

People's SAARC: New Delhi Declaration

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The People's SAARC Conference was held in New Delhi on 21-23 April 2010 while the heads of the states of SAARC countries are meeting in Bhutan.

We the members of social movements, civil society organizations, labour unions, peasant movements, other working people's organizations and women's groups have gathered here in Delhi from 20th April to 23rd April, 2010 as part of the process of Peoples SAARC to forge a vision for a People's Union of South Asia. This year's Peoples' SAARC is a culmination of a process of more than a decade. It reaffirms the South Asian Peoples commitment to creating a better South Asia free from all forms of discrimination, exclusion and domination. It also calls for the peoples of all SAARC countries to struggle against militarism and jingoism, and for secularism. In our diverse societies of minorities of all kinds, a secular society is crucial for national and societal harmony, human rights and national unity. It calls for equal respect among all countries irrespective of size, and power.

All our countries are suffering and tribals have suffered more including violence against women. It is time that we develop new paradigms of peaceful equitable, and sustainable paths of development that truly reflect the economic potential of our countries and meet the need of our peoples. SAARC countries must ensure the rights of all workers, especially women, tribal and Dalit workers in accordance with international standards including ILO conventions, international covenants and national constitutions. Fisher peoples' rights to fish in territorial waters be recognized and legally protected through proper mechanisms. Innocent fisherfolk incarcerated for wandering into neighbouring, sometimes disputed, territorial waters be immediately released and the presence of deep sea trawlers and foreign vessels should be banned as these are depleting fish stock and pursuing an unsustainable path apart from severely diminishing the catch of the ordinary fisherfolk.

Climate change and ecological degradation have become a species threat and a threat to the very survival of all life on the planet. Unfortunately the South Asian governments including those like India which were part of the BASIC alliance failed to get an equitable treaty signed at Copenhagen because of resolute resistance by the North led by the USA. Even after the Copenhagen document was arrived at no urgent steps have been taken towards reversing ecological degradation, the reduction of green house gases, all necessitating more sustainable forms of transport, construction, workers and peasants conditions and mining among others. It is imperative for a Peoples union of South Asia that vast areas of Bangladesh, parts of India and island states in the Indian Ocean are not submerged because of a lack of commitment particularly by the North.

In all our countries Human Rights has become a critical problem. Generally international Human Rights and Humanitarian Law is not implemented, even if already ratified. This leads to the flagrant suppression of movements that challenge the state, only some of which are violent. This is true of the entire sub continent.

People's movements to protect the forests, the rivers, and other natural resources are often brutally repressed. Peoples land is acquired for a relatively paltry sum in the name of development, and their rehabilitation is well below international standards. This of course is part of neo- liberalism. However the elites have become exceedingly selfish, intolerant and oblivious of the suffering of the people.

A major positive response would be facilitated at the South Asia level if people to people contact throughout the region was facilitated. This would enable experts and activists to interact across countries and regions to explore possibilities of a more just, peaceful, sustainable and equitable path of development which is also gender just. On the contrary, far from instituting a visa free South Asia our governments are increasing restrictions on people to people dialogue and some of these moves have been highly retrograde. This is not only a great barrier too our goal of a Peoples Union of South Asia, but is also a severe restriction on our efforts to move towards that goal. We recognize the universality of opportunity, equal rights and dignity of all people including excluded groups and minorities; including ethnic, sexual and the differently abled. We recognize the prevalence of patriarchy, masculinity, religious extremism and caste based discrimination that deny human dignity, socio-economic and political equality and justice to the millions of backward classes and deny women sexual and reproductive health rights in the SAARC countries.

There is need for alternate regional trade and economic framework that meet the needs and aspirations of small and medium producers and labour. This will ensure the defeat of neo-liberal instruments such as the WTO and free trade agreements in the region. We need to work out fair trade relations within South Asia as a precondition for fair trade relations with the rest of the world. This would also provide a democratic alternative to neo-liberal free trade agreements. It would also facilitate a fair wage for those in the import-export and connected sectors.

The SAARC countries must beware of imperialist machinations, designed to overthrow pro-people regimes or to play countries off against another to weaken SAARC unity. SAARC countries must radically cut down expenditures on conventional arms, and move towards a South Asian nuclear weapons free zone. This would save billions of dollars for the social sector. These countries must avoid strategic alliances with the US and allied powers. We urge that there be a no war pact between all SAARC countries.

Inter-state relations must be based on respect and equality and all unequal treaties should be annulled. Above all, states must respect each other's sovereignty. Military intervention and espionage operations on each others territories is the most glaring violation of this sovereignty. Terrorism has been a serious problem in Pakistan, India and recently in Sri Lanka. Where these movements involve alienation or deprivation of natural resources, there must be dialogue. Most terrorist movements are political. Military means should not be the main method of countering them. Fundamentalist movements who refuse dialogue should be countered. Militarism as a State ideology is a threat to democracy and peaceful dissent.

There should be recognition of health, education, housing, employment and adequate food as basic rights. More investment in the social sector is essential for a more equitable and sustainable society. The billions of dollars spent on defense not only foster aggressive militarism but also take away scarce resources otherwise available for the social sector and basic human rights. We uphold knowledge commons rather than patents which exploit our market and people. New attempts in WTO to bring generic drugs into TRIPS must be resisted so that vital medicines for HIV, new strains of Tuberculosis, Hepatitis and Malaria etc. do not become unaffordable. Unconditional cancellation of loans from international financial institutions and bilateral debt with the North, are a must for funds for socio-economic development.

Food banks should be set up of surplus food particularly food grains. Remunerative prices must be given to farmers for their produce. The poor must be provided food at subsidized prices. GM seeds should be banned. Seeds, fertilizers and pesticides must be provided at subsidized prices, along with diesel and electricity. Urgent steps should be taken for the forest dwellers who should have a right to the forest produce, and food and other subsidies in times of drought. Forest dwellers should have a right to the forest, and the economic exploitation of the forest. Through mining and the timber trade by corporate and contractors should be immediately stopped.

The right to mobility with dignity is a human right. Migrants should be assured of dignity and the right to work as well as physical protection, basic amenities and adequate wages. Safeguards for the basic rights of the local people must be instituted. Victims of trafficking, especially women and children must be protected. Similarly the rights of individuals and communities subject to forced displacement, disasters and forced eviction should be protected. Peaceful and just resolution of all conflicts in the region through political negotiations is imperative. This will include negotiations with the people of disputed territories. We call upon the SAARC governments to seriously address these concerns and demands of the people of the region. Governments must be accountable to the citizens of the countries in this region. We laud the democratic struggles and the resistance to neo-liberalism in the region. Our Peoples Union of South Asia is a rainbow coalition of democratic forces. We pledge to continue to learn, inspire, struggle and empower each other to realize this vision.