

"We hope to see a new South Asia emerging after the summit of the seven nations", Bangladesh Foreign Minister Humayun Rasheed Choudhury said at his office at the National Parliament building — the venue of the first meeting of the South Asian Heads of State and government — on Monday.

"It has been an arduous journey but we are now at the threshold of a new chapter in relations among South Asian states," Mr Choudhury told the Bangladesh Times in an interview.

The seven South Asian states — Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka — are meeting at Dhaka Dec. 7 and 8 to launch a formal regional cooperative body. The summit which will be attended by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi of India, President Ziaul Haq of Pakistan, President Jayawardene of Sri Lanka, King Birendra of Nepal, President Mamoon Abdul Gayoom of the Maldives, King Jigme Singye Wangchuk of Bhutan and President Ershad will turn into reality a five-year long dream by the regional countries to get together at the highest level.

"We created history by being able to arrange for the summit in a record time," Mr Choudhury who will be presiding over a preparatory meeting of the seven Foreign Ministers on Dec 5 said. ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations)

INTERVIEW

For a new South Asia

AHMED FAZL



Foreign Minister Humayun Rasheed Choudhury.

these areas into working groups", he said.

The nine areas chosen are agriculture rural development, telecommunication, meteorology, health and population activities, transports, postal services, science and technology and sports, arts and culture. But Mr Choudhury said that there were certainly tremendous possibilities of cooperation in other areas also. He cited as examples the joint control of terrorism, narcotics and smuggling. "But there has to be an agreement by all countries on these areas before these can be taken up," Mr Choudhury said.

Two important areas —

trade and education — are still outside the scope for cooperation because there has not been any unanimity on them.

Mr Choudhury is hopeful that the scope for cooperation will increase and fresh opportunities for forging regional links will open.

An active diplomat, Mr. Choudhury says that he is not one of those who are willing to bury their heads in sand and forget that there are no hurdles to regional cooperation. "We have our bilateral issues that need to be resolved," Mr Choudhury said.

But he emphasised that the SARC would be able to create

an atmosphere of friendship and understanding which could soften attitudes on bilateral issues.

The SARC has however kept the discussion of bilateral issues outside its structured arrangements.

A drawback that the SARC has to tackle is the large disparities in economic development among countries in the South Asian region. The ASEAN did not have such a problem because the South East Asian countries were more or less at an identical level of development.

"Bangladesh looks at the question of regional economic disparities not as a drawback nor as a problem but

as a challenge. "We have disease and poverty in the region but if we can work in a concerted manner with combined resources and technological know-how, we should be able to provide an acceptable living standard to all people in the region," Mr Choudhury said adding that the challenge before the SARC is to transform poverty into progress.

The idea of a regional cooperation for South Asia was first proposed by Bangladesh in 1980. A working paper was circulated in all the South Asian capitals explaining why such a regional forum was necessary and how this was possible. During visits to Nepal, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka between 1977 and 1980, President Ziaur Rahman discussed the idea with his hosts.

The response to his proposal was enthusiastic. The seven countries in South Asia soon got together at Colombo in 1981 at the level of their Foreign Secretaries to identify areas where cooperation could be started immediately.

"The credit of President Ershad's government is that it has been able to generate the momentum and speed and so the summit is being held in a record time after it was first mooted," Mr Choudhury said.

"The new atmosphere after the summit will be a reversal of the process injected into South Asia by colonial powers and unfortunately intensified by us after the colonial powers had left," he said.