

SARC summit opens today

By AHMED FAZL

Leaders of the seven South Asian nations are meeting here today at a historic summit to launch a regional organisation for cooperation which could pave the way for improved bilateral relations among them.

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi of India, President Zia-ul-Haq of Pakistan, President Junius Jayewardene of Sri Lanka, King Birendra of Nepal, President Mamoon Abdul Gayoom of the Maldives, King Jigme Singye Wangchuk of Bhutan and host Bangladesh President Hussain Muhammed Ershad are to approve a charter and a declaration for the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

The summit marked the end of five years of negotiations among the officials of the seven countries since a regional body was first mooted in 1980.

The seven Foreign Ministers of the South Asian countries held a one-day preparatory meeting on Thursday to finalise a draft of the declaration in which bilateral problems and international issues like Afghanistan which could lead to differences were kept out.

The SAARC—the acronym that has been officially accepted has been working since 1983 on an integrated programme of action in nine areas of cooperation—agriculture, rural development, telecommunications, meteorology, health and popula-

Lanka 747 jumbo jet. The five other leaders arrived in the capital on Friday.

The summit's official spokesman Abul Ahsan said on Thursday that the Foreign Ministers in their preparatory meeting had approved a proposed agenda for the summit, a charter, a draft declaration and an emblem of the new organisation.

The Foreign Ministers also approved a Bangladesh proposal for setting up two committees to go into the possibilities of cooperation in controlling terrorism and drug abuse.

They considered the periodicity of future summit meetings and said that the heads of state and government should meet frequently.

See Page 8

SARC summit

From Page 1

Mr Ahsan denied any discussions among the Foreign Ministers on the question of a collective security for the region stressing that the SAARC has no plans for military cooperation.

"All the countries in the regional body are members of the non-aligned movement and there is no question of their forming a military alliance," Mr Ahsan said.

At least two countries—Bangladesh and India—made strong pleas for having a permanent secretariat for the SAARC. Bangladesh Foreign Minister Humayun Rasheed Choudhury who chaired the meeting said that a permanent secretariat would be needed for better coordination as the cooperation programme expanded and involved new areas. Mr Choudhury recommended formation of a working group with the foreign secretaries of the regional countries to go into the question of the permanent secretariat.

Indian Minister for External Affairs Mr B. R. Bhagat told the preparatory meeting that the seven countries should reach a consensus on the question of a permanent secretariat.

"It is true that until now a need for a secretariat has not been felt very acutely," Mr Bhagat said adding that as more and more regional projects matured, the countries would be faced with common technical and financial problems.

Other countries in the organisation are at the moment hesitant about getting involved in the expenditure of creating a new bureaucracy for the organ-

ation with attendant financial involvements.

But all unanimously stressed the need for regional cooperation at an enhanced level.

"The countries of South Asia have made valiant efforts to overcome the burden of past neglect," Sahabzada Yaqub-Khan, Pakistan's Foreign Minister said at the meeting. He said that the seven countries shared a common perception of the need to quicken the pace of progress aware that scarce resources should not be frittered away in duplicating efforts already made elsewhere.

Nepalese Foreign Minister Mr Randhir Subha said that the collective economic strength would enhance positive political understanding. Mr Subha emphasised taking steps to implement projects already identified and agreed to.

Meanwhile, observers here say that apart from multilateral discussions, the leaders will have ample scope to talk bilateral issues among themselves on an informal basis. The best occasion will be provided by a four-hour river cruise on the ancient steamer M.V. Ostrich, which has been refurbished with new cane sofas and jute carpets to carry the seven leaders for a pleasure trip from "Meghna Ghat" to Ashuganj.

Mr. Gandhi and Mr Jayawardene will have time to discuss the Tamil issue while President Zia and the Indian leader can talk about the recent fighting along the borders and their nuclear programmes which has caused some sharp exchanges in recent times.

form a true and even surface. All minor surface pro-

8-4-0

R.A. 18-0

