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Dhaka-Colombo MOU signed

Joint call to reconvene stalled SAARC summit

Bangladesh and Sri Lanka on Monday made a joint call for immediate reconvening of the stalled 12th SAARC summit scheduled to be held in Pakistan, reports UNB.

The call came from an official meeting between visiting Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Khaleda Zia at the PM office.

Lasting more than hour, the talks covered all bilateral, regional and international issues of mutual interest, Foreign Secretary Shamsur Mobin Chowdhury told reporters.

The two leaders felt that all efforts must be made to see the wisdom and benefit of the SAARC summit earlier scheduled for last January in Islamabad and postponed following India's unwillingness to attend for alleged harboring of terrorism by Pakistan.

The two sides also called for holding meeting of the SAARC Standing Committee comprising Foreign Secretaries of the member-countries in Kathmandu to pave the way for the summit.

Chowdhury said since poverty alleviation is a core issue of the seven-nation South Asian forum and Bangladesh had already prepared a paper on the issue that needs approval of the SAARC leaders, the summit meet should be reconvened immediately.

Referring to the Sri Lankan President's recent meeting with Indian leaders, the Foreign Secretary said President Kumaratunga made a strong appeal for holding the summit as early as possible.

On the red-hot Iraq issue, Both Khaleda and Kumaratunga observed that the Iraqi people should be allowed to determine their future as well as territorial integ-

ity and sovereignty of the nation.

The two SAARC leaders stressed that efforts must be made to expedite humanitarian aid to the Iraqi people and restore law and order in the war-devastated Gulf country.

With regard to current peace process in the strife-torn island-state Sri Lanka, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia extended Bangladesh's all-out support for bringing about peace with territorial integrity and sovereignty preserved.

Bangladesh welcomes negotiated settlement of current dispute between the LTTE and the government to bring about peace and stability in the island state. The settlement must be acceptable to the people of Sri Lanka, the FS said.

On bilateral plane, both the

(See Page 15 Col. 7)

Dhaka-Colombo

From Page 1 Col-8

leaders felt the need for expanding economic cooperation by encouraging more joint ventures, particularly in the field of tourism.

Sri Lankan investment in Bangladesh amounts to around USD 100 million.

At the talks both the sides agreed in principle to resume direct traffic between Dhaka and Colombo. The direct air-link was suspended after a bomb blast at the Sri Lankan airport a few years back causing huge damage to the Lankan airlines.

In response to Khaleda Zia's query, President Chandrika said there had been some positive note and reduction of tensions following the cease-fire between LTTE and the government, which she appreciated as a good sign.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia said Bangladesh could extend any help towards finding a negotiated settlement of the ethnic conflict.

On the outcome of the Khaleda-Kumaratunga summit meeting, the Foreign Secretary said on all counts the talks were "significant, fruitful and constructive".

The talks were capped with the signing of a protocol that envisages regular consultation between the two countries at Foreign Secretary level once a year. The Bangladesh Foreign Secretary and the Sri Lankan High Commissioner in Bangladesh signed the agreement.

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Under the MOU, the foreign secretaries of both the countries will meet annually in Dhaka and Colombo at least once in a year. Bangladesh has signed similar MOU with India and Pakistan.

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia and Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga witnessed the signing ceremony at the International Conference Centre (ICC). The signing of MOU was preceded by the talks between Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia and visiting Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

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