

3rd SOUTH ASIA ECONOMIC SUMMIT

Regional Economic Integration, Climate Change and Food Security Agenda for the Decade 2011-2020, Kathmandu, 17th-19th December 2010

Roles of People's Representatives and the Private Sector in Strengthening Regional Cooperation

Presentation by Nihal Rodrigo, former SAARC Secretary General; and former Sri Lanka Foreign Secretary

Our collective gratitude is due to the many Organizers of this 3rd South Asian Economic Summit, particularly SAWTEE and SACEPS, for bringing us all together as participants to discuss South Asian economic integration in the face of the increasingly convoluted ramifications relating to the planet's environment, economy, energy as well as food security and extremist threats. The high level political participation including by Nepal's Prime Minister, Hon. Madhav Kumar Nepal, despite all his pressing commitments is to be specially appreciated.

There is much sarcasm about the effectiveness of SAARC and many critical comments about it. SAARC has grown like a large tree that has taken deep root, with many branches of activity, much foliage and verbiage: but not enough fruit. It remains yet indispensable for South Asia and its goals need to be pursued with greater dedication, political commitment and collaboration.

This presentation will specially focus on the roles that need to be played by the People, their political representatives particularly those in the Parliamentary processes of the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary, and the corporate sector in dealing with South Asia's regional cooperation. In 2000, when the current Indian Foreign Minister Krishna was Chief Minister of Karnataka, a Business Conference took place in the state bringing together politicians, corporate executives, economists and SAARC together in an early close encounter of the economic type emphasizing the need to work closely together.

In respect of the impact of the contemporary global situation within each of the eight South Asian countries, individual national concerns as well as sectarian interests understandably do clash and are often in conflict, at the domestic levels. This renders coordinated unified responses at regional inter-state level that much more complex. In this situation, careful interaction among all concerned groups is required to grapple with the issues concerned. This is essential, first, on the national stage, before coordinated regional approaches can be successfully developed. The wide variety and range of Parliamentary, political, professional, corporate, academic and technical backgrounds of the participants at this Summit here in Kathmandu has brought to light specific issues quite frankly and sharply. How much of these regional concerns will reach the decision-taking processes in SAARC states is not clear, although many Governmental representatives, including Ministers were engaged in the process during our sessions here in Kathmandu.

Among the bodies officially accorded "recognition" by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is the Association of Speakers and Parliaments which has held several meetings since its first Meeting, in 1994, when it was known as the SAARC Parliamentarians Association.

At a Session in Islamabad in May 2005 organized by the South Asia Free Media Association (SAFMA) which included economists and journalists among others, focus was strong on a paper presented by Pakistani economist, Dr. Akmal Hussain, who is here with us at this Economic Summit. While predicting that South Asia could become "the second largest economy in the world after China", he had then also

stressed that Governments in the region are required to “move out of a mind-set that regards an adversarial relationship with a neighboring country as the emblem of patriotism; affluence of the few at the expense of the many as the hall-mark of development; individual greed as the basis of public action and mutual deionization as the basis of inter-state relations”. During a meeting I had with him here in Kathmandu, he said that his words had been erroneously reported by the press at that time: he had referred to “demonization” and not to “deionization”. I think both words were appropriate given the “splitist” tendencies that are often visible in development processes which include so many actors.

In February 2009, the Conference of SAARC Ministers of Parliamentary Affairs bearing the theme, “Good Governance through Parliamentary Democracy”, evoked a message from the SAARC Secretary General that “good governance was an ideal which is complex in its totality, but (that) the lack of it was felt at the people’s level quite intensely”.

The Declaration adopted at 16th SAARC Summit in Thimphu (April 2010), Heads of State/Government, “while appreciating that all the Member States had evolved into multi-party democracies, underlines the challenges faced by them in ensuring effective, efficient, transparent and accountable governments, recognized the need to draw on the democratic and participatory tradition represented collectively by the Parliamentarians of South Asia for the progress of SAARC”

A draft Charter of Democracy is already on the SAARC anvil and is being shaped up for eventual acceptance and action by the Governments of the region. It is expected to affirm that broad-based participation of the People in the institutions and processes of governance would create a sense of ownership and responsibility and could, thereby, also promote greater stability within and between South Asia’s states.

The role of the South Asian Members of Parliament (MPs) and other People’s representatives in the collaborative regional process, built on the foundations of their respective national processes is indeed complex. At the closing Session of the 4th Conference of the Association of SAARC Speakers and Parliamentarians, the Deputy Speaker of the Indian Lok Sabha underlined the need for Parliaments everywhere to devise mechanisms to ensure that the public good always prevails over private interests.

There needs to be deeper substantial interactions by Members of National, Provincial and other chambers with the people and representative interest groups whose support and votes they seek and with whom they may be affiliated. The Conference of SAARC Ministers of Parliamentary Affairs (February 2009) in its Report decided, that every endeavor should be made to make the people aware of the functioning of Government. It declared that further measures should be introduced to ensure greater devolution of powers at the grass-root level (and, I would add, at the factory-floor level) to ensure maximum participation of the people in the decision making and implementation process.

Parliamentarians need also to be in close consultation and cooperation with the corporate sector and need to deal with all issue that this Economic Summit has taken up. The bond between development and democratic practices needs to be advanced in tandem between the two sectors,

Given the ethnic and other complexities as well as caste and religious differences in the diverse make-up of virtually all SAARC countries, grave security issues have also emerged. Terrorism is viewed by many who are in desperate straits as the sole means of attaining the goals of neglected or discriminated groups. Sri Lanka has not been alone in having had to contend with terrorism. Yet now, with terrorism defeated and the country in changed circumstances, it has even been possible for a reformed former child soldier of the terrorist group, the so-called “Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam” (LTTE), to be democratically elected from the Tamil community to now serve as a Chief Minister of the Eastern

Province – a Province in which terrorism had been rampant. Border issues between SAARC states could also slide into violence. Members of Parliament need to shoulder a special responsibility, not only to handle these issues to serve perceived national interests, but also to create a more conducive climate for the settlement, or even a laying back, of those issues so that they would not complicate bilateral relations nor hamper broader regional cooperation which bring greater benefits to their people.

Each MP is duty-bound to monitor and assess the views and concerns of the people he/she represents and to articulate them not only in Parliament and at public meetings but also to bring them before decision making processes of Governments to ensure their proper consideration. At the same time, her/his support for essential national economic objectives is necessary as also the need to explain to her/his own electorate what benefits would accrue to the country from the pursuit of such wider objectives.

Closer interaction between Members of Parliaments of SAARC countries would be useful to deal with economic issues which have a regional dimension. Shared borders, the historical legacy of colonial times and the “pangs of proximity” (to use Prof. S.D.Muni’s eloquent phrase) have often obstructed broader economic and political connectivity. Political issues of this nature should not interfere in nor obstruct regional economic collaboration for the South Asian peoples’ mutual benefits.

SAARC, while being primarily an inter-state organization, has fortunately given formal “recognition” status to a number of region-wide associations including Chambers of Commerce and Industry and other associations serving the corporate sector. Recognition has been accorded to associations of region-wide membership, including respectively, of accountants, architects, town planners, women’s organizations, writers, members of the media, medical and legal professions. These have also provided means for fruitful economic professional and other region-wide interaction. At the 2nd SAES held in New Delhi (December 2009), the UNDP acknowledged that “the vision of a South Asian economic summit as a high level tripartite dialogue among the policy makers, business and civil society is unique and catalytic”. However, the next logical step, which is the consideration of their often productive collective views, by State organs, is a more complex aspect in SAARC. Results vary.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh described “Connectivity” as a vital factor for economic development. At political level, it is essential for Parliamentarians and peoples’ representative groups to support it. Sri Lanka President Mahinda Rajapaksa, at the Colombo SAARC Summit in 2009, while strongly acknowledging the importance of connectivity as a powerful dynamo of growth for launching SAARC as a Partnership for Prosperity, stressed also the necessity of practical “continuity, consistency and coordination of initiatives, decisions and measures to sustain the momentum in regional economic integration”.

Connectivity has many dimensions – the good, the bad and the ugly. It is the key factor for practical action beyond intent and rhetoric on all the substantive issues of agreement. I briefly outline aspects of connectivity which help, as well as hinder in certain contexts, economic cooperation and good relations among SAARC countries.

First, in negative terms, there is the lack connectivity between areas of economic success and the continuing lack of economic development in other depressed and desperate sectors of society in the region. More attention and action needs to be exerted to ensure that economic success reaches down to the poorest areas of the region. Infrastructure development is also essential to physically reach out to poverty stricken areas. Politicians elected to serve in such areas need to work with dedication to

improve living standards as well as to shield the innocents from social, gender, caste and other forms of discrimination rampant in some areas.

Second, there must be connectivity and coordination between the political organisations of the State, Parliaments and corporate sectors with the bureaucracy which is the implementing arm of the State. The bureaucracy must faithfully implement national/regional decisions taken, or clearly indicate when necessary, where decisions are faulty.

Third, there must not be any connectivity or entanglement of contentious bilateral issues among member states with the larger more vital issues of regional cooperation which have been discussed in detail over the last two days here in Kathmandu. Bilateral issues need to be considered among the two states concerned outside the regional context without contaminating the atmosphere for cooperation with other SAARC states in the larger interests of South Asia.

Fourth, infrastructure connectivity beyond the region is also vital. I would like to add some views on infrastructure across the seas which were discussed here briefly today. Sri Lanka's own ongoing infrastructure development strategies cover sea connectivity as well. Hambantota, a port in the south of the island, which had even served as a point of connectivity for the ancient Silk Route of the Seas, is being currently developed extensively to provide essential services for economic regeneration and connectivity. It is situated virtually at the centre of the Indian Ocean. Hambantota is a trade and economic transit point in South Asia connecting conveniently eastwards to Japan, Korea, China and the ASEAN states; and westwards to Africa, the Middle East and beyond to Europe. Hambantota is situated a few months north of what is known as the busiest sea lanes in the world. Sri Lanka's Navy is commemorating its 60th Anniversary this year. Last week the Navy Commander Vice Admiral Thisara Samarasinghe commented that the presence of representatives of South Asian and other navies on the occasion in the island provided opportunity to discuss regional maritime security which was being threatened by people smuggling and drug trafficking and affecting economic development as well as causing immense human suffering to victims of unscrupulous traffickers.

Fifth, and finally, economic connectivity between SAARC and its Observers could be extended for mutual benefit. Following reservations of the past, cooperation is now being discussed and gradually developing with the Observers: Australia, China, Iran, Japan, Republic of Korea, Mauritius, Myanmar, the United States and the European Union. No region in today's globalised world can thrive in isolation although entanglement in certain evil trends, such as human smuggling, can also bring disasters. The ADB notes that only 5.5% of the trade of South Asia is region-specific, while in ASEAN the figure is well over 25%. ASEAN's economic strength has been partly helped by the so-called "Plus-3" relationship it had developed with Japan, Republic of Korea and China. Contributions from Observers to the SAARC Development Fund are now being accepted under certain understandable conditions relating to their purpose, deployment and usage. Here too, attitudes and views expressed in the media and in political circles come into play and need to be rationally analyzed. Foreign policy debates in Parliaments need to dispassionately approach regional development and security issues with SAARC's Observer States.
