



## Ministry of External Affairs

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# Statement by External Affairs Minister at SAARC Foreign Minister's Meeting held in Maldives

February 20, 2014

Your Excellency, Foreign Minister Dunya Maumoon  
Excellencies, Ministers of Foreign Affairs  
Hon'ble Secretary General  
Distinguished Delegates,

I join previous speakers in felicitating our colleague the Foreign Minister of Maldives Dunya Maumoon on her assumption of the Chair of the Council of Ministers. My delegation and I appreciate the arrangements for our stay in the tradition of Maldivian warmth and friendliness. Maldives is indeed a beautiful jewel of the Indian ocean and I am very happy to be here with my esteemed colleagues.

### Excellencies,

SAARC has traversed a significant distance since it came into being in 1985. There is little doubt about its achievements; it has succeeded in creating a framework of institutions and processes which have helped us progress towards our stated common goal of regional integration. Since our meeting at the last Summit in Addu City, Maldives in 2011, much time has passed. These meetings over the past few days in Bandos have been very useful in making an assessment of what we have achieved to date and where we need to make changes. While the overall direction of our progress is positive, we need to move faster and to add momentum to our cooperation within the SAARC framework.

In this context, let me express appreciation for the efforts put in by the Secretary General and his team who presented the detailed Periodic Analytical Report yesterday, informing of the work done and the progress made in SAARC initiatives and mechanisms since the last Summit in 2011. This report should guide us in identifying the sectors in which more progress needs to be made.

Our vision of SAARC, underpinned by our historical ties, as a region of friendship, development and shared prosperity remains unchanged. To bring this vision to fruition we need to continue to focus on removing the barriers, physical or otherwise, that stand in the way.

The Comprehensive Study to rationalize, strengthen and streamline SAARC institutions and mechanisms therefore comes at an opportune time. This Study is a useful input into our efforts to strengthen the core

areas of SAARC and should help us make decisions to bring these areas into greater focus by shedding peripheral or ineffective mechanisms and processes. I am informed that preliminary discussions on the recommendations made in this Study were held in the Standing Committee yesterday.

I would like to highlight a few themes which I feel are central to our common effort towards greater regional integration.

### **Excellencies,**

Trade is the most critical factor in accelerating regional economic growth. The agreement on the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) was envisaged as playing a pivotal role in this effort. SAFTA was signed in Islamabad in January 2004 and implemented in 2006. In the years since, intra-SAARC trade flows under SAFTA, while having grown, still do not do justice to the potential that exists for intra-regional trade. India has taken several measures to boost intra-regional trade, including providing duty-free access to goods from SAARC LDCs. I urge colleagues from Member states to focus on this key issue of promoting regional trade and deepening our economic linkages with one another.

This brings me to the second theme that I want to highlight: regional connectivity. Our maritime, land and air connectivity is still very tenuous and we must focus on building common infrastructure which transcends our boundaries and interconnects our region. We need only to look at the seamless way in which other regions are connected to understand the enormous benefits that can accrue to our peoples from such an endeavour. We must be more imaginative in this sector and think of different ways of connecting our countries, whether through road, rail, and sea or by air or an integrated multi-modal approach for the subcontinent. Enhancing connectivity would help raise all our rates of economic growth and accelerate our common development.

The third theme I would like to highlight is that of promoting mutual understanding and contacts among our peoples, especially between our youth. I am happy to inform this august gathering that the South Asian University in New Delhi has started functioning in full earnest and is now in its 4th academic year, with 374 students from all eight SAARC countries. We have ambitious plans for this University and the role that it will play in increasingly bringing young people together from all SAARC countries.

Culture also has its special role to play in promoting mutual understanding and friendship. We are happy to see enthusiastic participation by SAARC countries in the Surajkund Crafts Mela, held near New Delhi every year. I would also like to commend the work of the SAARC Cultural Center in Colombo, which has been active in promoting cultural cooperation and awareness, particularly in the fields of literature, films, and music. A SAARC Museum of Textiles and Handicrafts and an associated Training Centre is being established in Delhi in recognition of the age-old textile traditions of the region. The SAARC Bands festival, with rock bands from all SAARC countries, has become an annual feature in New Delhi. I am also glad to know that Ms. Runa Laila of Bangladesh, Shri Ajay Devgan of India and Ms. Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy of Pakistan were conferred with the honorary title of SAARC Goodwill Ambassadors for HIV and AIDS and have already begun their activities.

### **Excellencies,**

The comprehensive study on SAARC by the SAARC Secretariat and the deliberations yesterday serve to

underline the importance of taking a holistic view towards institutional reform. Similarly, SAARC needs to clarify its thinking on the nature and the direction of its relationships with partner States who have Observer status. Some of the Observer States have done commendable work with our Association, but it is important that we define a clear set of policies and objectives for these relationships and their future direction, before we move further.

## Excellencies,

South Asia is home to one-sixth of humanity. It is a very special part of our planet, not only because of numbers, but due to its wealth of human talent and natural resources, and its rich traditions and culture. Its future will undoubtedly have a significant impact on the collective destiny of mankind. It falls upon us to seize the opportunities to improve the quality of life of our peoples and to make our region a beacon of peace and prosperity. I see no vehicle better placed than SAARC in carrying this agenda forward. SAARC has come a long way and has succeeded in creating an increasingly relevant framework of institutions and instruments. It has provided an invaluable forum for continual contact between leaders, officials and specialists. We need to extend and expand this platform to promote greater interaction and mutual understanding amongst our peoples. Let us work together to infuse greater energy into this organisation, to make it more focussed on our core objectives, and to collectively dismantle the barriers which stand in our way.

In concluding, I want to reiterate India's sincere and abiding commitment towards our shared vision of regional prosperity, peace and cooperation. I take this opportunity to thank the Maldives for ably chairing SAARC in the last couple of years.

Thank you.

Malé,  
February 20, 2014



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