

# Creation of people's union of South Asia emphasised

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Colombo,

The Sri Lankan capital started wearing festive mood as the forthcoming SAARC Summit is approaching nearer to begin the preparatory meetings from July 27.

The South Asian People's Assembly, a non-government citizen forum comprising civil society representatives from all seven SAARC countries ended its three day conference here on Sunday adopting a declaration focused to creating a 'People's Union of South Asia' in future.

The declaration has also called upon the leaders of the SAARC member states to work towards bringing closer trade and socio-economic integration of the region to beat back poverty and achieve higher growth.

Eminent writers, political thinkers like Nimalka Fernando of Sri Lanka, several senators from Pakistan, legislators and senior journalists from India, political activists from Nepal, trade union leaders and NGO representatives from all member states took part in the conference.

A total of 1,000 delegates, including over 500 from the region gathered here to take part in the conference.

The conference came to an end with a march past by over 25,000 activists in the major city streets and holding a rally in the city centre.

Another regional civil society event, staggering over three days, is also going to take place prior to the summit at the ancient city of Kandy from July 22.

A new regional forum called 'Imagine a New South Asia' is organising it and many eminent legislators, writers, journalists and other civil society organisations are on the list of participants including Finance Minister of Pakistan or former prime minister of India IK Gujral.

Noted economist Dr Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmed is here to lead a Bangladesh delegation after attending the People's Assembly conference here.

Its objectives are also the same like other forums to promote people's cooperation in the region breaking the past hostilities and parochialism and replacing it by plans of actions to work towards a common future for the region.

Senior South Asian journalists will also hold a meeting in the sideline of the summit under the banner of South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA) to encourage the SARC leadership to bring change in the region.

Once the SAARC summit is over, a three-day SAARC trade fair has been planned in the Sri Lankan capital from August 27.

In yesterday's closing of the South Asian People's Assembly, veteran Indian journalist Kuldip Nayar stressed on the need for more socio-economic and trade integration, along with transforming the political landscape, to save the region from the clutches of WTO.

Other participants including Pakistan senator Iqbal Hyder decried in the conference what they say the neo-colonial aggression of the imperialist forces under new dress rehearsal.

The World Bank, IMF and the WTO are such instrument of the neo-liberal capitalism, they said adding South Asia can only protect it by building the common response creating more trade within itself.

Eminent writer Salina Hossain spoke for Bangladesh. Rezaul Karim Chowdhury, of the Equity & Justice Working Group, one of the organisers of the event also spoke in the rally.

Sunday's Colombo Declaration called upon the people of the region and its leaderships to take collective stand against all structures of oppression, discrimination and violence, be it against the poor and lower caste or against women to give them equal access to justice and fair treatment.

It called for strengthening democratic institutions and participatory political process and demanded a no-war pact and a nuclear free South Asia.

It called for cross border connectivity and visa free South Asia. It has also called for a common regional food security stance creating seed and food banks, rejecting high breed crops and to accelerate research in agriculture.

It has also stressed for a common strategy and plan of actions towards mitigating the global warming and climate change issues.

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\* From The New Nation (Bangladesh):

<http://nation.ittefaq.com/issues/2008/07/21/news0192.htm>