



EXTERNAL AFFAIRS MINISTER PRANAB MUKHERJEE VISITS KABUL



External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee with President Hamid Karzai in Kabul. He handed over the formal invitation to President Karzai on behalf of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to attend the New Delhi SAARC Summit.

At the invitation of Afghan Foreign Minister Dr. Spanta, Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee visited Kabul on January 23-24, with a five-member delegation that included Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon. Minister Mukherjee came to Kabul to invite Afghanistan to attend the 14th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Summit in New Delhi.

India, the current chairman of SAARC, is hosting the Summit on April 3 and 4. Afghanistan formally becomes a SAARC member when President Karzai signs the Joint Declaration with other Heads of Government and State at the New Delhi Summit.

India has been a strong advocate and supporter of Afghanistan's membership in SAARC, taking the lead at the Dhaka Summit in November 2005, where the formal decision on admitting Afghanistan into SAARC was taken. India believes

that the regional character and composition of SAARC is incomplete without Afghanistan.

During his two-day stay in Kabul, Minister Mukherjee had a hectic schedule. Soon after his arrival, he called on Speaker of Wolesi Jirga (Lower House of Afghan Parliament) Mohammad Yunus Qanooni. Lauding India's

President Karzai appreciated the time-tested friendly ties and enduring cordial relations with India. He also thanked the Government of India and its people for the assistance in rebuilding Afghanistan.

traditional cordial relations with Afghanistan, Qanooni highlighted the Indian assistance to build the new Parliament Complex at Darul Aman, Kabul. Minister Mukherjee extended an invitation on behalf of Lok Sabha Speaker to Qanooni to visit India with a Parliamentary delegation. Thereafter, he interacted with

Ustaad Rasool Sayyaf, Chairman, and members of the Foreign Relations Committee of Wolesi Jirga. Minister Mukherjee welcomed the suggestion made by the Committee to set up an Indo-Afghan Parliamentary Friendship Group.

At the delegation-level talks with Afghan Foreign Minister Dr. Spanta, Minister Mukherjee extended an invitation to Dr. Spanta to attend the 28th SAARC Council of Ministers Meeting as "Special Invitee".

During the official talks, Minister Mukherjee and Foreign Minister Dr. Spanta took stock of the bilateral relations and exchanged views on the regional situation.

Later, the two Foreign Ministers witnessed the signing of an MOU among India, Afghanistan and UNDP on Capacity Building in Public Administration. India is providing an amount of \$1.08 million with a matching contribution from UNDP.

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EAM's Opening Statement at the joint press conference

Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee addressed a joint press conference in Kabul along with Afghan Foreign Minister on January 23. Following are excerpts from the text of his statement.

My visit to Kabul is in the context of the 14th SAARC Summit to be held in New Delhi on 3-4 April, 2007. However, it has also given me an opportunity to discuss bilateral relations with leaders here.

We are extremely happy that it will be our privilege to welcome Afghanistan in New Delhi when it joins as a member of SAARC in the first-ever expansion of this Association.

Later today, I will be calling on President Karzai to convey the invitation of PM Manmohan Singh to the SAARC Summit. I have also invited Foreign Minister Dr. Spanta to participate in the 28th meeting of the SAARC Council of Ministers in New Delhi on 2 April 2007 as a Special Invitee.

Earlier today, I called on the President of Wolesi Jirga, His Excellency Mohammad Yunus Qanooni. I also met Chairman of the Committee of Foreign Relations of Wolesi Jirga Ustaad Rasool Sayyaf and discussed India-Afghanistan relations with members of the Committee. We have just concluded detailed talks with Dr. Spanta and his delegation on SAARC and on the entire gamut of bilateral relations. We also exchanged views on the regional situation.

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