

The Seven In A Family

—Ahmed Fazl

As the flower beds lining the capital's boulevards come into bloom under a clear December sky, leaders of South Asian countries will start arriving in Dhaka for a historic summit turning into reality a five-year-old dream.

It was the youngest South Asian country Bangladesh which first floated the idea of regional cooperation in 1980 and it soon found moorings in the neighbouring capitals. For the first time, the seven South Asian nations—Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka—began to realise that despite some of their bilateral problems, they share many common values which have their roots deep in the region's history and cultural traditions.

The seven together make up for more than a billion people, nearly one-fifth of the world's population. Jointly, they can play a global role commensurate with their size.

But South Asia is a difficult terrain for regional cooperation. History has created common bonds but also generated mutual suspicions. The countries of the region are at varying levels of development some are more developed than others.

Those who worked assiduously for the last five years to prepare the seven countries for the first South Asian Regional Cooperation (SARC) Summit have been cautious so that neither history nor economic disparities stood in the way of a fruitful

This article traces the origin of the idea of regional cooperation of the countries in South Asia and the efforts leading to the holding of the summit meeting going to be held in Dhaka on December 7 and 8.

cooperation. The areas selected for cooperation were those which would benefit all the countries of the region. Working on a paper on regional cooperation prepared by Bangladesh, the Foreign Secretaries of the seven countries decided to cooperate initially in five areas in their first meeting in Colombo in April, 1981. These are agriculture, rural development, telecommunications, meteorology and health and population activities. They also decided to conduct studies in co-operation in these fields assigning a country to co-ordinate studies in each area.

Seven months later, the Foreign Secretaries in Kathmandu decided to build cooperation in three more areas—transport, postal services and science and technology. Another area sports, arts and culture was added in Islamabad in 1982.

9 IDENTIFIED AREAS

The working groups on the nine identified areas of cooperation prepared their reports which were examined by a committee. The Committee recommended an integrated programme of action.

The time had come for taking

the next step in regional cooperation. The Foreign Ministers of the seven countries met for the first time in New Delhi on August 1, 1983 and adopted a declaration on SARC taking regional cooperation to a political plane.

The Ministers also launched the integrated programme of action and established a Standing Committee of the Foreign Secretaries for coordination and monitoring of the programme. The committee has the authority for approval of projects, determining sectoral priorities, mobilising regional and external resources and identifying new areas of cooperation.

The Standing Committee has been meeting once a year since its formation in 1983. At least 21 projects are being implemented within the programme of action and when the committee meets again on December 4 in Dhaka before the summit, it is expected to announce a new set of projects for regional cooperation.

What the Foreign Ministers decided in their meeting in New Delhi is to recommend to their heads of government to meet at a Summit. Since then the Standing Committee has been preparing for the first Summit in Dhaka. Through small but decisive

steps at a time, the ground for the summit has been prepared. Dhaka as the venue was a natural choice for the summit and recognition for the pioneering role played by Bangladesh for regional cooperation.

The framework will be given an official stamp as Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi of India, President Ziaul Haq of Pakistan, President Junius Javewardene of Sri Lanka, King Birendra Bikram Shah of Nepal, President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom of the Maldives, King Jigme Singye Wangchuk of Bhutan and their host President Hussain Muhammad Ershad adopt the charter of the SARC on the second day of the Summit which begins on December 7.

The leaders start arriving in Dhaka from December 3 with President Javewardene expected to reach first. He will be followed the next day by the other five leaders.

A warm welcome awaits all of them. The capital has put on a new coat of paint for the Summit and welcoming arches on the streets will proclaim the united search by the seven countries for a new era of cooperation and a new identity.

The leaders have no agenda for the summit. The task before them is to give a formal structure and a concrete shape to the spirit of cooperation that has caught the imagination of the people in South Asia. They are thinking of themselves as part of a family—a family of seven members with many shared hopes and promises of a brighter future.