

SAARC ISSUE

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia's official visit to Sri Lanka in the wake of the postponement of the fifth annual summit of the SAARC states in Colombo is a reflection of Bangladesh's commitment to the principles of regional cooperation. Dhaka initiated the concept of regionalism for the one billion South Asian people from the firm conviction that collaborative efforts and the pooling of resources on key development issues will accelerate progress for all the seven countries. Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka comprise one-fifth of the present global population and also some of the poorest people of the world. Their development needs are urgent and yet progress was not being achieved at a rapid enough pace.

Although many skeptics dubbed the SAARC, the "Club of the Poor", the organisation in the last six years had made unbelievable progress in binding individual endeavours in human and natural resources development together in the mainstream of regional progress. The achievements in the case of agricultural research, weather forecasting and rural development projects like non-formal education, vocational training and improved health services, point to the fact that regional cooperation as a concept has caught the imagination of the vast majority of development planners and workers.

Begum Zia in response to a welcoming address by Sri Lankan President Premadasa, underscored the need for widening the scope of SAARC instead of squeezing it in the context of the changed global political environment. The end of superpower rivalry makes it easier for regional cooperation to grow. Also regionalism holds the prospects of using to the best advantage the new opportunities unlocked by the relaxation of global tension.

It is important, therefore, to ensure the growth of SAARC and protect it from all kinds of heinous motives. The regional forum faced several challenges in the initial period and most of these crises had their roots in mutual distrust and suspicion which were the outcome in turn of lingering bilateral issues. Increased cooperation under SAARC should create a climate of confidence which is necessary if the countries in this impoverished part of the world are keen on building peace and stability in the region.

It is hoped that SAARC will be able to cope with the new challenge posed by the postponement of the summit and emerge stronger from the crisis. The peoples of the region are committed to the SAARC principles and this has been demonstrated in the past. It is now for the leaders to respond positively to the demands of the times.

Bangladesh has made its point strongly enough that the progress in regional cooperation achieved so far cannot be allowed to go to waste. In the unofficial mini-summit of the four South Asian leaders in Colombo, it had been clear that the vast majority of South Asians are in favour of carrying forward the momentum of regional cooperation. Whatever may be the compulsions which forced the postponement of the Colombo summit on Thursday, the annual meeting should be held as early as possible and at the same venue. Begum Zia returning

from an official visit to Colombo yesterday stressed that in the interest of sustaining the progress of regional cooperation the summit should be held before the new year.