

Kabul hosts Regional Economic Cooperation Conference

Minister of State for External Affairs E. Ahamed led the Indian delegation at the first ever Regional Economic Cooperation Conference hosted in Kabul on December 4 and 5. President Karzai had put forward the idea of such a conference earlier in 2005, building on the work done by international financial institutions. G-8 Foreign Ministers announced their support for such an initiative at their London meeting in June 2005.

Taking part in the Conference were 11 regional countries — China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, UAE and Uzbekistan. Also present were G-8 representatives and officials from the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, IMF, etc.

The Afghan leadership understands fully well that economic cooperation is central to the future security of the region. The timing of the Kabul Conference coincides with the completion of the Bonn Process. The post-Bonn Process highlights the importance of regional cooperation in Afghanistan's national development strategy.

The Conference focused attention on specific projects and programmes where practical work can be undertaken in the near term. These include trade in electricity and power generation; transport and transit infrastructure and improved procedures; border management; and measures to facilitate regional and external trade.

Speaking on the occasion, Minister of State Ahamed reaffirmed India's commitment to working with the people and the Government of Afghanistan to rebuild this country after the devastation caused by three decades of conflict. He emphasized that Afghanistan, as a land-locked country, needs regional linkages to expand its trade, both within the region and with the outside world.

"Our vision of prosperity is not limited to India but encompasses our region. I am convinced that sustained economic growth in India will have a positive impact on our neighbourhood. The natural economic linkages which once governed this region in the pre-colonial era will be rediscovered and the process of economic development will transform the nature of political discourse in this region," the Minister said.

A Kabul Declaration on Regional Economic Cooperation was adopted. India has offered to host the next Conference in 2006.



PHOTO ABOVE,
Minister of State for
External Affairs E.
Ahamed, left, with First
Vice-President of
Afghanistan Ahmed Zia
Massoud at his
office in Kabul on
December 4. PHOTO
RIGHT, Minister Ahamed
addressing the Regional
Economic Cooperation
Conference. Seated behind
at centre is Ambassador of
India to Afghanistan
Rakesh Sood.



I The natural economic linkages which once governed this region in the pre-colonial era will be rediscovered and the process of economic development will transform the nature of political discourse in this region, Minister of State for External Affairs Ahamed said.

While urging for a "stronger partnership" between regional organisations, the Declaration said that the "short-term focus of regional economic cooperation should be on practical win-win projects, which benefit two or more countries and can subsequently fit into wider regional economic cooperation, notably in the fields of energy, transport and

trade". The Declaration also called for "high-level political commitment" for such projects and the need for "better information sharing" among the countries so as to avoid duplication of efforts.

The Declaration also noted that countries of the region must "implement and, where necessary, revise and update existing international, regional and bilateral conventions and agreements" on transportation. It urged the "creation, development and maintenance of inter-continental transit routes", with a focus on the "East-West and North-South corridors".

It also said that countries should "encourage and facilitate the transportation of energy resources".

During his brief visit, Minister Ahamed called on President Karzai and First Vice-President Ahamed Zia Massoud and he also had bilateral discussions with Foreign Minister Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, British Minister of State Kim Howell and Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Wu Dawei.