

Call not to limit expansion of cooperation

SAARC now vital reality: Ershad

MALE (Maldives), Nov 21 (BSS): President Hussain Muhammad Ershad today called for revitalisation of South Asian Regional Cooperation and said SAARC had to develop a personality of its own as South Asia needed to recognise the growing validity of regional cooperation as a viable means to improve the lot of its people.

He was addressing the fifth summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) opened in this Indian Ocean atoll nation Wednesday.

Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, was unanimously chosen the new Chairman of the grouping at the glittering opening ceremony attended by leaders of its seven member countries.

Mr. Gayoom's name was proposed by the outgoing chairman. Prime Minister Mohammed Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan and approved by leaders and delegates of the SAARC countries with applause.

It is the first Summit since December 1988 of SAARC which was founded in 1985 to promote cooperation in the region that is home to more than 50 per cent of the world's poorest people.

SAARC has visibly become such a vital component of the South Asian reality that its absence would leave a gaping void that cannot be easily filled President Ershad told the inaugural session of the summit held at Dharubartuge (conference hall) here.

The inaugural session was addressed by Bhutanese King Jigme Singye Wangchuk, Indian Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar.

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 Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, Nepalese Prime Minister Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, Sri Lanka Prime Minister D.B. Wijetunga and host Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. Spouses of the distinguished guests including First Lady Begum Raushan Ershad and delegates from the SAARC countries including Foreign Minister Anisul Islam Mahmud were present.

In his 23-minute speech President Ershad touched upon various aspects of SAARC and pleaded for reviewing certain aspect of its charter with the object of ensuring that it did not limit the freedom to expand cooperation among member nations.

In this context he said the unanimity rule the principle excluding discussion of bilateral or contentious issues and the injunction that SAARC should not duplicate but compliment bilateral and multilateral cooperation all underscored this sense of circumspection in its decision making.

Despite our respective domestic constraints and specific difficulties in bilateral relations

among ourselves we have successfully taken shared stands on various international issues he added.

Even within South Asia itself, President Ershad said, "we have been in consultation with one another on major issues which affect relations among ourselves."

President Ershad referred to the recent Gulf crisis and its multiple political and economic spin-offs which, he said, were immediate examples of the dangerous forces that could be unleashed by lack of restraint.

He said the Gulf crisis had affected the South Asian countries very seriously and engulfed "all of us, some more than others, economically."

President Ershad proposed for serious consideration the discussion of this subject formally in the agenda of the summit saying "it will enable us to reinforce the support and sympathy which the International community and international financial institutions had already extended to us."

He said the question of communications between member states should be discussed both at the multilateral and bilateral levels so that a political decision could

be taken to facilitate freer travel, more effective communication links, road, rail, air and telecommunications, so that we could both meet one another and talk to one another much more informally and make our SAARC projects more meaningful.

President Ershad emphasised on discussion to find out ways and means for exchanging information and news material among the member countries. This he said, required a political decision and added. "I do not see why these important and vital issues should be contentious if we exercise our political will to promote them."

Referring to the progress made in several areas he said, those needed to be firmed up through national legislation and actual implementation. We have already adopted the convention on terrorism and useful follow-up meetings have taken place to strengthen intra-regional cooperation, he added.

The Maldives summit, President Ershad said, was now poised to adopt regional convention against drug abuse and drug trafficking. Both these initiatives have placed South Asia in the forefront of combating the

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