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Summit today

Leaders of the seven South Asian nations are meeting here today at a historic summit to launch a regional organisation for cooperation which could pave the way for improved bilateral relations among them.

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi of India, President Zia-ul Haq of Pakistan, President Junius Jayewardene of Sri Lanka, King Birendra of Nepal, President Mamoon Abdul Gayoom of the Maldives, King Jigme Singye Wangchuk of Bhutan and host Bangladesh President Hussain Mohammad Ershad are to approve a charter and a declaration for the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

The summit marks the end of five years of arduous negotiations among the officials of the seven countries since a regional body was first mooted.

The seven Foreign Ministers of the South Asian countries held a one-day preparatory meeting on Thursday to finalise the draft of a declaration.

The SAARC has been working since 1983 on an integrated programme of action in nine areas of cooperation—agriculture, rural development, telecommunications, meteorology, health and population activities, transport, postal services, science and technology and sports, arts and culture.

The seven South Asian countries constitute a billion people, nearly one fifth of the world's population. At least five of them—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives were former British colonies.

The South Asian leaders had their first informal meeting Friday evening after they gathered here to launch the regional forum for cooperation.

The summit's official spokesman Abul Ahsan said on Thursday that the Foreign Ministers in their preparatory meeting had approved a proposed agenda for the summit of the leaders, a charter, a draft declaration and an emblem of the new organisation.

The Foreign Ministers also approved a Bangladesh proposal for setting up two committees, to go into the possibilities of cooperation in controlling terrorism and drug abuse.

They considered the periodicity of the summit meetings and said that the heads of state and government should meet frequently.

At least two countries—Bangladesh and India—made strong pleas for having a permanent secretariat for the SAARC. Bangladesh Foreign Minister Humayun Rasheed Choudhury who chaired the meeting said that a permanent secretariat would be needed for better coordination as the cooperation programme expanded and involved new areas. Mr Choudhury recommended formation of a working group with the foreign secretaries of the regional countries to go into the question of the permanent secretariat.

Indian Minister for External Affairs Mr. B.R. Bhagat told the preparatory meeting that the seven countries should reach a consensus on the question of a permanent secretariat.

"It is true that until now a need for a secretariat has not been felt very acutely," Mr. Bhagat said adding that as more and more regional projects matured, the countries would be faced with common technical and financial problems.

Other countries in the organisation are at the moment hesitant about getting involved in the expenditure of creating a new bureaucracy for the organisation with the attendant financial involvements. But all unanimously stressed the need for regional cooperation at an enhanced level.