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SAARC must be revamped for regional peace, stability

International conference on South Asia told

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) must be politically invigorated so that it can be the most effective confidence building measure (CBM) for peace and stability in

South Asia, speakers felt on the concluding day of a three-day conference yesterday.

The upshot of the conference was that the rejuvenation of the 16-year old organisation in its true manifestations could help establish a comprehensive approach to the

regional confidence building.

The International Conference on Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) and Security Cooperation in South Asia: Challenges in the New Century" was organised by the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) in collaboration with the Embassy of Germany in Dhaka.

Around 100 distinguished scholars, including some from Germany; members of the academia and representatives of different governments, private institutions and NGOs participated in the deliberations.

The conference was rounded off with a press conference joined by BIISS Chairman Shafi Sami, Director General Major General AM Mansur Ahmed, German Charge d'affaires Herman Nicolai and Research Director Dr A Rab and Conference

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SAARC must be revamped

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Co-ordinator M Humayun Kabir.

The SAARC appears to offer a hope for enhancement of military CBMs, the participants observed.

In another important observation, the participants concluded that asymmetric relations between India vis-à-vis the rest of South Asian countries were not the problem, rather the problem was largely due to the "arrogant attitude" of the Indian bureaucracy.

Such an "arrogant attitude", however, was not only directed at the smaller neighbouring countries of India, but aimed at the common people of India -- a phenomenon that was a by-product of colonial legacy.

The participants suggested that in order to create credibility between Bangladesh and India, New Delhi go beyond the legal framework, promote confidence and mobilise public opinion to resolve existing disputes.

In the light of the Helsinki process, the participants examined the relevance of European experience of CBMs to South Asia. Some participants argued that the experience of the European CBMs had relevance to the region.

The participants discussed the US policy for South Asian CBMs critically and held that America did not play any active or useful role in fostering mutual trust and confidence between India and Pakistan. The US cashed in on the Indo-Pak hostile relations and failed to follow a consistent policy vis-à-vis India and Pakistan, they believe.

Earlier, a working session on "Institutionalising CBMs and Security Cooperation in South Asia" was held.

Prof. Dhuba Kumar Sreshtha of the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies in his paper "The Highest Stake and Hard Choice" remarked, "Perhaps, the highest stake of India in securing the future of political and strategic stability in South Asia is concerned with building ICBMs rather than fostering CBMs.

"Although Kashmir was always a top priority issue for India and Pakistan, other events in the past, as now, relegated the issue to a secondary consideration, as was the case during the 1972 Simla negotiations."

Dr Amena Mohsin of the Department of International Relations, Dhaka University, in her paper, "CBMs and Security Cooperation in South Asia: The Role of the Civil Society" said the states of South Asia came to "accept" some conceptions of security at the policy level.

"But it needs to be emphasised that this acceptance is more of a consequence of donor pressure than an actual appreciation and realisation of (the concept) by the South Asian leadership," she said.

Shaheen Akhtar, senior research analyst at the Institute of Regional Studies of Islamabad, in her paper on "Institutionalising CBMs and Security Cooperation in South Asia: Non-military Aspects" said, "The non-official dialogues could be geared up to develop an alternative framework for security cooperation in the region. The

institutionalisation of non-official dialogue process and their greater interaction with governments and people is likely to broaden their space in the policy-making and implementation of issues encompassing security as well as economic and cultural cooperation."

German Charge d'affaires Herman Nicolai said the conference came at a most convenient time. He explained that the conference sponsored by Germany is "not a vaccine but a medicine" applied to the stability of different parts of the society.

Is there an agenda for the German Embassy to sponsor the international conference on regional cooperation for the second consecutive year?

There is one, "but it is not a hidden agenda."

"Germany", he said, "has been a beneficiary of confidence building measures in Europe. Therefore, South Asia, being a nuclearised region is a matter of concern. It would help defuse tension. We will support any moves for cooperation."

Dr. Abdur Rab, the BIISS research director, suggested that South Asia opt for more confidence building measures. Besides, it should try to insulate itself from being drawn into a vortex of newer conflicts.

Earlier on the opening day, the international conference was opened by Foreign Minister Badruddoza Chowdhury and German Ambassador Dietrich Andreas.