

Afghanistan formally joins eight-member SAARC

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The final declaration of SAARC leaders also stressed the need to ensure effective market access through smooth implementation of the trade liberalisation programme and said that the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) "should be implemented in letter and spirit."

It also called for integration of services in SAFTA, while asking for the finalisation of an

Agreement on Investment Promotion and Protection. The final declaration said the SAARC leaders called for an early roadmap that would lead to a South Asia Customs Union and a South Asian Economic Union "in a planned and phased manner". Reflecting a new will, the document denounced terrorism in unambiguous terms, calling it a threat to peace and stability in the region.

"They (leaders) condemned the targeted

killing of civilians and terrorist violence, in all its forms and manifestations, wherever and against whomsoever committed. Terrorism ... is a clear and present threat to international peace and security," the declaration said.

The Heads of States or Government, while urging continued efforts to combat terrorism, also called for the urgent conclusion of a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism. ■

■ Highlights of the Declaration

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■ Recognised that the remarkable growth of the economies of SAARC countries has opened new opportunities to pursue the fight against poverty with firm resolve. They called for deepening of pro-poor orientation of growth process, including through enhancing investment in human capital and infrastructure, increasing budgetary allocations for relevant sectors and improved delivery of services.

■ Acknowledged that there is a wide range of homegrown best practices and innovative solutions for transforming the lives of peoples in South Asia.

■ Recognised that the implementation of the Social Charter needs focused attention and directed the National Coordination Committees (NCCs) to formulate concrete programmes and projects to complement national implementation efforts. They underscored that civil society organisations have a vital role to play in driving forward the implementation of the Social Charter and directed the NCCs to mobilise civil society organisations to achieve this end.

■ The Heads of State or Government appreciated the Independent South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation (ISAC-PA) for its elaboration of the SAARC Development Goals (SDGs).

■ Recognised the full benefits of an integrated multimodal transport system in the region. They called for an extension of the SAARC Regional Multimodal Transport Study (SRMTS) to include Afghanistan as well.

■ They emphasised that in its third decade of existence, there was an urgent need to move SAARC from declaratory to implementation phase. They directed that the focus of SAARC should be on implementing collaborative projects that are concrete and effective.

■ Recognised the region's rapidly increas-

ing energy demands for meeting the developmental needs of SAARC countries. They also acknowledged the need of expediting development of conventional sources of energy in a sustainable manner and for strengthening renewable energy development such as in hydropower, bio-fuel, solar and wind.

■ Reiterated their deep concern at the continued degradation of environment and reaffirmed the need to further strengthen cooperation towards protection and conservation of the environment as a priority area.

■ The leaders expressed satisfaction at the launching of 2007 as the 'Year of Green South Asia'.

■ Stressed the need for closer regional cooperation in the field of information and communication technology.

■ Noted with satisfaction timely ratification of SAFTA Agreement by all member countries.

■ Underlined the importance of implementing trade facilitation measures, especially standardisation of basic customs nomenclature, documentation and clearing procedures.

■ Complimented the SAARC Finance Ministers for finalising the framework of cooperation on financial issues in the region.

■ Emphasised the need to develop, at an early date, a roadmap for a South Asian Customs Union and a South Asian Economic Union in a planned and phased manner.

■ Noted the cultural and social ties among the SAARC countries, based on common history and geography, and reiterated that the future of peoples of South Asia is inter-linked.

■ Decided to establish the South Asian University in India and welcomed the signing of the Intergovernmental Agreement establishing the University.

■ The Heads of State or Government acknowledged that women's full participation in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process are fundamental for the achievement of equality and development.

■ Stressed the need to collectively overcome the challenges of poverty, disease, natural disasters and terrorism.

■ Acknowledged that countries of South Asia face challenges of food insecurity and malnutrition.

■ Noted the challenges confronted by the countries of South Asia in ensuring food and nutritional security as well as in maintaining vibrant rural economy for agricultural development.

■ Underlined that terrorism is a threat to peace and security in the region and condemned the targeted killing of civilians and terrorist violence, in all its forms and manifestations, wherever and against whomsoever committed.

■ Agreed to work on the modalities to implement the provisions of the existing SAARC Conventions to combat terrorism, narcotics and psychotropic substances, trafficking in women and children.

■ Recognised corruption was an issue of concern and agreed to exchange information on national experience in combating corruption to effectively address this problem.

■ Reaffirmed their commitment to a rule-based multilateral trading system. They recalled that the Doha Round was premised on the centrality of development.

■ Welcomed the People's Republic of China, Japan, European Union, Republic of Korea and the United States of America, to be associated as Observers to SAARC.

■ They welcomed the offer of the Maldives to host the 15th Summit Meeting of the Heads of States or Governments of the South Asian Association for the Regional Cooperation. ■