

People's SAARC Declaration, Colombo - 2008: Towards a Peoples Union of South Asia

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The South Asian People's Assembly (Colombo, 18-20 July) resolves to issue the Peoples SAARC Declaration at this gathering of representatives from SAARC countries.

We, members of social movements, labour unions, women's groups and civil society organisations have gathered here in Colombo from 18-20 July 2008, as part of the process of Peoples SAARC, to forge a vision for a Peoples Union of South Asia.

This year's People's SAARC culmination in Colombo is the continuum of a process of more than a decade. The last peoples SAARC gathering in Kathmandu in March 2007 reaffirmed the South Asian peoples' commitment to creating a better South Asia free from all forms of discrimination, marginalisation and domination.

We represent a rich and wonderful diversity of cultures, languages, religions and a multiplicity of identities and are linked by shared histories, geographies and cultural practices.

We believe we have the opportunity and strength to transform our social, economic and political futures to ensure that all our peoples can live in peace, security and dignity.

For this to become a reality, we must take a collective stand against all structures of oppression, discrimination and violence facing the people of the region. We uphold the equality of all countries in the region, and condemn attempts of any one country to dominate the region. We stand for a secular, democratic, equal, peaceful and just South Asia. We will ensure that those who have been traditionally marginalised from political processes, such as dalits, women, indigenous peoples, ethnic, religious and sexual minorities, will be in the forefront of this political project.

This involves creating a discourse on democratic and participatory political processes which respect national and local priorities and take into consideration the very real inequalities between the different states in the region. We are ready to take on this challenge through resolute struggle. We hail the people's movements for democracy and peace and against dictatorship and monarchy that are ongoing in the countries in the region

After discussions and debates for three days at plenary sessions and over thirty workshops we affirm our commitment to achieving the following goals and aspirations;

1. To build a South Asian identity based on our diversities and common histories. We Reject bigotry, jingoism and hatred and will work towards ensuring that enmity between countries is not propagated through instruments such as the media and education.
2. Resolutely oppose intervention of USA and war exercises both in the region and elsewhere. Reject the so called War on Terror which is nothing but an attempt to cover up warmongering by USA and its allies to target ordinary citizens.

3. South Asian countries to commit to a no-war pact and declare the region as nuclear-free. This also involves the drastic reduction of defence budgets and demilitarisation of the region.
4. Free movement of peoples in the region or in other words a visa-free South Asia
5. Restoration and creation of rail, road and sea-links that meet the needs of people. Encouraging and facilitating people- to- people contact and communication in the region.
6. Peaceful and just resolution of all conflicts in the region, including those on the border, through political negotiations, and revoking so called national security laws that give a free-hand to state authorities to commit atrocities against their own peoples.
7. Operationalisation of food sovereignty through building alliances of women, peasants and agriculture labour. This would involve the creation of seed and grain banks, promotion of participatory research and sustainable technologies and the rejection of monopolistic and environmentally destructive technologies such as genetically modified organisms.
8. Fisher-people's right to fish in territorial waters be recognized and legally protected through proper mechanisms. Innocent fisher-people incarcerated for wandering into neighbouring territorial waters to be immediately released.
9. The right to mobility is a human right. Migrants should be assured of dignity and right of work as well as physical protection, basic amenities and adequate wages. The victims of trafficking must be protected, especially women and children. Similarly, the rights of individuals and communities subjected to forced displacement due to conflict, disaster, and development projects should be protected.
10. Ensuring rights of all workers, especially women and dalit workers in accordance with the International Labour Organisation Convention, United Nations Covenants and National Constitutions.
11. The setting up of regional institutions and mechanisms such as a South Asian Tribunal of Justice to address human rights violations. Those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity must be prosecuted. Protection to be guaranteed for right of dissent, protest and organization. We call for the immediate release of political, social, media activists and prisoners of conscience in the region.
12. Recognizing the universality of visibility, opportunity, equal rights and dignity for all people, including excluded groups and minorities: ethnic, sexual, gender and people with disabilities. Recognize the prevalence of patriarchy, religious extremism and caste based discrimination that deny human dignity, socio, economic, political equality and justice to the 260 million dalits of in the SAARC countries.
13. Achieving Climate justice by ensuring that the burden of adjustment is borne by the elites. This requires a fundamental departure from the current industrial and economic paradigm in the region. Also, people's rights to information, knowledge, skills, housing, education, health, food security and their organizations must be fulfilled to strengthen their resilience to hazards such as floods, droughts and cyclones.
14. The creation of alternative regional trade and economic co-operation frameworks that meet the needs and aspirations of small producers and labour. This will ensure the defeat of neo-liberal instruments such as the World Trade Organisation and Free Trade Agreements in the region. (In the light of current attempts to revive the flawed WTO Doha Round we commit to work with groups

across the region and elsewhere to ensure that no deal comes out of the WTO Mini-Ministerial Meeting at Geneva from 21-25 July 2008.)

15. Recognition of health, education, housing as basic human rights. The scaling up of public infrastructure such as housing, health, education and other civic amenities through democratic sources of development finance. We urge equitable quality education to all children through common school system in the region. We oppose the privatisation of these services and uphold the principle of basic services for all. We particularly assert the rights of those affected by disasters.

16. Upholding knowledge commons, rather than monopolies of corporations. Adoption of free and open source software and open standards in all e-governance projects. Setting up of a South Asian resources pool for free software which enables international relations with knowledge sharing.

17. Unconditional cancellation of loans from International Financial Institutions & bilateral debt.

We call upon Government representatives at the 15th SAARC Summit at Colombo to seriously address these concerns and demands of the people of the region.

SAARC must be made accountable to the citizens of the countries in the region.

We celebrate the struggles for democracy and resistance to neo-liberalism and imperialism in the region and in particular the victory of the people's movement in Nepal. Our Peoples Union of South Asia is a rainbow coalition of democratic forces. We pledge to continue to learn, inspire and empower each other to realise this vision.