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SAARC Council meet Dec 4

Poverty alleviation to be highlighted

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Poverty alleviation, the key problem in the South Asia inhabited by more than one billion people, will remain the major issue when the SAARC Council of Ministers begins a two-day meeting in Dhaka on December 4, reports BSS.

Poverty alleviation is central to SAARC programme for cooperative efforts towards economic uplift while the council will deliberate on the Integrated Programme of Actions (IPA) and other relevant matters, Foreign Secretary Reaz Rahman told newsmen in Dhaka on Monday.

The Council, made up by the Foreign Ministers of the member nations, is meeting during the interregnum of the last summit in Dhaka and the next one which will be held in India.

This conference of the Foreign Ministers halfway through the summits is aimed at making an overview of the SAARC activities in the light of the decisions of the preceding summit.

The Foreign Secretary said SAARC activities were moving in full swing to the satisfaction of the members and the process of IPA to the benefits of the people of the region is receiving impetus with the passing of every summit.

Senior officials of the SAARC members begin their meeting in Dhaka from today (Tuesday) as a prelude to the discussions by the foreign secretaries under the aegis of the Standing Committee.

The Standing Committee prepares the ground for the Foreign Ministerial meeting.

All the Foreign Ministers of the SAARC states will attend the conference which will be the 13th session of SAARC Council of Ministers, Mr. Rahman said.

The main vehicle of SAARC activities is the IPA, which will come under review of the meeting along with the calendar activities of the 13 Technical Committees.

The Foreign Secretary, who is also the Chairman of the Standing Committee said other issues outside the IPA like the "People to people contact", two conventions, SAARC food reserve, would come for discussions.

The report of the independent South Asia Commission on poverty, whose report was endorsed by the last summit, will also come for review, he said.

Besides, he added, the details of the South Asian Preferential Trade

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Agreement (SAPTA) and the South Asian Development Fund (SADF) will be deliberated upon in the meeting.

Answering questions, the Foreign Secretary said contentious bilateral issue like "Farakka" is not covered for discussions by SAARC charter since objective of the collective effort is to concentrate on the issues relating to common good.

However, he said, bilateral matters are often discussed when Foreign Ministers meet at bilateral plane and this casts a sober effect on the overall climate in the region.

Responding to questions about the progress of the SAARC, he said the process continues and the achievement is laudable given the condition and resource constraints in the region.

Replying to other questions, he said Bangladesh made every effort to facilitate the return of the "Chakma refugees" from India and it is awaiting for early outcome of its efforts.

He told another questioner that the Government is pursuing with all vigour the repatriation of "stranded Pakistanis" from Bangladesh.