

CONFERENCE
ON
**“BUILDING BRIDGES AND PROMOTING PEOPLE-TO-
PEOPLE INTERACTION IN SOUTH ASIA”**
ORGANIZED BY THE CENTRE FOR SOUTH ASIAN STUDIES
IN COOPERATION WITH GPPAC AND RCSS
KATHMANDU, 23-24 OCTOBER 2011

Distinguished Chair, Ambassador Nihal Rodrigo, Former Secretary-General of SAARC,

Prof. Amal Jayawardane, Executive Director, Regional Centre for Strategic Studies,

Mr. Nishchal N. Pandey, Director, Centre for South Asian Studies,
Distinguished Delegates,

It is an honour and a privilege for me to address the Conference on “Building Bridges and Promoting People-to-People Interaction in South Asia.” With the coming together of so many distinguished personalities from within the region and beyond, I am confident this Conference is well poised to come up with worthwhile recommendations in strengthening regional cooperation in South Asia.

I would like to acknowledge the distinguished presence of my predecessor, Ambassador Nihal Rodrigo, in our midst this morning as Chair of this Inaugural Session. Ambassador Rodrigo has been a strong advocate of regional cooperation in South Asia. Even after relinquishing charge as the Secretary-General of SAARC several years ago, he has

been actively involved in garnering support for regional cooperation in South Asia. Only two weeks ago, we saw him speaking passionately for the cause of strengthening SAARC and its Institutional Mechanisms at the Consultative Session organized by the Republic of Maldives as the host of the Seventeenth SAARC Summit. I am confident that his deep insights and contribution will enrich the outcome of this Conference as well.

I would like to thank Mr. Nischal N. Pandey, Director of the Center for South Asian Studies for organizing this Conference on such a topical theme in collaboration with the Global Partnership for Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), Netherlands and the Regional Center for Strategic Studies (RCSS), Sri Lanka. This Conference couldn't have been organized at a more opportune time than this. Convening just two weeks before the Seventeenth SAARC Summit, this Conference will not only generate the momentum for the forthcoming Summit but will also provide inputs to its preceding meetings.

Distinguished Delegates,

One of the primary objectives of SAARC is to promote mutual understanding and goodwill among the peoples of South Asia. Successive SAARC Summits have underscored the need and importance of promoting people-to-people contacts at all levels. At the Eleventh Summit held in Kathmandu in January 2004, recognizing the need for promoting a sense of regional identity among the people of our region, the Heads of State or Government lauded the roles played by intellectuals, professionals and eminent persons in promoting people-to-people contacts within the region and agreed to encourage such endeavours as a healthy sign of regional cohesion and fraternity. More recently, at the Fourteenth SAARC Summit, our Leaders agreed to improve intra-regional connectivity, particularly physical, economic and

people-to-people connectivity. They agreed to the vision of a South Asian community, where there is a smooth flow of goods, services, peoples, technologies, knowledge, capital, culture and ideas in the region.

Indeed, promoting people-to-people contacts in the region has always received impetus from our Member States. The launch of the SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme, organization of tourism and trade fairs, establishment of the South Asian University, and grant of recognition to popular and professional bodies as SAARC Recognized and Professional Bodies are some of the initiatives undertaken by SAARC to achieve that end.

Keeping in mind the visionary pronouncements by our Leaders and subsequent interventions made by our Association, this Conference which is devoted to the theme of “building bridges and promoting people-to-people interaction in South Asia” is very relevant to the agenda of SAARC. It is all the more relevant when we look at the theme of the Seventeenth SAARC Summit, which is devoted to “Building Bridges.”

Distinguished Delegates,

During a quarter century of its existence, SAARC has embarked upon the path of regional cooperation in diverse areas and created a number of inter-governmental mechanisms to deal with them; established eleven Regional Centers in specialized areas; commissioned many different studies on thematic issues; and ratified a host of agreements. While there has been considerable progress in several areas, it is widely acknowledged that SAARC has fallen short of delivering on the hopes and aspirations of our people. With this realization, our Leaders have time and again stressed on the need to strengthen SAARC

and its Institutional Mechanisms so as to make our Association more effective. In this context, I might mention that the recommendations made by the First Meeting of the South Asia Forum held in New Delhi last month and the Consultative Session on Strengthening SAARC and its Institutional Mechanisms held in Malé just a fortnight ago do amply validate such a need.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Among other things, following the directives of successive Summits, SAARC is currently pursuing the eventual goal of the South Asian Economic Union. An inter-governmental Expert Group on Financial Issues has been mandated to develop a roadmap in realizing that vision. Among other things, this Group has identified the need for evolving common custom procedures, harmonizing standards, avoiding double taxation, promoting and protecting investments and adopting measures to facilitate trade. While considerable progress has been registered in these respects, issues like tariff and non-tariff barriers continue to impede intra-regional trade under SAFTA. Likewise, the Agreement on the Promotion and Protection of Investment is pending for long. It is hoped that the upcoming SAARC Summit will provide explicit guidelines to address these bottlenecks.

Distinguished Participants,

Improving intra-regional connectivity is the key to the progression towards the goal of South Asian Economic Union. Cognizant of this, at the Sixteenth SAARC Summit held in Thimphu in April 2010, our Leaders declared 2010-2020 as the Decade of Intra-regional Connectivity. They also noted that seamless connectivity within the region would not only promote intra-regional trade but also usher in a new era of increased people-to-people contacts. While on this subject, I

must mention that the SAARC Regional Multimodal Transport Study conducted with the technical and financial assistance of the Asian Development Bank has proved to be a very useful reference document to develop intra-regional connectivity. Accordingly, as envisaged in this Study, Member States are in the process of implementing their respective national components on a priority basis in order to develop a multimodal transport mechanism to connect our region. Likewise, we are currently seized with the task of finalizing two separate Agreements on Railways and Motor Vehicles. With these agreements in place, I am confident that we will have covered considerable miles in connecting our countries. Speaking on this subject, I am happy to mention that regional connectivity initiatives have for the first time entered into the area of maritime connectivity to connect our Member States that are separated by oceans. The initiative to launch the Indian Ocean Cargo and Passenger Ferry Service, involving India, Sri Lanka and Maldives, is a vivid example in this respect.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In a much broader context, however, the overarching goal of poverty alleviation has remained largely unaccomplished. SAARC region still has the highest concentration of the poor people. At the same time, our region is faced with new and emerging challenges which are threatening to overshadow whatever modest progress we have achieved thus far. Ensuring food security is still a challenge for us, as the SAARC Food Bank is still ineffective for a variety of administrative and procedural hurdles. Further, frequented by the devastating natural disasters, affected by the vagaries of climate change, and impacted by the ever-growing intensity of globalization, our region is finding it difficult to reach a higher trajectory of growth, prosperity and well-being. This gloomy, yet stark, reality reminds us of the imperative to

forge mutually beneficial regional cooperation, and to strengthen our institutional mechanisms, including the SAARC Regional Centres and the SAARC Secretariat. At the same time, it is also necessary to bring our peoples closer, not only to combat the emerging challenges, but also to take advantage of the complementarities that our countries have on offer.

Distinguished Participants,

There is a growing realization that in order to be able to really make an enduring impact on the lives of our teeming millions in the region, SAARC mechanisms need to be strengthened. It is accurately so, as over the years, the proliferation of institutions, mechanisms and activities has burdened Member States so much so that they are finding it difficult to meet their commitments. At the same time, while the range of activities under the auspices of SAARC has increased both in content and substance, we have not been able to strengthen our mechanisms to deal with them. It is therefore only logical that we undertake a comprehensive review of SAARC and its institutional mechanisms in the light of the changed context of regional cooperation and emerging demands of our Member States. In undertaking such an exercise, inputs of civil society organizations across the region would be essential. Seen from that perspective, this Conference would certainly add value to this process.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

While SAARC is essentially an inter-governmental mechanism, it is encouraging to note that over the years, it has increasingly recognized the need to benefit from the Track II initiatives in order to make the process of regional cooperation more effective and responsive to the needs of our people. The recently established South Asia Forum

representing the academia, media, bureaucracy and business, among others, is therefore a befitting development. The Forum provides for a unique mechanism of the public-private partnership, aimed at generating a debate in charting out the course of SAARC in the decades ahead. It is hoped that the recommendations emerging out of the Forum would eventually guide our Association to take timely, useful and pragmatic decisions towards fast-tracking regional integration and strengthening SAARC mechanisms and institutions to realize that end. In this context, I am happy to mention that the recently held first meeting of the South Asia Forum has come up with a set of very useful recommendations for consideration of our Leaders during the forthcoming Summit. Among other things, the Forum emphasized on the imperative of learning from the success stories of other regional associations, creating a robust and mutually beneficial trade regime, establishing effective physical connectivity, strengthening regional cooperation mechanisms, managing regional public goods and facilitating unhindered people-to-people contacts and interactions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is heartening to note that as we prepare to convene the Seventeenth SAARC Summit, several activities have been organized by both the government and non-government sectors across the region to generate inputs for the Summit process. All these activities have unequivocally stressed on the need to expand the ambit of regional cooperation and integration and to strengthen mechanisms and institutions to achieve that objective. I do believe that these are reflective of the collective views of the very people that we aim to serve.

On this note, I would like to wish this civil society initiative every success. I thank you.