

# South Asian Countries To Improve Cooperation

by Ramtanu Maitra

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) concluded its April 3-4 summit in New Delhi, ushering in some hope of stronger cooperation among the member nations in a region which is in the midst of unprecedented political and economic change.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced, as the chairman of the summit, the member countries' agreement to set up a regional food bank to provide food security in the region. "The food bank will come into operation to meet the exigencies during calamities so that the SAARC member states could immediately tackle the crisis," an official told reporters. Once the deal is finalized, the food bank will start with a reserve of 241,580 tons of food grain, which would be gradually increased. Initially, to build up the stock, India will contribute 153,200 tons of food grain, while Pakistan and Bangladesh will contribute 40,000 tons each, Sri Lanka and Nepal will contribute 4,000 tons each, Maldives will contribute 200 tons, and Bhutan will contribute 180 tons.

The other important aspect emphasized at the summit was "connectivity": physical connectivity in terms of concrete infrastructural projects; economic connectivity through freer movement of goods and trade; and connectivity of ideas and people, through increased people-to-people contact, rather than a mere inter-governmental process.

## Origins and Growth

This was the 14th summit of SAARC, which was established on Dec. 8, 1985 by India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Maldives, and Bhutan. On April 3, 2007, Afghanistan, which was present at this summit, became the eighth member of the organization.

Beside the member nations, SAARC invited observers to attend. Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing, Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso, South Korean Foreign and Trade Minister Song Min-soon, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Richard Boucher, and the European Union's Deputy Director-General of External Affairs for Asia and Latin America, Hervé Jouanjan, were also present.

The SAARC was brought into existence by the late Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, although the original concept was developed in the 1970s by the late President of Bangladesh, Ziaur Rahman, who proposed the creation of a trade bloc consisting of South Asian countries. SAARC, an economic and political organization, is the most populous re-

gional organization in the world, with a population of approximately 1.47 billion people.

The 14th summit was somewhat unique in more than one way. Besides the fact that Afghanistan joined the organization prior to the summit, Iran was formally given the status of observer. The decision to include Iran has not gone well with those nations that demand that Iran be isolated. However, Japan's support for the inclusion of Iran as observer came as a surprise. While Boucher and others were not quite sure how to react to this development, and were heard muttering under their breaths, Mitsuo Sakaba, director-general for press and public relations in Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, told reporters in Tokyo prior to the summit: "Regional cooperation in SAARC involving Iran can help in the development and democratization of Iran."

## The British Factor

"Japan is in favor of India playing a key role in invigorating SAARC. It's time for SAARC to strengthen its vision of bilateral ties," Sakaba stressed. He could not have been more correct. For decades now, SAARC has remained a virtual talk shop, where words like "peace," "harmony," "cooperation," and "development" were thrown around, without addressing the real problems that affect the enormous population of this region. The SAARC charter demands that only regional cooperation be discussed, and that the many regional problems should be worked on jointly. But, one of the reasons this charter has not functioned, is the British-induced mindset, which makes the leaders of the member nations focus on their differences.

The region was almost entirely under British colonial rule as late as the 1940s, and most politicians and academics in the SAARC member nations will readily admit that British colonial rule was based upon one simple principle: Divide the population along the lines of ethnic, tribal, ideological, and religious differences; and use the fissures thus created to maintain control.

And yet, every time these countries got together, a laundry list of "who did what to whom" is fished out to sabotage all constructive efforts. While all seven member nations—Afghanistan is yet to begin playing a role—are responsible for continuing with the British-taught divisive policies, India, being the largest and with the most at stake, has to be apportioned maximum blame.

The success of SAARC will eventually depend upon realizing how the region can be integrated economically, through development of manpower using scientific and technological developments, and meeting infrastructural, agricultural, and industrial requirements of the people.

Those who wish the best for the region, hope that the 14th SAARC summit is a beginning of a process of moving away from the British-taught self-destructive *Realpolitik*, and the start of utilizing the capabilities the region has to "wipe tears off every face."