

SAARC is boon

By A Staff Correspondent

The seven-nation South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) was formally launched at the highest political level with all the partners fully committing themselves to work for the success of the forum on the first day of their meeting in Dhaka on Saturday.

With this came the culmination of the arduous and painstaking process of institutionalisation of the concept of regional co-operation mooted by Bangladesh five years back.

The SAARC leaders in the working session immediately after the inaugural function adopted the charter of the forum with an unanimous agreement to meet once a year, instead of biennial summit as contemplated in the draft charter. The second SAARC summit will be held in New Delhi next November. Summiteers also decided that the Foreign Ministers would meet at least twice a year and the Foreign Secretaries as frequently as possible. The leaders will formally sign the charter at the concluding session this (Sunday) afternoon.

The summit decision of the seven leaders to start hiatus of regular South Asian summitry reflected their determination to forge greater amity and understanding among the partners for positive regional cooperation. The close-door working session originally scheduled to last an hour continued for about two hours indicating the seriousness of the summiteers to chart out a course for the 100 crore people of the region.

Down to-earth approach

The spokesman, Ambassador Ahsan said that the Summit adopted the emblem of the forum, approved the integrated programme of action, and ca-

lendar of activities for 1986 decided to form a secretariat of the forum and finalised the 'Dhaka Declaration' to be released today (Sunday). He said that complete amity and understanding prevailed in the close-door session. The heads of state and Government took a down-to-earth approach themselves taking the care of writing their declarations in the charter and finalising the draft declaration, leaving little for their aides, an insider observed.

Though contentious regional and global political issues were kept deliberately out of the ambit of the forum, the inaugural session of the summit was marked with opening statements by the heads of state and Government that carried political overtones. The partners in the forum felt that political issues

cannot be ignored in the geopolitical realities of the region and it is perceived that some in the next summit meeting in New Delhi and other meetings of the Council of Ministers and Standing Committee. A delegate was of the view that the SAARC leaders were very cautious not to bring any contentious issue in their first summit that might mar the smooth launching of the forum.

The leaders agreed to maintain high-level contacts to combat terrorism, drug and abuse and drug trafficking. Their Foreign Ministers to go into the details of this issue and formulate a comprehensive policy to fight back terrorism and stop drug abuse and drug trafficking. When they discussed terrorism, the leaders did not however

mention about the Sikh and Tamil terrorism, the spokesman told a questioner. The spokesman said that Pakistan suggested to form an organisation for women of the SAARC countries to encourage them to form the part of the mainstream population and ensure their upliftment.

About setting up of the Secretariat, the summiteers advised their Foreign Ministers to decide about the venue, staffing and other modalities of the Secretariat. So far only Nepal offered its wish to host the Secretariat. Asked whether Bangladesh would propose to have the Secretariat in Dhaka, the spokesman said the place would be decided by the SAARC Council of Ministers.

In reply to a question, the spokesman said that there was no proposal to expand the membership of the SAARC. He replied in the negative when asked whether any proposal for a non-aggression pact among the member countries came up for discussion in the summit. The heads of state and government stressed on the quick implementation of the integrated programme of action to reach

the fruits of regional co-operation directly to the people. In this regard they underscored the necessity of establishing direct telecommunication and air services, facilities among the member countries.

The SAARC leaders will enjoy a four-hour river cruise on board a 56-year-old vessel 'm.v. Ostri ch' today (Sunday) and at the end of the trip they will fly back to the capital to attend the concluding session.

President Ershad who is also the Chairman of the SAARC will address a Press conference at the end of the summit. The earlier decision for holding a joint Press conference by the seven heads of state and government has been dropped.