

Statement by Rt. Hon. Girija Prasad Koirala, Prime Minister of Nepal at the 14th SAARC Summit Meeting - 03/04/2007

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Mr. Chairman,
Excellencies the Heads of State and Government of SAARC,
Excellencies the Representatives from the Observer States,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is, indeed, a great pleasure for me to come to this historic and vibrant city of New Delhi for the SAARC Summit Meeting. I extend my sincere gratitude to the Government and friendly people of India for the warm reception and friendly hospitality.

I would like to congratulate His Excellency Dr. Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister of India, on his election to the Chair. Nepal places its fullest confidence and trust in your wisdom and experience, Mr. Prime Minister, to lead our deliberations to a successful conclusion and to inject fresh momentum and dynamism into the SAARC process while making it more relevant. Let me also express my appreciation to Bangladesh, for its stewardship of the SAARC process during last year, as a Chair. I commend the Secretary General for providing committed leadership to the SAARC Secretariat and his colleagues for their dedication.

Mr. Chairman,

Today, we are welcoming Afghanistan as a member of our family and it is surely a joyful moment for the whole South Asian Region. We extend a hearty welcome to His Excellency Hamid Karzai, President of the Afghanistan, in our midst. Another milestone in this SAARC process is the participation of international community beyond the region as Observers. We would like to warmly welcome them. We are confident that these expansionary steps would instill dynamism in our mission and open new vistas of relationship with the observer countries. These two important events are the reflection of the recognition of its potentials as well as the commitment to work together, indicating a sign of new confidence in SAARC.

Mr. Chairman,

We have completed a journey of over two decades on the path of regional cooperation endeavours. Given the difficult situation, SAARC has been able to cultivate the spirit of cooperation and partnership among its member states to work to improve the life of almost one and a half billion people.

We are aware that the region is inextricably bound by history, culture and geography and more recently by the current social and economic realities. Our challenges and constraints are fundamentally similar in nature though they differ in magnitude indicating that we should concentrate ourselves on areas, which matter most to the people of our region. It is in this context that I wish to outline a few areas, for our focused attention, in order to take SAARC even closer to the lives of the people.

In our efforts to promote economic cooperation within the framework of the Association, SAFTA has already come into effect. Enhanced and effective regional cooperation should lead to an equitable growth and prosperity for all, in particular for the least developed

countries among them, because they face special challenges and constraints. Similarly, we have also initiated dialogue on wider economic issues such as investment, services, energy and macro economic policies. We are glad about the Regional Energy Dialogue that has started within the framework of SAARC. We sincerely hope that all sources of energy including hydropower would be harnessed for the promotion of the welfare of the South Asian people through common endeavours. While giving priority to eradicate poverty, we have designated SAARC Development Goals and enhanced cooperation on social sectors. Recently, we have committed ourselves to accelerate concrete work through execution of projects and to expand the areas of our activities with the cooperation of international organizations.

Secondly, the Kathmandu Summit agreed to the ultimate vision of an Economic Union in a gradual and phased manner. We all believe that strong and meaningful cooperation can really touch the lives of the people. Therefore, as the first step, we should all strive to take concrete and interlocking steps in an accelerated pace to operationalize the Free Trade Agreement and enhance the size of the pie for all. We can also further contribute to it by reducing physical barriers in the field of transport and communications, because they are the foundations upon which economic interactions take place. The recent studies have shown that the South Asian borders are more cumbersome to pass through than many regions. Trade facilitation measures should, therefore, receive as much priority as the implementation of SAFTA in our deliberations.

SAARC process must be geared to free people from the chains of poverty and misery through the efficient, effective and equitable utilization of human and economic potentials. Pervasive poverty, hunger, misery, disease and ignorance are our formidable challenges as stated and this can only be overcome by mutual cooperation. As I stand here on this podium, I think of the genuine hopes and expectations of millions of peoples of the South Asian region for a better and secure future for them and their children. Let us remind ourselves that the main objective of SAARC is to ensure peace, freedom, social justice and economic prosperity through regional cooperation. Mutual understanding, good neighborly relations and meaningful cooperation should foster these objectives. This is the benchmark against which we should compare our results and actions.

Mr. Chairman,

Many countries and various parts of South Asia are suffering from insurgency and deprivation, although in various dimensions and context. It might be worthwhile for SAARC to look into the issues of marginalization, poverty, governance, globalization and violent conflicts in a holistic manner. This could be done while fully respecting sovereignty, territorial integrity and good neighborly relations as enshrined in the Charter. As they will have a direct bearing on the lives of the people, a structured and institutionalized work in these areas could open another meaningful chapter of cooperation in South Asia.

Our low social indicators are a stark reminder to us about our situation. Despite a galloping economic growth rate, the incidence of poverty in the region is still one of the highest in the world. Our challenge is thus to confront it with single mindedness and to make sure that there is no trade off to be made between economic growth, equity and reduction in poverty. That could be done through appropriate and inclusive policy interventions, women's empowerment, social mobilization and high rate of sustained growth in all our countries through further consolidation of our common yet shared efforts and cooperation. We should link up SAARC Decade of Implementation with the SAARC Decade of Poverty Reduction. Implementation of projects such as Multi-modal Transport, Telemedicine Project and South Asian University could go a long way towards providing tangible benefits to the people. We

are all cognizant of the fact that enlarged interactions at people-to-people level will further reinforce the regional cooperation and bring it closer to the people of South Asia. We should encourage acculturation through the professionals, media persons, teachers, writers, workers etc., for fostering better understanding and collaboration in the region.

Mr. Chairman,

In Nepal, a decade long armed conflict has been transformed into a peace process. While protecting the sanctity, credibility and integrity of the democratic system, we have managed to bring elements opposed to democratic practice into the mainstream competitive politics. I am confident that a new chapter will soon be written out of people's mandate for the first time in the history of Nepal.

Nepal's transformation has established that the "dialogue" could be an instrument for socio-political changes. Though democracy may appear fragile in the beginning, it is my simple but firm conviction that democracy alone creates political and economic space to initiate the process of national reconciliation and unity, produces a representative government, unites different ethnic groups, manages underlying differences, addresses deep rooted social changes and multiple manifestations of conflict, and starts the much needed development process to extricate people from poverty, disease, injustice and various forms of sufferings.

In conclusion, SAARC has now reached a stage where it is capable of taking decisions to make its present better and future realistic and secure. It is time for us to show concrete benefits to our people from a range of existing complementarities in the region. The success of this regional organization is naturally in our own hands. We must make sure that we create and sustain a regional synergy in our efforts, which would contribute to enhance competitiveness and ensure prosperity to all. In this day and age of global interdependence, enhancement of cooperative efforts will develop a win-win situation for all. We should not lose this opportunity. Let us pledge ourselves to take the SAARC process to a new height with a collective vision, firm commitment and effective implementation of programs on a priority basis. Nepal pledges its continued support, expresses its commitment and determination, and offers its readiness to do everything possible to make the SAARC vision a reality.

Thank you so much for your attention, Mr. Chairman.