

Afghanistan takes part in SAFMA meeting at Shimla

It was a heady mix of politicians and media personalities at the two-day meeting of South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA) Parliamentary Forum at Shimla. At the June 2-3 gathering, a 14-member delegation from Afghanistan with six members of Wolesi Jirga (lower house of Afghan parliament) and eight journalists were in the thick of action in the meeting. Samander, Secretary General of SAFMA-Afghanistan Chapter was quite nostalgic about the trip and elated about the experience. He observed, "For us a visit to India is always memorable. But here is an occasion we could combine business with pleasure by visiting one of most popular summer hill stations in India."

With the formal inauguration of the SAFMA Chapter in Kabul on May 30, the Afghan delegation made their maiden official appearance at the Shimla gathering. Afghanistan media, experiencing a tremendous growth since the fall of the tyrant regime of Taliban, is now formally reaching out to its South Asian media brethren.

The Shimla meet is a build up on the Bhurban Declaration adopted at the end of first meeting of South Asian Parliament meeting held in May, 2005 in Punjab, Pakistan. With the focal theme of 'South Asian Parliament: towards South Asian Unity', the Shimla meeting witnessed participation of a wide spectrum of political personalities and prominent media representatives from all over the South Asian region.

The meeting deliberated on topics from overarching theme of regional cooperation to specific issues like water sharing, South Asian



SAFMA meeting in progress at Shimla.

Human Rights Code, specific policy actions on energy cooperation, cross border cooperation in fighting the menace of terrorism, etc.

Afghan delegates found the proceedings very lively and an exposure to cherish. Noor Akbari, one of the Afghan parliamentarians and a frequent visitor to India, found the meet useful to catch up with some acquaintances and an opportunity to make new acquaintances. For Samander, it was an unusual experience offering the tough challenge of handling media and politics at such a large forum. Halim Fidai, President of SAFMA, Afghanistan Chapter, was very appreciative of India's active support for Afghanistan joining SAARC and the traditionally cordial relations between the two countries.

"SAFMA Afghanistan Chapter, though officially started only last week", a confident Fidai said, "is going to add a new chapter both physically and substantially to SAFMA in particular and SAARC in general. Our participation in the Shimla meet is only a small step in this direction."

Excerpts from Shimla Declaration of SAFMA

■ This is a historic moment when the people of South Asia have become conscious of their new tryst with destiny.

■ We urge all our states to simultaneously move forward to address long-standing political disputes through peaceful means.

■ A system of connectivity will have to be constructed especially for the railways and the truckers will have to be issued special permits.

■ Countering the widespread threat of terrorism, the SAARC countries must implement the current protocol for cooperation against terrorism and bring it in line with the international norms.

■ The regional efforts against terrorism must also include measures to combat the spread of small arms and light weapons, narcotics trafficking, smuggling, organized crimes and criminal mafias.

■ This will require exchanges and interaction between the national intelligence and security agencies with their counterparts across the border and greater interaction between the armed forces and military establishments in the region.

■ To overcome information deficit in the region, it is essential that all restrictions on access to and free and uninterrupted flow of information are removed forthwith. Media persons and products should be allowed free movement across frontiers.

India offers assistance to AAAS

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Inputs were also sought from international organisations like Food and Agriculture Organisation, International Centre for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas, International Centre for Potatoes. Sectoral working groups were formed to discuss the overall framework of AAAS in the fields of crop improvement, R&D programmes in agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry, livestock, forestry and natural resource management, etc.

The team also undertook site visits to research farms at Badambagh and Binihesar, vegetable farm at Qaragah, key agricultural and animal husbandry cooperatives as well as Afghanistan Academy of Sciences. Based on the deliberations and the outcomes of the meetings and working groups, the Indian team will shortly be submitting its concept plan for AAAS, to be taken up appropriately by the Afghan side.

President Karzai's worthwhile goal for reform in the vital agricultural research sector may, then, not be too far from being realised plurality. ■

India provides fortified biscuits

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Minister Atmar welcomed the protein biscuit distribution programme led by India, maintaining that the nutrition provided will help in making children more active and boost their overall development. Ambassador Sood reaffirmed India's commitment to continuing the protein biscuit distribution programme as a valuable means towards reviving the crippled education sector in the country. WFP Country Director Corsino, on his part, welcomed the timely arrival of biscuits. The Samangan Governor Shafaq appealed to the community elders to send more and more children to schools to benefit from the programme.

At the Naswan Girls school too, the ambience was hugely uplifting. It was the first time that the school was receiving Ministerial-level dignitaries, and it had pull out all the stops in according an appropriate welcome. Watching the smiling faces of school children, framed against the afternoon sun, it was not hard to figure out why the protein biscuit distribution programme is considered the most visible symbol of partnership between India and Afghanistan. ■