

### **Brief comments by invited ambassadors**

[The following brief comments by the ambassadors were paraphrased by Dr Apurba Kundu, EIAS Senior Research Fellow.]

### **Brief comments by H.E. Mr P.K. Singh, Ambassador of India to the EU**

Ambassador Singh began by endorsing the comments by the main speaker, Ambassador Fatemi, regarding developments at the SAARC Summit in Islamabad.

He then went on to describe how there is ‘a great excitement’ in India over the outcome of the SAARC Summit and its positive results that ‘took a lot of people by surprise’. Much of the ‘praise must go to the political leadership’ for their ‘courage and commitment’ at the Summit. Also, added Ambassador Singh, much to the surprise of many observers who had seen ‘previous reports put into the dustbin’ for lack of political understanding, there is now a ‘groundswell of public opinion’ in favour of moving forward via SAARC. Indeed, there is almost a ‘hint of jealousy in the Subcontinent’ of other regions of the world moving forward towards economic progress while South Asia seemed to be ‘running to stay in the same place’. Its people are wondering: ‘Why not us? Why has South Asia not moved ahead?’ For instance, stated Ambassador Singh, at independence, ‘we were richer than Malaysia. Now they are far ahead.’

Ambassador Singh noted that a second important aspect of the SAARC Summit outcome is that it is not confined to the intelligentsia—many of whom have always wanted to move forward on a regional basis. Now, public opinion seems to have come around significantly to this conclusion as well.

Real progress was made at Islamabad, added Ambassador Singh. There is now ‘no disagreement that all issues must proceed in tandem. There are no linkages in the pace of progress between issues’. India and Pakistan can move forward on a number of different issues simultaneously.

Ambassador Singh noted how, in terms of its resources, South Asia is highly endowed. It is a 'pity that we are more or less starting to exploit these resources and complementarities so late...but better late than never'. Indeed, things are now moving forward very rapidly. 'Even before ink is dry' on the SAARC Summit documents, Indian and Pakistani civil society representatives have presented additional agendas identifying new areas where the two countries can move forward.

Ambassador Singh concluded by noting that even the 'media is very excited' by the future prospects for advancement in South Asia. 'Who would have thought five years ago' that the prospects of achieving peace with Pakistan would be a major campaign issue!' However, he cautioned that the support of public opinion is very important in enabling the leadership to move ahead on sensitive issues.

#### **Brief comments by H.E. Mr Maudud Ali, Ambassador of Bangladesh to the EU**

Ambassador Ali began by noting how the previous speakers had covered much of substance regarding the SAARC Summit in Islamabad.

Ambassador Ali described how his 'father was born in British India, I was born in Pakistan and my son was born in Bangladesh'. This goes to show that South Asia is 'basically, one people divided into seven countries'.

While there is tremendous potential in this region, added Ambassador Ali, historically, there has been 'an inability to tap this potential'. While one-quarter of all the people in the world live in South Asia, 'one-third of them live on less than US\$1 a day. This sounds incredible but it is true'. This is not because South Asia does not have resources, noted Ambassador Ali, but because we have misallocated them. However, now there is a 'realisation that conflicts cannot be resolved by war'. Ambassador Ali praised the 'extreme sense of maturity' shown by national leaders at the SAARC Summit.

Ambassador Ali also spoke of 'political, religious, and ideological terrorism'. We must

‘defang one type of terrorism so that all terrorism can be defeated’.

The many agreements reached at the SARRC Summit were praised by Ambassador Ali. He pointed out that there have been very quick developments after the Summit: India and Pakistan have agreed to increase the number of diplomats each allows, overflight clearances have been granted quickly and easily, and trains are now plying between the countries. Such measures are ‘indicative of sincere intentions’.

Ambassador Ali then went on to address the issue of energy. If we could integrate the energy supply and demand of South Asia—for example, hydro power in Nepal may be used by Bangladesh, and Bangladesh could export natural gas to its neighbours after ensuring its own reserves and requirements—this could benefit the entire region. Similar cooperation over transportation—for example, enhanced access to sea ports by Nepal and Bhutan—was also feasible. The integration of energy and resources would really help alleviate poverty, argued Ambassador Ali. Happily, the SAARC Summit showed that ‘the [political] will that was always necessary has arrived’.

Ambassador Ali concluded by stating that next year’s SARRC Summit is to be held in Dhaka—and ‘you are all invited!’

### **Brief comments by H.E. Mr Narayan S. Thapa, Ambassador of Nepal to the EU**

Ambassador Thapa agreed that, as his colleagues had already covered quite a lot of the issues thrown up by the SAARC Summit, he would confine his formal remarks to reiterating how decisions are taken at SAARC summits.

The SAARC Charter makes clear that bilateral issues are not to be discussed at its annual summit. Also, added Ambassador Thapa, note that decisions taken at summits are done so on the basis of unanimity. However, at the 1997 Male Summit, SAARC introduced the idea of enhancing political co-operation in the summit agenda by introducing the idea of a ‘retreat’ with the key aims of promoting mutual trust and understanding, and fostering

good neighbourly relations among members states. The retreat normally takes place on the second day of the summit, and allows SAARC leaders to have a free and frank exchange of views on bilateral matters. It also allows leaders to thrash out issues related to SAARC which have not been resolved by the Council of Ministers. Ambassador Thapa added that there is a feeling among intellectuals that it is worthwhile for the leaders to discuss bilateral matters utilising the opportunity offered by the summit.

Ambassador Thapa reminded noted that there have been 18 years of SAARC, but only 12 summits. Indeed, before the recent summit, the very existence of SAARC was being debated. But the success of the Islamabad Summit shows the importance of SAARC.

### **Brief comments by H.E. Mr C.R. Jayasinghe, Ambassador of Sri Lanka to the EU**

Ambassador Jayasinghe began by stating that his 'very capable colleagues' had already dealt with most of the issues raised by the SAARC Summit in Islamabad.

Ambassador Jayasinghe spoke of how the Islamabad Summit took place within the context of a general concern that South Asia is being left behind, and noted that, in her address to the SAARC Summit, Sri Lanka President [Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga] stated that South Asia risked being 'marginalised'. We look with admiration at how other regional groups have organized themselves to cope with globalization.

Ambassador Jayasinghe also stated that it was self-evident that the smaller SAARC countries would welcome a pooling of strengths. The question was whether the larger countries would have the same degree of enthusiasm. For example, from a Brussels perspective one could discern how the two bigger South Asian countries [India and Pakistan] have gained greater traction vis-a-vis the EU than their smaller neighbours. Pakistan would shortly be having ministerial talks with the EU Troika [consisting of the respective foreign ministers of Ireland (current holders of the EU Presidency) and the Netherlands (next holders of the EU Presidency), plus the European Commission's

Commissioner in Charge of External Relations], while India enjoys annual summit meetings with the EU.

Ambassador Jayasinghe observed that even larger powers were beginning to accept that development and progress in their immediate neighbourhood would be to their own benefit. For example, China has been reaching out to other countries in Asia, extending asymmetrical economic benefits to ASEAN. India has entered into a FTA [Free Trade Agreement] with Sri Lanka, and was engaged in discussions on a similar agreement with Bangladesh.

Many of the issues acted upon at the SAARC Summit had long featured on summit agendas, added Ambassador Jayasinghe. Discussions on regional trade liberalization went back to 1993 [the seventh SAARC Summit in Dhaka], terrorism had first been debated in 1987 [the third SAARC Summit in Kathmandu], and the importance of people-to-people contact was raised by [then Indian Prime Minister] Rajiv Gandhi at the 1986 SAARC Summit in Bangalore.

Ambassador Jayasinghe concluded by saying that, while there had long been a vision in South Asia of the steps which needed to be taken, their realisation had been stymied for a number of reasons. Now, however, there was a new 'synergy in the region'. This is necessary as, 'unless the region gets its act together, it will continue to lose out'. Yet, Ambassador Jayasinghe expects that the new synergy between the regional vision and the concerns of the region not to be marginalized will mean that SAARC will match its rhetoric with action.