

## SAARC: a failure story

Thursday 3 May 2007, by [SULERI Abid Qaiyum](#) (Date first published: 22 April 2007).

**The dream of a new South Asia is of realisation of freedom — free from want, freedom from fear, and freedom to live with dignity. But is SAARC the right platform to realise it?**

Delhi declaration passed during the 14<sup>th</sup> SAARC summit concluded last month is not very different from one that was approved during 13<sup>th</sup> SAARC summit two years ago. To be precise, all 14 declarations so far are quite good on paper, and quite consistent too as they keep on talking of resolving the challenges facing people of South Asia.

It is much easy to say 'Issues facing people of South Asia' than to imagine them. South Asia is world's poorest region that houses 40 per cent of world's poor, over 500 million live below poverty line (governments underestimated poverty line). It is worlds' most illiterate region, actually home to world's half of all illiterates. The region where more children are out of school than the rest of the world, combined; two-thirds of these are female!

South Asia is worlds' most deprived region too. 260 million inhabitants lack basic health facilities in South Asia; 337 million lack safe drinking water; 830 million are without rudimentary sanitation and 400 million go hungry every day. This is not all; SAARC is world's most militarised place on earth too where two declared nuclear states Pakistan and India are annually spending around US\$ 30 billion on their defense expenses. One of its newly joined members, Afghanistan is facing war for last three decades.

These are some of the challenges facing South Asia and our leaders are rightly committed to resolve them. Without realising that terrorism takes its roots from tyranny and social injustice, our leaders are also committed to launch a joint battle against terrorism. In their efforts to curb terrorism all they are doing is symptomatic treatment. Killing of terrorists is much easy a job than eradicating the factors that turn innocent and deprived people 'terrorists'.

Rationalising the security costs of insecurity is an extremely difficult task. For the cost of one battle tank (US\$ 4 million) four million children can be immunised. For the cost of 10 Mirage fighters (US\$ 90 million) three million children can get primary education and for the cost of a modern submarine (US\$ 300 million) sixty million people can have access to safe drinking water. Our governments want to resolve the issues facing South Asian people without realising that government actions are part of the problem and not the solution. Insecurity within societies that leads to social restlessness and conflict is created by the social injustice in the name of national security measures.

Pakistan bought three Agosta 90B submarines from France for \$ 1 Billion. For this amount (for one year): Primary Education for all 17 million children now unenrolled; and safe drinking water for 67 million people without clean water; and family planning services for 9 million couples could have been assured.

Likewise India bought modern jet fighters worth \$ 4.5 Billion: For this amount (for one year): Primary Education for all 45 million children now unenrolled; and safe drinking water for 226 million people without clean water; and essential medicines for 135 million people with no health facilities

could have been ensured.

At a global level, the world spent approximately \$956 billion on the military in 2003. This was 10 times more than it spent on development assistance in 2001. Adding the cost of the military occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. has spent \$500 billion on direct military purchases. That means the U.S. is spending more on the military than the combined total that the rest of the world spent in 2003.

Ask any sensible person to compare the total number of death tolls in Pak-India wars so far with the number of deaths in these countries due to lack of immunisation, lack of safe drinking water, lack of medical care, poverty related deaths, deaths due to road accidents and intrastate violence. It does not require rocket science knowledge to guess that our people are most insecure from internal factors. I have consciously excluded the number of deaths due to so called natural calamities like earthquake or tsunami. It is a fact that natural calamities cannot be avoided, however, right policies and planning can stop natural calamities turning into human tragedies. I would invite the readers to pause and think who is threatening our national security and what should be the focus of expenditures to ensure national security. Most of you would agree that it can be anything but defence expenditures.

People of South Asia have been the victims of the past for last many decades. Lack of trust, solidarity, peace and stability among South Asian neighbours remained the stumbling blocks for a meaningful SAARC. However, a socially responsible, empowered, and responsive generation of South Asians has emerged. This generation wants to build the future based on mutual trust while denying carrying the baggage of the past. To them, politics of South Asia would have to be of the people's and development would have to be people centered.

This generation is not confined to any country, age group, religion or ethnicity. While SAARC conference was taking place, thousands have gathered in Hanuman Dhoka Durbar Square Kathmandu, as well as in New Delhi (main venue of SAARC summit) to hold parallel people SAARC Summits, and South Asia Social Policy Forums.

Eminent policymakers, parliamentarians, academics and activists from across South Asian countries ranging from former prime minister of India Mr. I.K.Gujral, to former foreign secretaries from Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, along with many parliamentarians and representatives of civil society jointly pressed for the SAARC member-countries to fight the regional and global challenges together and to go beyond enabling nationalism by creating a regional union.

Stating that SAARC has failed to address the people's agendas, they urged the lawmakers to work with the civil society to meet the common agendas of rule of law, constitutional supremacy, inclusion, human rights and other issues of livelihood and dignity of the people of the region. They demanded for social justice, peace and democracy; vision of alternative political, social, economic and cultural system; elimination of distinction, discrimination and gender, caste, religion, language, and ethnicity; and new South Asia free from exploitation and oppression among others.

This seems to be a dream. However, one has to have a dream to make it reality. The dream of a new South Asia is of realisation of freedom — free from want, freedom from fear, and freedom to live with dignity. This is premised on the axiom that every single individual on earth has both the potential and the right to live a decent life. This is exactly what our governments have ratified in Human Rights and Socio-Economic rights conventions.

The dream of a new South Asia is of attainment of prosperity, free from the clutches of hunger, poverty and despair. The dream of a South Asia where growing GDP would directly translate into

improved human development. This dream is of celebration of diversity, the home of most diverse and colourful human society in the world. This is an opportunity to shun the tainted practice of hegemony and oppression in the name of religions, ethnicity, caste and culture. The dream is also of unleashing of pluralistic democracy. This is a call for a 'functional democratic', decentralised, political system, for enjoying essence of citizenship amidst diversity.

The dream is also of redefining our national security priorities and the only way forward, otherwise we would remain the poorest, most illiterate, most deprived, and most militarised region of the world.

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**P.S.**

\* From The News, 22 April 2007:

<http://jang.com.pk/thenews/apr2007-weekly/nos-22-04-2007/pol1.htm#3>