



Kabul participates in 29th SAARC Council of Ministers' Meet in New Delhi



Afghan Foreign Minister Dr. Rangin Dadfar Spanta (second from left), Union Minister of External Affairs Pranab Mukherjee (fourth from left) with SAARC countries' Foreign Ministers at the 29th SAARC Council of Ministers Meeting in New Delhi on December 7.

Dr. Rangin Dadfar Spanta, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan took part in the 29th Session of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Council of Ministers in New Delhi on December 7-8.

Spanta represented Afghanistan as Permanent Member for the first time after Afghanistan was admitted into SAARC as its eighth member in April last year.

In this opening remarks at the conference, Spanta expressed Afghanistan's determination to become an active member of the SAARC fraternity.

Describing regional cooperation as one of the pillars of Afghanistan's external, security and development strategy, Spanta highlighted Afghanistan's position as the land-bridge linking Central Asia, South Asia, Middle East and the Far East.

The Foreign Minister also informed the conference about the steps taken by the Afghan Government towards promoting regional cooperation, including Afghanistan's commitments and obligations towards the various SAARC agreements.

On the sidelines of the Session of the Council of Ministers, Spanta met his Indian and Nepalese counterparts and exchanged views with them on Afghanistan's bilateral relations with their countries.

During the Council of Ministers Meeting, the Foreign Ministers of the eight countries of the South Asian subcontinent took a major step towards creating a regional security network and agreed to finalise a mutual legal assistance pact that would enable greater cooperation in countering terrorism in the region.

To make SAARC people-centric and to promote social development of nearly 1.5 billion people of the region — one-fourth of the world's population — the ministers also agreed to operationalise the SAARC Development Fund immediately.

A temporary cell is being established at the SAARC Secretariat for the Fund's operationalisation and implementation of identified projects.

The Fund already has a corpus of \$300 million with India pledging \$100 million.

The Council of Ministers also endorsed the grouping's Home Ministers' recommen-

dations for a security network within the association. The Ministers also agreed to have the draft agreement on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters finalised as soon as possible.

A meeting of legal advisers to finalise the agreement will be held in Colombo in April this year.

The proposed security network and the draft mutual legal assistance agreement will go a long way in boosting cooperation among South Asian countries to tackle terrorism and trans-border crime, and will help bridge the trust deficit among countries of the region in this crucial area.

The concept was actively discussed at the 14th SAARC summit held in Delhi in April last year. But the proposal initially met with some resistance from Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Later, all SAARC Foreign Ministers called on Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh.

The Ministers also discussed in detail a range of transport links that would create a genuinely inter-connected South Asia and promote more popular contacts in the sub-continent. ■