



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. ■

Kabul Remembers Maulana Azad



A section of the audience at the lecture-cum-discussion on the life and times of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. Seated on the dais (from right to left) Ambassador Rakesh Sood, Maulvi Zeinollah Manalai, Najib Manalai, Senior Advisor to Minister of Information & Culture, and Golnoor Bahman, poet and writer.

For many in Afghanistan, both young and old, the name of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the first Education Minister of India, has a familiar ring. For a younger Afghan generation, ICCR, or the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, is a household name with its much coveted scholarships. Maulana Azad was the founder president of ICCR.

For the older generation, Maulana Azad represented the sublime values of Muslim intellectual renaissance, and symbolised the finest aspects of progressivism.

Maulana was also an important figure in India's freedom struggle. This was the focal theme of the special presentation made by the 83-year-old renowned Afghan poet, scholar of jurisprudence and writer of repute, Maulvi Zeinollah Manalai.

The lecture-cum-discussion was organised by the India Cultural Centre (ICC), Kabul, and attracted around 70 eager listeners.

Inaugurating the function, Ambassador Rakesh Sood spoke about the life and achievements of Maulana Azad and his contribution to

the education sector in India.

In an erudite and detailed presentation on Maulana Azad, Maulvi Manalai touched on various aspects of his life.

Maulvi Manalai then reflected on the thoughts and philosophy of Maulana Azad with specific reference to Azad's work 'Gubar-e-Khatir' (Fog of Thoughts). Maulvi Manalai has himself translated 'Gubar-e-Khatir' into Pashto.

The audience clung to every word of the Maulvi's hour-long presentation.

On the occasion, Nilab Rahimi, Director, Public Libraries, Ministry of Information & Culture, and Golnoor Bahman, a well-known poet and writer, also spoke about the life and times of Maulana Azad.

For many, the session was an interesting and educative experience.

For Maulvi Manalai, this was a remarkable experience. The gentle octogenarian said: "This is a memorable day for me. I never thought there would be an occasion like this. I want to thank ICC and the Indian Embassy for giving me this opportunity."

INDIA CULTURE CENTRE EVENTS FOR JANUARY 2008

JAN 15 'Cry of History' Theatre performance by Simorgh Film Association of Culture & Art, Herat. Dialogues in Dari.

JAN 22 Screening of Shyam Benegal's film 'Making of Mahatma', in English

JAN 26 Patriotic songs by students of India Culture Centre



Afghan delegation takes part in IITF 2007



The Ambassador of Afghanistan to India, Dr. Makdoom Raheen, with the Afghan business delegation at the Afghan Pavilion at IITF 2007.

Pragati Maidan in New Delhi is a familiar landmark, particularly for those interested in trade fairs and exhibitions. Come November, India Trade Promotion Organisation's (ITPO) flagship event, formally known as 'India International Trade Fair' (IITF) attracts thousands of visitors to Pragati Maidan. For a second successive year, the Afghan business delegation at IITF became the cynosure for many.

The 27th edition of IITF, held from November 14-27, saw more than 40 Afghan businesspersons, representing different sectors of Afghan industry. The Afghan pavilion, built artfully and adorned with a variety of goods ranging from carpets, dry and fresh fruits, traditional handicraft items, herbal medicines to precious stones, turned out to be a "grand success" at IITF.

Formally inaugurated jointly by the Afghan Ambassador to India, Dr. Makdoom Raheen, and the president and CEO of Afghanistan Investment Support Agency (AISA), Dr. Omar Zakilwal, the Afghan stalls proved to be a major draw at IITF.

For the Afghan participants, IITF 2007

became a valuable experience and source of inspiration.

Bibi Fawzia, director of the Community of Afghan Women Handicrafts (CAWH) and one of the exhibitors herself at the Afghan pavilion, said: "This is a great experience that we can use for our participation in future exhibitions. I may have a contract in the near future with an Indian trade organisation as they chose one of our samples at the stall."

Dr. Zakhilwal said, "Our exports to India have declined since over a decade, due to the disturbed situation in our country. From the existing level of \$30 to \$40 million per year, we want to increase our exports to India. Participation in such trade events would be very important for us."

Mohammad Hadi Farzam, director of Farzam Carpet Manufacturing Company, added, "Exhibition of Afghan products at such fairs is the first step in raising our profile and visibility." AISA's Investment Promotion Department director, Walid Tamim, agrees: "To see so many people standing in queue to buy Afghan dry and fresh fruits explains that Afghan agro prod-

ucts have a very significant place in the Indian market."

With ITPO declaring 'Agro Industries and Processed Food' as this year's special theme at IITF, the Afghan businesspersons felt a special affinity with the theme, as Afghanistan is traditionally known for varieties of dry fruits like almond, fig, raisins, apricot, pistachio, and fresh fruits like grapes, pomegranates, melons, apples, and medicinal herbs.

The Afghan delegation also participated in a discussion titled "Doing Business with Afghanistan", hosted by Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industries. Delivering the key note address, India's Minister of State for Commerce Jairam Ramesh said that India would offer zero import duty on 4,536 tariff lines to Afghanistan, as a new member of South Asia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) with effect from February 2008.

Tamim, reflecting the spirit of the Afghan delegation, said, "We are already looking forward eagerly for next year's IITF, may be in larger numbers." ■

Afghani tandoori chicken, ashak, sheer pera take part in SAARC Food Festival

With Afghanistan's delicious Afghani tandoori chicken and ashak, Pakistan's simmering chappali kebabs, Sri Lanka's tempting fish ambulthiyal, Maldives' delicious masbai and Nepal's spicy maasu bhaat — the food chapter of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) cultural festival held in New Delhi was a cauldron of flavours of South Asia.

Open to the public from December 7 to 9 last, the food festival — organised by the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR), at the Ashoka Hotel — was the one place where the best chefs of the eight SAARC countries — India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal and Bhutan — came together to whip up some of the best loved delicacies of their countries.

Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee, who inaugurated the festival, said: "Food is a product of centuries of evolution, it is the window on the culture we belong to. In this food festival one will see that there are a number of common things that we South Asian countries share. Whether it's our spices, our cereals, the form of cooking, or the traditional form of service, everything is very similar. This festival reinstates the fact there is unity in diversity."

All Foreign Ministers of SAARC countries were present on the occasion. They all shared the appetizers served on a silver plate, which symbolises the belief that breaking bread from the same plate fosters kinship among the people.



On the first day of the festival, Afghanistan presented its specialties — ashak, Afghani tandoori chicken and kabuli pulao.

Asif Ali Yousufi, the chef, said Afghani food is generally non-spicy. "Afghani food is not as spicy as Indian food is. Ashuk for instance is steamed and not at all spicy. It's a flower which is found in countries like Afghanistan, Iran and Turkmenistan," Yousufi said.

Bhutanese food, on the other hand, is very hot and spicy. "Ema dat for instance, which is made of chillies and cheese, is a delicacy

and it's very spicy. Similarly, Ra-Cha which is a mutton delicacy is again very spicy," said Regina, the host at the Bhutan stall.

Those who love gorging on fish had a wonderful time sampling delicacies at the stalls set up by Sri Lanka, Maldives and Bangladesh. "Hilsa and prawn dishes are a speciality and we have made a range of fish dishes. The green Bengal chicken is a speciality one must try," said Tommy Miah, the chef at the Bangladesh stall. "Its rich green colour is because of the spinach and mint and not because of any artificial colour," Miah added.

Besides that, the Bangladesh stall also had shadkora gosht, masala jhinga and lloow ghoota.

Similarly, the Maldives stall had lots of fish dishes like masbai, which is rice flavoured with tuna and pepper and theluli rihaakuru, another fish dish, while the Sri Lankan stall had fish ambulthiyal.

Manoj Amardeepthi, the Sri Lankan chef, said that the island's food is spicy, seasoned with lots of herbs but much less oil.

And then of course the Pakistan stall ruled the festival with its aromatic fare, simmering on hot plates. Kadai gosht, kohati bhindi bhujia, chappali kebab... and many more sumptuous dishes.

But how can any meal end without a sweet lacing the end? So Maldives stood forth with its special paan, Afghanistan with sheer pera and aft mewa, Sri Lanka with a jaggery dessert wattalappan and Pakistan with its famous phirni. ■

Eid-ul-Adha celebrated throughout India



Eid-ul-Adha (Festival of Sacrifice) was celebrated in various parts of India with traditional fervour and gaiety on December 21. Indians seen offering prayers at Jama Masjid in Delhi (left), Jama Masjid in Srinagar, Jammu & Kashmir (centre), and Mosque Kharudin in Amritsar, Punjab. The Eid Al-Adha marks the end of the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Afghan Band rocks Delhi at SAARC Band Festival



Aryan Band performs at the SAARC Band Festival in New Delhi on December 2.

Fantastic"! In unison the ten members of the Aryan Band respond, when asked about their experience at the SAARC Band Festival, in New Delhi, on December 2.

The SAARC Band Festival, part of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) cultural festival, organised by the Government of India, was held from November 30 to December 2. It attracted 14 music bands from SAARC countries. Afghanistan, the newest SAARC entrant, was represented by Aryan Band at this maiden regional music festival.

When the Aryan Band started out in 2003, the ten members just wanted to share their passion for music and at best thought of performing in front of a responsive audience. What they experienced on December 2, in front of an enthusiastic and young audience was beyond their expectations. The perform-

ance of the band mesmerised Delhiites and evoked memories of the rich diversity and tradition of music in Afghanistan, the land of rubabs and Zerbaghalis.

During the Taliban regime, music was anathema to the ruling elite and pop music a taboo. In the post-Taliban period, forming music bands was an equally uphill task. Defying all odds, these ten youngsters got together to form Aryan Band. "Though the idea of a concert is new in Afghanistan, we are not scared of enjoying music anymore," said Abdul Ghafar Mehdyar, one of the performers. Forming a band has not been an easy task, however. While there are a few solo artistes, only two or three bands have been able to gain recognition. Most of the groups are reduced to performing at weddings, says Mehdyar. However, the four-year-old band faces severe constraints — lack of funds, a

place to practise, and time for rehearsals.

Drawing inspiration from Sufi singers and their country's folklore, the group specialises in Persian and Pashto numbers. Experimenting with foreign tunes, the group composed 'Murg-e Ishq' (Bird of Love). The song, influenced by Latino music, caught the attention of music lovers in Afghanistan.

Familiar with Hindi films and Bollywood music, the band picked the latest hit songs for their SAARC performance. "Our trip to India is very important. It is an experience and a turning point in our professional career. The SAARC event has given us the exposure and opportunity to share our music with the rest of the region," says Siddique, the Aryan spokesman.

Music has no boundaries. The Aryan Band proved it, when their performance ended with thumping claps and shouts of "encore". ■

Mr. Perfectionist dons the director's cap



Think Aamir Khan, and the “don’ts” are the defining thoughts. In an industry where networking is an essential, next only to oxygen, what’s behind that perpetual loner profile?

“It’s certainly not something that I have planned. I do understand that it would help if I did some things, but I can’t really be otherwise. I think it is every individual’s right to decide what he wants to be a part of, and what he wants to keep out of. Some things I am just not comfortable doing, it springs from the person I am...” says the elusive Bollywood star.

And the rest? “Sometimes I genuinely don’t have the bandwidth to do anything at all, apart from what I am working on. When I am doing a film, I just cannot bring myself out of that, everything else sort of goes into soft focus. It may seem like a tactically good move to be more visible during those phases, to do more things to be talked about, but I find it very, very difficult to do something else. I guess you can call me a reluctant star.”

How street savvy is that for an industry veteran of 17 years? “I know I have an impractical approach to life, not just in this respect, but in many things,” he adds.

Appearing as a child actor in ‘Yaadon Ki Baaraat’ (1973), Khan’s career started eleven

years later with the film, ‘Holi’ (1984). He received his first commercial success with ‘Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak’ (1988) and won a Filmfare Best Male Debut Award for his performance in the film. After eight previous nominations during the 1980s and 1990s, he received his first Filmfare Best Actor Award for his performance in ‘Raja Hindustani’ (1996), his biggest commercial success so far. He won acclaim for his role in the Academy Award nominated ‘Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India’ (2001) and received his second Filmfare Best Actor Award, as well as numerous other awards.



Being a part of several commercially successful movies and delivering highly acclaimed performances, he has established himself as one of the top and most successful leading actors of Hindi cinema

With ‘Taare Zameen Par’, which released on December 21, Aamir dons the director’s cap for the first time, to tell the story of an unconventional teacher who helps change the life of a child with academic problems.

Initially, Amol Gupte, who has written the script and is also the creative director, was the director of the film. But ‘Mr. Perfectionist’ wasn’t satisfied with the work and decided to handle the project in his own way. The actor explained how he took over the reins as director. “About a week into the shooting I was not very happy and Amole Gupte and I had a meeting and I expressed my reservations. Obviously we realised that we had creative differences, so I offered to pull out. Gupte gave it some thought and both of us decided that perhaps I should take over the responsibility.”

Aamir conceded that acting and directing together for the first time was a bit of a challenge. “It is challenging and comes with its own demands so I did the best that I could. I think I’m quite happy with the way the film has turned out.” ■