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SAARC summit

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begins today

By A Staff Reporter

The two-day seventh SAARC summit begins in Dhaka this morning with a renewed zeal for reviving the confidence on the regional forum of one billion people and bringing out some concrete results through mutual cooperation of seven South Asian countries.

The summit, which was postponed twice—first in December and again in January last—because of some internal compulsions of India, marks the second cycle of the SAARC summits. SAARC whose idea was first mooted by Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman, was formally launched at first summit held in Dhaka December, 1985.

Despite the existence of contentious bilateral issues and occasional strains in relationships, leaders of seven South Asian nations kept the forum going with the objective of improving the economic wellbeing of more than one billion people of the region through mutual cooperation. They also took advantage of the summit for holding off-the-summit discussions on bilateral issues. The SAARC charter does not allow discussion on any bilateral contentious issues within SAARC framework. The capital city has been spiced up for the summit with grandeur and face-lift. The city has been dressed up with colourful bunting, portraits of SAARC leaders, blinking fairy tale lights adorning all important buildings and important road crossings.

In the backdrop of bomb blasts in major cities of India

and Pakistan, tight security measures have been enforced in and around the capital in connection with the holding of the summit. About 3000 security personnel comprising police, armed police, para military BDR, intelligence agencies have been deployed and all processions, rallies and demonstrations banned since Thursday night. The ban on rallies and processions would continue till 10 pm Monday.

Prime Minister of Pakistan Mian Nawaz Sharif, King of Bhutan Jigme Singhe Wangchuk, Prime Minister of Nepal Girija Prasad Koirala, President of the Maldives Mamoon Abdul Gayoom and current Chairman of SAARC and President of Sri Lanka Ranasinghe Premadasa have already arrived here to attend the summit. Indian Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao is scheduled to arrive at 8.30 am today from the Thai capital, Bangkok.

Before the start of the inaugural session of the summit, guard of honour will be presented to heads of state and government at the ICC premises. The inaugural session is scheduled to last from 10 am to 12.30 pm after the inauguration ceremony, leaders will plant saplings at the ICC premises and at 1.30 pm would be flown to Meghna ghat by helicopter for a cruise on the traditional steamer "Ostrich" for more than three hours. During the cruise the leaders would be free to discuss bilateral issues. They will have

Contd. on page 8 col. 3

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Contd. from page 1

their lunch on board.

The South Asian leaders will attend a banquet hosted by Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, who would take over the stewardship of the SAARC from the outgoing Chairman Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa at the inaugural session of the summit in the evening.

On the second day of the summit tomorrow (Sunday), the leaders will be free to hold bilateral discussions in the morning. They would make a joint call on President Abdur Rahman Biswas at Bangabhaban and attend a lunch hosted by him there. After the lunch

the SAARC leaders will witness a cultural show at Bangabhaban.

The concluding session of the summit, scheduled to be held for 75 minutes begins at 5 pm tomorrow at the conference venue at ICC. The summiters are expected to adopt a declaration at the concluding session.

BSS adds: The nascent SAARC made a modest beginning with cooperation in selected areas but gradually came to cover a lot of areas of direct benefits to the common people in the region.

Area analysts say that the SAARC over the last few years has blossomed into a meaningful economic forum and it is time that the group addresses

itself to more hardcore economic issues meeting the aspirations of the people of the South Asia.

The seventh summit is expected to take up such hardcore economic matters, in addition to consolidating the gains made so far by the SAARC.

While the bilateral issues are not covered by the SAARC arena, the SAARC gatherings either at the heads of government or Foreign Ministers or even Foreign secretaries level have always provided a desirable opportunity for the member states to discuss rather vexed bilateral matters.

Such discussions might not have produced resolutions of the vexed issues but cast a

sobering effects on the overall environment in the region, the area analysts said.

For instance they pointed out, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia's talks with Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao would focus on such crucial issues like the sharing of the waters of the Ganges and with the Pakistan Prime Minister on early repatriation of the "stranded Pakistanis" from Bangladesh.

The Seventh SAARC summit is expected to provide a collective stimulation to the efforts for common goods by the states, whose ties are often bedevilled by occasional strains at bilateral plan.