

South Asian People Unite for Democracy, Peace and Justice!

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Peoples SAARC 2008 also known as the South Asian Peoples Assembly was hosted in Colombo, Sri Lanka between 18 and 20 July 2008.

This annual regional convergence of representatives of social movements and civil society organisations, working with and among women, organised and unorganised workers, peasants, fisher-folk, forest workers, marginalised castes and social groups, ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, students and youth, began in 1993 in New Delhi parallel to the official South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) heads of state and government summit.

As Sri Lanka is hosting the 15th SAARC summit, local civil society organisations rose to the challenge – in the present oppressive security and human rights country situation – to organise a South Asian peoples convergence to assert our right to associate, assemble and express our views; to receive and rally the solidarity and support of regional peoples movements and organisations in our time of need; and in the current global context of financial crisis, rising food prices, climate injustice, and erosion of democracy through the 'war on terror', to frame a peoples agenda for South Asia distinct from the growth-centred, neo-liberal and anti-democratic model of development promoted by SAARC.

Peoples SAARC 2008 took place in and around Vihara Maha Devi Park in the heart of Colombo. Some 400 delegates from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal and Pakistan joined over 1 000 Sri Lankan delegates. The three day event took the form of plenary discussions, workshops, exhibitions and stalls, film festival, cultural performances ranging from drums to vocals and street theatre.

The main plenary themes were 'South Asia Today and the New South Asia We Want'; and 'Towards a New South Asia'. This set the tone for other meetings and discussions which were on alternative perspectives, policies and institutions for South Asia.

Some of the keynote speakers included the Filipino analyst, Prof Walden Bello, Indian feminist, Kamla Bhasin, Indian academics Prof KM Pannikar and Prof Kamal Chenoy, former Senator Iqbal Haider from Pakistan, Nepali health and democratic rights activist Dr Mathura Shrestha, Maldivian Presidential candidate Ibrahim Ismail, Bangla writer Selina Hossain, and Sri Lankan women's and human rights activist, Sunila Abeysekera.

Workshop discussions on 18th July were on issues ranging from national security ideology to democracy and governance to refugees and internally displaced persons to human rights protection and transitional justice to the SAARC Convention on Trafficking. On 19th July, workshops were held on food sovereignty and the agrarian crisis, debt-cancellation, climate justice, caste-based discrimination, men, masculinity and gender-based violence as well as on migration, right to health, right to housing, labour rights, media freedom and right to information and so on.

A SAARC Parliamentarians Forum was arranged on 19th July on the sidelines of Peoples SAARC in which legislators from several countries had the opportunity to meet and discuss common issues and concerns as well as to interact with regional civil society activists. The forum was facilitated by former parliamentarian and veteran socialist political activist, Vasudeva Nanayakkara, Leader of the Opposition in the Colombo Municipal Council.

Resolutions and proposals for alternatives from workshops and sectoral meetings were received on the 20th for incorporation into the 'Colombo Declaration' which raises a peoples' agenda for SAARC. Participants hailed the victory of the peoples movement in Nepal towards a federal republic and were inspired by the lawyers movement against military rule in Pakistan.

The closing event on the 20th took the form of a 4 000 strong procession of people culminating in a rally addressed by representatives from each SAARC country, the Veddah (indigenous peoples) Chief Uruwarige Wanniyala Aththo, and leading trade unionist, Bala Tampoe of the Ceylon Mercantile, Industrial and General Workers Union.

Ideas and suggestions that emerged from Peoples SAARC 2008 include proposals for:

- A Visa-Free South Asia
- Minimum 10% reduction in military budget and reallocation for social welfare
- No-War Pact among South Asian countries and Nuclear-Free region
- Ratification and Implementation of the UN Migrant Workers Convention
- Permanent South Asian Peoples Tribunal on Human Rights

Peoples SAARC 2008 is part of a regional process most tangible in the annual convergence. Nevertheless this peoples' assembly is preceded by months of preparation through country-level processes and discussions on core themes, key issues and alternatives.

It is a meeting place for regional networks and also where new networks are created and existing ones strengthened.

As the women's rights and peace activist Nimalka Fernando commented, "Peoples SAARC embodies the desire of the peoples of South Asia to tear down the barriers and boundaries that divide us and to forge in place of the ritual and increasingly meaningless summits of SAARC, a Peoples Union of South Asia."