

Opening transit route will help trade, says Spanta

The denial of transit facilities by Pakistan is hampering Indian efforts to help in the economic development and reconstruction of Afghanistan, Afghan Foreign Minister Rangin Dadfar Spanta said in Dhaka on the sidelines of the 27th Council of Ministers meeting of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

Noting that Kabul had requested Islamabad to lift the ban on the movement of Indian goods and products overland to Afghanistan, Spanta said: "If the route through Pakistan is opened, less time will be consumed and goods will reach Afghanistan at cheaper costs. It is important for us from the point of view of our national interest."

India is engaged in a huge reconstruction exercise in Afghanistan worth \$650 million in diverse fields and has been asking Pakistan to allow these and other humanitarian supplies to be transported through that country.

In the absence of the transit facility, Indian supplies are taken to Bandar Abbas in Iran and transported by road to Afghanistan.

Stressing that the opening of transit facilities would also help Afghanistan's exports Spanta said that his country had immense potential to export dry and fresh fruits — and India and Pakistan could be prime markets for these.

Spanta, whose visit to Dhaka marked the first-ever participation of Afghanistan in a SAARC meeting, described it as a "historic day for Afghanistan and for all SAARC members".

In his address at the meeting, Spanta said: "We are fully aware of the potentially significant part that Afghanistan could play in the current movement of regionalism. Therefore we strive to invest efforts in enabling Afghanistan to attain this objective, which will serve our common interests. Afghanistan has the desire to play a land-bridging role, mainly in the areas of energy, transport, trade and transit, in the region."

Underlining the economic opportunities opening up in Afghanistan, Spanta said: "The service sector... is one of the fastest-growing sectors with many opportunities for regional investors. Afghanistan's liberal investment regime, combined with regulatory and legal changes, has opened the way for private investors across a wide range of sectors in our country."



Afghan Foreign Minister Dr. Spanta, fourth from right, with other Ministers at the 27th SAARC Council of Ministers meeting held in Dhaka on August 1 and 2.

The mining law has opened the way for private investment in the rehabilitation of the mining sector in Afghanistan. This will be followed by additional legislation that will allow for greater private participation in previously state-controlled sectors."

Envisioning Afghanistan as "a bridge between the Islamic world and the family of pluralistic democracies", the Afghan Minister said: "There is no contradiction between being a Muslim nation and democrat, committed to the rule of law, human rights, women's rights, freedom of thought... I am confident, with the continuing support of our international partners, we will realise our dream to be a prosperous, democratic and responsible member of the international community."

Touching upon the security scenario in Afghanistan, he said: "Improved security is

something that is desired by all... Terrorism, extremism, narcotics, unresolved regional conflicts and underdevelopment are currently the main elements of insecurity and instability in our region and around the world. It is important that collectively we address the main causes of these factors and work even harder to have a well-coordinated approach to address them. It is my strong belief that regional cooperation is the best mechanism to overcome our common challenges."

In another interview given on the sidelines of the meeting, Spanta said "external elements" were helping the Taliban regroup once again.

Without naming any country, the Afghan Minister said: "Taliban must be getting financial support, weapon support and training, possibly from somewhere... It is not internal but external elements (that are supporting them)... Without that they would not be in a position to attack our civilians and security forces and bomb our schools and hospitals, and kill our teachers, etc."

Describing the current security situation, Spanta said: "There are problems in the southern parts, particularly in border areas (but the situation in the rest of the country) is much better than people abroad think."

Afghanistan's request for membership of the South Asian grouping was acceded to at SAARC's Summit last November. The country will take its place as a full member of SAARC at the next summit, scheduled to be held in New Delhi in April 2007.

Highlights of the SAARC Ministerial Meeting

- The meeting formalised the accession of Afghanistan to SAARC.
- Granted observer status to China and Japan.
- Emphasised endorsement and implementation of three major agreements on avoidance of double taxation, mutual administrative assistance in customs and formation of the SAARC Arbitration Council.
- Agreed to hold a meeting of immigration officials to thrash out a way of making the SAARC region visa-free.
- Agreed to grant observer status to the U.S., EU and South Korea.
- Decided the 14th SAARC Summit will be held in India in April 2007.