Thimphu valley, the outcome would be many, and fruitful.

I also express my deep gratitude to Sri Lanka, and President Mahinda Rajapaksa, for their invaluable contribution towards revitalization of the SAARC, during their stewardship. I also cordially welcome the distinguished SAARC Observers present here, and thank them for their productive engagement with funds and technology in implementing a number of vital projects in the region.

Mr. Chairperson,

The South Asian economies have shown remarkable resilience in the face of recent global meltdown. Still, they have suffered from economic slowdown, soaring oil and food prices, and climate change. Global warming and climate change have already impacted our nations with melting of the Himalayan glaciers, rising sea level, erratic precipitation, land degradation, desertification and salinity.

These adverse geophysical changes, with

increasing frequency of cyclones and floods, have been retarding our economic growth, poverty alleviation efforts, and millennium development goals. To face these challenges, I believe, a holistic approach is imperative at regional and global levels.

At global level, COP -15 at Copenhagen last November has given hope of a comprehensive, long term program. There is now need to lock in the key global players in COP-16 at Mexico City later this year for concrete commitments covering greenhouse gas emissions cuts, and guaranteeing fund and technology. At the regional level, a unified approach is of essence, and calls for the SAARC to establish a Himalayan Council in the model of the Arctic Council, for assisting affected countries in the region.

An International Adaptation and Research Center for recommending adaptive measures also needs to be established, perhaps in Bangladesh because of its years of experience in adaptation. The Center could facilitate exchange of scientific data, eco-friendly technologies, experience in renewable energy and assist the relevant SAARC Regional Centers to realize their mandates. It could also help implement the SAARC Convention on Cooperation on Environment.

To meet the challenges of climate change, Bangladesh has adopted 134 action plans under the National Adaptation Program of Action, and the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan. Authorities have been designated for Clean Development Mechanism. A plan in progress is dredging of rivers to hold more water, restrict flooding and reclaim inundated land. River banks are being raised with excavated silt to contain rising water, create green belts, and provide homesteads for the displaced. Moreover, 14,000 cyclone shelters have been constructed with more on the way.

To reduce greenhouse gas, a low carbon path to development is being followed. Our plans also include creation of a large carbon sink through social forestry and green belts, use of clean coal technology, nuclear power and renewable energy. To meet the costs, we have set up a Climate Change Fund with our own resources. Climate change is also responsible for declining agriculture land, thereby threatening food security. An answer

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here is high yielding seeds, resistant to pest attacks and climate variations for enhancing productivity. Therefore, the need is for a SAARC Seed Bank with necessary legal framework for quality seed production, harmonized seed testing, certification, seed trade and exchange of germ-plasm and plant genetic resources.

Tariff liberalization under SAFTA, operation of SAARC Development Fund (SDF), and now SAARC Agreement on Trade in Service (SATIS), and other trade facilitation measures over the last twenty-five years have enabled the SAARC to cross significant milestones. Yet intra-regional trade among our countries measures up to a low single digit percentage of global trade of the region. Though sensitive lists of trade items are being reduced, greater efforts are needed to make SAFTA and SATIS meaningful. Hopefully, once the South Asian Regional Standards Organization (SARSO) is established, it would efficiently work in harmonizing our standards to facilitate trade.

In recent years, our South Asian countries have displayed increasing focus in regional connectivity, and on a greater sense of regional identity. Success here is possible through enhanced people to people contact by means of easy communication, and education services. It is, indeed, high time to agree on equivalence of education standards and mutual recognition of degrees. A productive start could be prioritizing disciplines that may initially include science and technology, engineering, medical, law, and financial management. The inauguration of the South Asian University could prove to be a successful vehicle in achieving this objective.

Our economies, in the last decade, have registered commendable growth, thereby raising huge demand for energy. Recent trends indicate immediate need for cooperation at bilateral, sub-regional, and regional level to harness each other's capacities and resources. This includes developing a regional power-grid, harnessing renewable energy sources like hydropower, solar, bio-fuel, wind and reducing dependence on fossil fuel. It is here SDF, whose secretariat is to be inaugurated today, could play its role in generating funds from within and outside the region for projects on energy production.

As the SAARC strive at intensifying connectivity to draw member states closer for mutual gains, certain wrongdoers and terrorists are out to undo our good intentions and the growing trust among ourselves. Bangladesh, a nation committed to peace and involved in UN peacekeeping efforts, is firmly opposed to terrorism, insurgency, organized crimes and religious extremism. We categorically reject claims of those who cloak themselves in the rhetoric of Islam, or any other faith to justify violence. We are also committed against the use of Bangladesh territory for launching terrorism elsewhere.

SAARC's success also lies in building bridges among our peoples. It is possible through close and free interaction of our peoples from all walks of life. Here, tourism could play a catalytic role.



These would mean free movements and while there is rationale for immigration control, a reasonable balance could be worked out. Though SAARC could have, in its quarter century of existence, achieved more for our peoples and nations, the opportunity is still there. Indeed, through SAARC, we could forge greater trust and confidence among ourselves, help each other in the spirit of collective self-reliance, and move towards a prosperous, progressive, integrated South Asia.

Mr. Chairperson,

As we, the leaders of the SAARC member states gather here today amidst the pure and tranquil atmosphere of beautiful Thimphu valley, let us take a moment to ponder on the plight of

our 1.5 billion people. An awesome majority of them live in poverty craving for food and other basic necessities. Is it not fair that we, as their entrusted leaders, consider seriously their dilemma, determinedly rise above all our differences, and plunge with fixated resolve to change their life? I firmly believe we can, and do so we will, with some bold decisions here. I am convinced that this maiden Summit of the Kingdom of Bhutan under its Chair, would lead us across the threshold to a new era of peace and prosperity of our peoples.

I thank you all.

Khoda Hafez

Joi Bangla, Joi Bangabandhu

May Bangladesh Live Forever ■

