

Afghanistan joins SAARC Car Rally



PHOTO ABOVE, Heads of state and government of SAARC countries, including Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, third from right, and Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai, second from right, flagging off the last leg of the SAARC Car Rally from Vigyan Bhavan in New Delhi on April 3. PHOTO LEFT, a view of the rally as it crossed Bangladesh on March 16, a day after it was formally flagged off. A four-member team from Afghanistan joined the rally on April 3, after their country was formally inducted into SAARC.

With Afghanistan's formal induction into the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) on April 3, a four-member team from the country joined the first ever SAARC Motor Car Rally that had started from the Bangladesh's coastal city of Cox's Bazaar on March 15, to strengthen cooperation among the eight member countries of the regional grouping. A four-member team from Afghanistan — Lal Mohammad Sayar, Rohullah Farhad, Sayed Khalid Sadat and Ghulam Sarwar Sultani — joined the 30 Tata Safaris, carrying about 120 participants from the SAARC member countries, for the final leg of the seven-nation rally in New Delhi on April 4. They were flagged off, among others, by President Hamid Karzai and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

According to officials of the organisers — India's External Affairs Ministry — during the 13th SAARC Summit in Dhaka in November 2005, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had put forth a new vision of an interconnected South Asia. He emphasised the need for reconnecting the countries of the subcontinent, including Afghanistan, and then reconnecting the subcontinent to the larger Asian neighbourhood, and offered transit facilities on a reciprocal basis to all the SAARC countries, including an open skies policy. In this regard, he proposed a South Asian Car Rally in the run up to the next SAARC Summit in New Delhi.

"I am happy to announce that India offers to hold a South Asian Car Rally. This would be

a run up to our next Summit. It would symbolize vividly our regional identity and also draw attention to the urgent need to improve our SAARC transport infrastructure," he had said.

The idea received overwhelming support from all member states, and, in true SAARC spirit, all countries pledged complete logistics and hospitality support for the success of the Rally. Not to be left behind, the private sector in SAARC region, too, came forward very enthusiastically, to make it a successful public-private partnership.

Accordingly, the rally — organised in association with the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), a leading industry chamber in India — covered over 8,200 km, across varying terrain, over a 30-day period, 'connecting people, strengthening ties' on the way, as they meandered through the subcontinent. The rally, which was kicked off from Bangladesh on March 15, was a mega event of 2007

that showcased the oneness, and diversity, of the region like never before, and attempted to tap the vast potential of intra-SAARC trade, investment and tourism opportunities. The rally, was flagged off from Cox's Bazaar by Chief Advisor to the Government of Bangladesh, Dr. Fakruddin Ahmed.

The route crossed was as follows: Bangladesh (March 15-18), India (March 18-19), Bhutan (March 19-21), India (March 21-23), Nepal (March 23-26) - India (March 26-28), Pakistan (March 28-31), India (March 31 - April 7), Sri Lanka (April 10-13) and lastly Maldives (April 13-14). ■



The team from Afghanistan for the first SAARC Motor Car Rally. The rally kicked off from Bangladesh on March 15, but the Afghan team joined it in New Delhi on April 3, after Afghanistan's formal induction into the regional grouping. Seen from left are Lal Mohammad Sayar, Rohullah Farhad, Sayed Khalid Sadat and Ghulam Sarwar Sultani.