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SAARC Speakers' confce opens

Hasina stresses on unity for peace of S. Asian people

Staff Correspondent

The third conference of the Association of the SAARC Speakers and Parliamentarians began in Dhaka on Friday with a call for regular exchange of views among the Speakers and Parliamentarians of the region in a bid to strengthen the democratic norms and practices for the welfare of the one billion people.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina inaugurated the three-day conference at the International Conference Centre as the chief guest in presence of the Speakers and delegation members of the seven SAARC countries.

The Speaker of Bangladesh and Chairman of the association Humayun Rasheed Chowdhury, Leader of Parliamentary Delegation of Bhutan Tashi Phutsog, Speaker of the Indian Lokshaba G.M.C. Balayogi, Speaker of Nepal Ramchandra Poudel, Speaker of Pakistan Illahi Bukhsh Soomro, Deputy Speaker of Sri Lanka Anil

Moonesinghe and Deputy Minister of Education of the Maldives Abdul Hammed Abdul Hakeem also addressed the inaugural function.

Addressing the function Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina called for unity among the SAARC parliamentarians on a minimum point that is peace and welfare of the people in the region transcending political discordance.

She said that neither poverty nor illiteracy could be removed unless democracy was at work. "Authoritarian rulers have no concern and removing poverty or illiteracy is not in their interest, since that would go against them", she added.

She said, "We seem to have been caught in a vicious circle. Democracy can not work if there is widespread poverty and illiteracy, poverty and illiteracy can not be removed unless there is democracy. We must try to get out of this. This is the most urgent task."

She said, "We wish to make Parliament the nerve-centre of all national activities—all issues of the consequence must be debated there and we must find answers to these together."

The Prime Minister said, "Our concept of our democracy, although the concept which is taken from the West, is not, and can not be the same as democracy is in the West, whatever similar their forms and contents might be. What the West has taken centuries to attain, we can not be asked to attain overnight. Our democracy must be our own, close to our own conditions, culture and values."

She further added, "If we are asked what now stands most in the way of democracy in this region I would say, without a mo-

ment's pause, poverty and illiteracy. We, most of us living in this region, are ordinary mortals, our life more full of despair than hope, our faith in what is good and in our ability to attain it is challenged every moment by disappointment and disillusion of one kind or the other. Money can play havoc with us, and it does. It can buy muscle power and intimidate us. It can even buy us, since we live in distress and are not above temptations. Our vision is blurred, since we have poor or little education. We find the issues involving our life in too difficult or complex for us to grasp. We act blindly, at times on impulse, at times driven by compulsions we can not escape from."

Focusing on the trend of politics in South Asia, she said polit-

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Unity for peace

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ical issues by and large dominated politics of this region and suggested that in the new millennium all should be more concerned with social and economic issues than ever. "Why can not these be turned into political issues and given greater importance in our political thoughts?" she parried.

The Prime Minister observed, "Political issues have their due place in politics. That does not mean that other issues, equally important, if not more so, should be relegated to backseat".

She called for giving importance to the issues attracting boys and girls to school, providing pure drinking water, sanitation facilities and healthcare services, ensuring women empowerment and social justice and attaining economic growth.

One other thing democracy is closely linked to is human rights, she said and added, "Here too there is difference of perception between the West and us. The most important human right is, I believe, the right to life. This is not threatened in the West, as it, unfortunately, is more often than not, in our region. We have to make persistent efforts to make sure that no one dies of hunger or malnutrition because of lack of medical care. We have to see to it that natural calamities, which are frequent and devastating here, do not take

ogy to be able to instantly communicate with each other and particularly with parliamentarians within the region in order to draw on individual and collective experiences and wisdom.

The Indian Speaker G.M.C. Balayogo said, "We, parliamentarians who have been entrusted by the people with the task of promoting their welfare, have a

special responsibility in ensuring the success of SAARC, its objective, policies and programmes of action. We, as popular representatives, have the special advantage of carrying people's concerns into SAARC activities and reinforce them with ultimate popular approval."

Pakistani Speaker Illahi Bukhsh Soomro said, "A heavy responsibility rests on the shoulders of parliamentarians to ensure peace and prosperity in the region."

The inaugural function was attended by ministers, parliament members, excepting BNP members, high government officials and officials of the Jatiya Sangsad. The Leader of the Opposition in Parliament and BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia and BNP MPs did not attend the inaugural session.