

18th SAARC Summit

Statement

By

Her Excellency Sheikh Hasina

Hon'ble Prime Minister
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

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Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim

Mr. Chairperson, Your Excellency Prime Minister Sushil Koirala,
Hon'ble Presidents and Prime Ministers of SAARC Member States,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Assalamu alaikum and a very good morning to all.

I am delighted to be in this beautiful valley of Kathmandu for the 18th SAARC Summit. I would like to extend my warmest felicitations to Prime Minister Sushil Koirala, on his election as the Chair of SAARC. I am confident that SAARC will attain greater heights under his wise stewardship.

I would also convey my deep appreciation to the Government and the people of Nepal for the warm hospitality and excellent arrangements made for the Summit.

I would also like to commend the leadership of the Maldives, our outgoing Chair.

Our Association was created three decades ago with the core objectives of building partnership for the welfare and prosperity of the people. Looking back, one would have the impression that its achievements have been rather modest compared to our expectations and potentials.

Yet, I remain optimistic of what SAARC can actually attain given our collective political will and ambitions. What is needed is to set aside our differences and work on collective strength for bringing real progress to the people in the region. A candid assessment and frank conversation among us is the need of the hour to bring dynamism to SAARC and its activities.

Mr. Chairman,

For long, we have been talking about "People's SAARC". The new Global Agenda also requires that we place people first. Let me, therefore, share some of my thoughts on some of the critical areas that need our urgent attention.

First, poverty as our common and key enemy hinders peace and development in the region. Ensuring food and nutritional security of our ever-increasing population poses a big challenge. However, over decades, much of South Asia has attained self sufficiency in production of key cereals. This has helped us reduce abject poverty and improved our MDGs profile.

In Bangladesh, with an average growth rate of 6.2% for the last five years, we have reduced poverty to 24.4% by now from 40% in 2005. We have attained targets of universal safe drinking water and sanitation for the people. We need to do more as we have targeted to turn Bangladesh into a Middle-Income Country by 2021 and a developed country by 2041.

Cooperation in increasing productivity of key cereals, inland fisheries and livestock, improving water efficiency in agriculture are crucial for attaining nutritional security of our people and eradicating poverty. In this context, effective operation of SAARC Food Bank and Seed Bank are important.

Second, each of our countries has a large youthful population. We now need to develop them as human resources - primarily by giving them quality education and effective training.

In Bangladesh, we have taken innovative steps to ensure education for all. Girls are getting free education up to graduation level. About 12.8 million students from poor families are getting monthly stipend. 75 percent of them are girls. Each year, we are distributing nearly 318 million textbooks free to all students up to the secondary level. Gender parity in primary and secondary schooling has been achieved. Now, we are focusing on ensuring "quality education" for our students.

We recognise that our education system should be need-based and innovative, with adequate exposure to scientific and technological advancement and comparable with the advanced countries.

Our women and men need easy access to affordable and quality technical and vocational education. Our education and skill development need to be linked to employment and entrepreneurship.

Sustainable development entails empowerment of women and their equal participation with men in all walks of life. In this context, Bangladesh has made tremendous progress in empowering women in social, economic and political arena. Pragmatic policies, resource allocation and strong commitment of our government are instrumental to this achievement.

Third, technology, especially ICT, determines our everyday life in so many ways. It is changing our lives and livelihoods bringing solutions that we could not even thought of a few years back.

To fulfil our vision to build "Digital Bangladesh" by 2021, we have established 5 thousand 275 Digital Centres across the country. Rural people have been receiving more than 200 ICT-related services from the Centres. They are also getting health care services from 13 thousand 500 IT-connected Community Health Clinics with free medicine. We have, so far, set up over 3 million solar home systems. We have increased tele-density to 77.3% from 31.3% in 2008 and internet density to 27% from 2.8% during the last five years.

For achieving development faster, we must deepen our collective efforts to develop, use and apply science-technology-innovation at all levels. We need support in health, agriculture, food and climate change technologies. Bangladesh would call for deeper cooperation in these areas.

Fourth, climate change poses serious challenge to much of our development enterprise. Intensity and frequency of disasters in our countries are rising. The risks are so grave that, for Bangladesh, climate change may wipe out 2 to 3% of our annual GDP, including displacement of more than 30 million people by 2050.

To address the challenges of climate change related risks effectively and comprehensively, we have adopted a National Climate Change Strategy and a National Plan of Action. We have, so far, allocated 385 million US dollars from our own resources for adaptation and mitigation.

At SAARC level, we need to secure result-oriented implementation of the regional Agreements and Plans through cross-border initiatives.

Fifth, optimum supply of energy remains fundamental to ensuring steady growth and sustainable development of our people. Progress on the SAARC Framework Agreement on Electricity Cooperation is laudable.

Energy is a sector where we have much to tap in terms of regional hydro-power. There are aspects, like energy regulation, efficiency and conservation, regional power grid - where we can work beneficially. It is, therefore, the time to commit ourselves on regional, sub-regional and bilateral initiatives for the development of energy sector in a comprehensive manner.

Sixth, the new Global Development Agenda requires us to focus on our fourth frontier - the Indian Ocean. There is so much to benefit through collaborative exploration of the living and non-living marine resources. The ocean resources-based "Blue Economy" can play a critical role to sustainable development of the SAARC region.

We should collaborate on development of capacities, partnerships and research in utilizing our marine resources. Our common undertakings must secure protection, development and exploration of seas and oceans in a sustainable manner.

Seventh, physical connectivity is important in ensuring overall peace, progress and stability across South Asia. Multimodal physical connectivity links territories and communities of SAARC.

Bangladesh approaches connectivity in a wider context. We believe in connecting ideas, knowledge, technology, culture, people, road-rail-air, movement of goods, services and investment.

Bangladesh will appreciate the early signing of Regional Motor Vehicles Agreement and the Regional Railways Agreement. Beyond those, I would urge all SAARC leaders at the podium to lend their support to advance implementation of the agreed regional outcomes on connectivity.

At the same time, we need to focus on increasing intra-regional trade. Early and effective implementation of SAFTA remains important. We will particularly need to address the non-tariff and para-tariff barriers. Our people want to see robust actions, on-the-ground. They are more focused on "outcomes" than "process".

Mr. Chairman,

Over the years, some of the SAARC Observers have brought in useful knowledge and support. Bangladesh value their contribution and engagement with SAARC.

In SAARC, a number of Regional Centres have generated important regional goods, knowledge and ideas. We must support them in all possible ways to develop them as centres of regional excellence.

Forty years ago, our Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in his maiden speech at the UN General Assembly said, "The Bangalee nation is pledge-bound to establish a global order based on peaceful co-existence, social justice and freedom from poverty, hunger, exploitation and aggression." That vision continues to guide Bangladesh's national development pursuits and our engagement in regional and global affairs.

Let us focus on undertaking more realistic, result-oriented and mutually beneficial partnership for cooperation to prosper together.

Let that be our contribution to redeem our pledge to our people to leave a more peaceful, progressive, connected and knowledge-based South Asia.

I thank you.

Khoda Hafez.

Joi Bangla, Joi Bangabandhu.

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