



Speech of:

H.E. Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani

Honorable Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan

at the Inaugural Session of
THE SIXTEENTH SAARC SUMMIT

Thimphu, Bhutan
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**Your Excellency,
Prime Minister Jigmi Y. Thinley,
Distinguished Heads of Delegation of SAARC
Member States,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen.**

It is a privilege to participate in the Sixteenth Summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. I am happy to be once again amongst colleagues and peers, in the SAARC fraternity, on the occasion of the Silver Jubilee of our Organization. On my behalf and on behalf of my delegation, I wish to express our profound gratitude to the Government of Bhutan for their warm and generous hospitality. I am confident that under Your Excellency's able guidance, this Summit will prove to be a historic milestone. To this end please rest assured, Excellency, of Pakistan's full cooperation.

May I also take this opportunity to acknowledge His Excellency President Mahinda Rajapakse, the outgoing Chairman for his skilful stewardship of the SAARC process. I also wish to thank the Secretary General H.E. Dr. Sheel Kant Sharma and his team for their unremitting efforts to promote the SAARC Agenda. Bhutan is truly a Himalayan wonderland of unmatched, pristine beauty. From the people of Pakistan, I carry for the people of Bhutan warm sentiments of goodwill and friendship. From the vast stretches of these majestic mountains to the warm sea shores of South Asia, our peoples and cultures have interfaced for ages.

Excellencies,

As our Association celebrates its silver jubilee, I take great satisfaction in noting that democracy and democratic norms have taken firm root across South Asia. Popular mandates reflect popular aspirations. SAARC affords the right platform to realize these aspirations; to transform South Asia's vast development potential into reality.

Excellencies,

A dispassionate reflection on SAARC's performance during the past 25 years is certainly

warranted. For many years, real progress remained stalled due in part to hesitancy borne from historical legacies, differences and disputes. However, the past could not obfuscate the promise of a glorious future. The whole-hearted commitment of the member states to the goals and objectives of SAARC remained robust. The future beckons us to accelerate the process of regional cooperation. Deepen and broaden the SAARC enterprise.

The over-riding priority for our region is development. This certainly is Pakistan's priority. To realize socio-economic development and ensure the well-being of our peoples, we need to create harmony and stability. Peace and stability at home and in the region is an indispensable condition for development. We must reflect individually and collectively on how best to create peace, stability and harmony in our societies and region-wide. The vast array of SAARC's programs and activities is undoubtedly indicative of our region's resolve to develop a holistic development paradigm. Poverty alleviation is a priority. Socio economic disparities within the region and sub-regions have to be addressed. There is the need for greater coordination between national and regional plans.

Excellencies,

The promise of SAARC can only be realized if we are able to not only deepen our engagement but also benefit from the process of globalization. We warmly welcome the presence of Observers in our midst. We must find ways and means to enable these and other interested states and regional organizations to engage substantially with SAARC. South Asia can become an engine for global economic growth. Our vast markets, our natural and human resources, our innovative spirit are critical ingredients for developing win-win scenarios. It is by a deliberate shift from "dependence" to accepting the reality of "interdependence" that we shall be able to forge partnerships that are mutually beneficial.

Poverty alleviation, food and energy security, health and education are among the SAARC priorities. We must redouble our efforts to realize the SAARC Development Goals.

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Mr. Chairman,

The theme of the Summit reflects our common concern on global warming, with all its attendant and multifaceted challenges. Our region, with its widespread poverty, agrarian base, stressed water resources, varying food productivity, and susceptibility to natural disasters, is particularly vulnerable to the vagaries of weather.

Bhutan has been the torch bearer of environmental responsibility. It is, therefore, apt and auspicious that the SAARC Convention on Cooperation on Environment is being signed in Bhutan. While this is a welcome first step, more must follow. We must focus on sharing best practices and pool our resources to adopt region wide mitigation and adaptation measures.

We must develop mechanisms to address our carbon footprints, in a manner that does not jeopardize our growth and development prospects. We must also evaluate and take requisite steps to preserve the region's ecosystem and precious water resources. Pursuant to the Agreement on Environment, a Joint SAARC Study on Himalayan Glaciers may be commissioned. Regional cooperation on water conservation and water management may be instituted together with programs for watershed rehabilitation on major South Asian river systems. Pakistan welcomes the inauguration of the Secretariat of the SAARC Development Fund in Thimphu. This step would allow effective utilization of the Fund, to the benefit of the peoples of the region. We are happy to note that steady progress is being made towards operationalizing the Food Bank, the SAARC Arbitration Council and the Regional Standards Organization. The intra-regional trade is less than

5 per cent. We should address the issues impeding intra-regional trade. SAARC must also seek free and preferential trading arrangements with other regions, notably EU and ASEAN.

We must work towards concluding Regional Inter-Governmental Framework Agreement on Energy Cooperation. SAARC should be a catalyst in harnessing indigenous sources of energy. I can visualize the benefit to our region from Bhutan's hydro-electric potential. It is time to promote collective scientific research and transfer of applied technologies. We may contemplate establishment of SAARC Science Foundation, as well as SAARC Biotechnology and Nanotechnology Forums. Pakistan is fully focused on delivering on the SAARC Social Charter. Poverty alleviation and women empowerment programs have been undertaken. The Benazir Income Support Program (BISP) is a unique instrument for a massive social reach out to the poorest of poor. Its main focus is to empower women so as to enable them to improve their socio-economic conditions. We would be happy to share the BISP experience with SAARC. Internally SAARC must increasingly adopt a project based approach, co-opting our private sectors, and capitalizing on the many win-win opportunities that our region affords. And externally, SAARC must reach out to other regions to develop win-win partnerships.

Excellencies,

From the plateaus of Balochistan to the sands of Cox's Bazaar, from the



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peaks of the Himalayas to the coral gardens of Maldives, the peoples of South Asia aspire for a future, which is peaceful, prosperous and secure.

Security of environment and energy; security of food and water; security from terror and conflict, and from want and poverty. Security within national frontiers and security without. Only when we refuse to be held hostage to history, only when we sincerely and assiduously work to build trust, resolve disputes, bridge perceptions and see merit in an enlightened collective self interest, will we be able to unleash our latent potential.

Excellencies,

Terrorism has affected our region and impacted each one of us. This toxic brew, under the garb of diverse ideologies and diverse agendas, has taken root. Terrorism is a phenomenon that is global,

regional and local, trans-national and trans-regional. It has roots in history, in economic neglect and injustice. We need to join hands to fight it individually and collectively. Against forces of extremism and intolerance, we need to forge a common front, based on tolerance, on respect for human dignity and universal values. It is my great hope and expectation that the forthcoming Meeting of the SAARC Interior Ministers in Islamabad would help strengthen cooperation in this vital area. By synergizing capabilities and creating partnerships we can effectively address the common challenges of our common neighborhood.

Let us reinvent our engagement.

Let this Summit mark a fresh beginning.

Thank You. ■

