

Afghanistan's isolation must not be repeated: Karzai



PHOTO LEFT, Afghan President Hamid Karzai addressing the 14th SAARC Summit at Vigyan Bhavan in New Delhi on April 3, after Afghanistan was formally inducted as the eighth member of SAARC. PHOTO RIGHT, President Karzai with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, on the eve of 14th SAARC Summit, in New Delhi on April 2.

In a spirited speech at the 14th SAARC Summit in New Delhi on April 3, during which Afghanistan was formally inducted as the eighth member of the 22-year-old organisation, Afghan President Hamid Karzai not only called for a political will and leadership among member nations to fight the scourge of terrorism that virtually affects all countries in the region, but also to expand trade and economic ties in the region, especially in the area of energy security.

After thanking the SAARC leaders for including his country as a part of their fraternity, he said he looked up to the Association for the development of his country that had suffered two decades of economic and political isolation. "Today will be remembered as a landmark event as Afghanistan assumes its place in the South Asian family. I wish to thank SAARC's member states and the SAARC Secretariat for supporting Afghanistan's accession."

The Afghan people, he said, were eager to learn from the experiences of their neighbours. In this regard, he particularly cited micro-finance in Bangladesh, rural development in India and the proposed oil and gas pipelines criss-crossing several countries in the region as possible areas of regional cooperation.

Underlining the need for regional economic integration and the role of Afghanistan as a conduit for growing regional trade, Karzai also warned against repeating the Afghan experience of political and economic isolation. "Stark lessons" can be learnt from Afghanistan's isolation, he said at the opening ceremony of the SAARC summit. "We all know what happened next: Terrorism and criminality plagued Afghanistan with detrimental consequences," he said, and added that it was the common duty of all SAARC leaders to fight extremism and terrorism in all forms and sources, including political sponsorship and financing.

Karzai, glowing in a green Afghan robe, also pushed for strong economic and trade linkages among the SAARC members. "Enhanced economic cooperation must be pursued for the sake of regional economic and political stability," he said.

In this context, he alluded to the reconstruction of the national highway system in the region and projected Afghanistan's pivotal position as a bridge "connecting Central Asia to South Asia and the Far East to the Middle East — a market of literally half of the world population and vast resources."

Continued on page 3

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ON THE SIDELINES



PHOTO LEFT, SAARC leaders call on President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam at Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi on April 3. Seen in the photo, from left, Bhutan's Prime Minister Lyonpo Bhandu Wangchuk, President Kalam, Bangladeshi's Chief Adviser of the Caretaker Government Fakhruddin Ahmed, Afghan President Hamid Karzai, Pakistan Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse, Nepal's Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala and Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom; PHOTO CENTRE, Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee with his Afghan counterpart Rangin Dadfar Spanta in New Delhi on April 3; PHOTO RIGHT, Afghan President Hamid Karzai being received by Union Overseas Indian Affairs Vyalar Ravi in New Delhi on April 2. (Photos: Courtesy, Press Information Bureau)