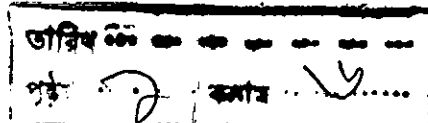


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SAARC summit in December likely

COLOMBO, Aug 9:—Top foreign ministry officials from seven South Asian nations neared agreement Thursday on a December summit of their leaders, as the region's two main players—India and Pakistan—were set to meet Friday for crucial bilateral talks, reports UNB.

"There is a broad agreement that heads of states and heads of government should meet in Nepal in late December," Pakistan Foreign Secretary Inamul Haq told The Associated Press after attending a meeting of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.

Bangladesh was having problems confirming the proposed Dec. 28-30 date for the summit, because of parliamentary elections in October and the subsequent formation of a new government.

Haq said Pakistan was also ready to have a bilateral summit with India in September in New York during the United Nations General Assembly.

"Pakistan wants to take forward the process of improving its relations with India. We are ready," he said.

India's Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee invited Pakistan

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SAARC summit

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President Gen. Pervez Musharraf to a July 14-16 meeting in Agra, India. They could not agree on a joint statement but said they would meet again.

Haq said he would meet his Indian counterpart, Chokila Iyer, in Colombo on Friday and will reiterate Pakistan's suggestion of a New York meeting.

Iyer was cautious about whether she and Haq will be able to hammer out a date and time for their leaders to meet.

"Let us wait and see," she said.

Meetings of the seven-member regional group, known as SAARC, had been postponed for the past two years because of animosity between India and Pakistan, which fought a mini-war over the disputed province of Kashmir in May and June, 1999.

Because of the easing of tensions created by the Agra meeting, SAARC's foreign secretaries were able to open gather Thursday for a two-day meeting, expected to be followed by the foreign ministers soon.

SAARC was founded in 1985 to promote regional trade. However, the standoff between India and Pakistan has halted progress on more regional cooperation.

The last SAARC meeting was to be held in Nepal in 1999 but was canceled because of the battle between India and Pakistani troops across the Kashmir border.

In opening remarks Thursday, Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar asked delegates to take concrete steps to enhance regional cooperation. Indian and Sri Lankan officials said terrorism would be high on the agenda.

Officials speaking on condition of anonymity said that while there was a general agreement that terrorism should be fought, the member states have not been able to agree on specifics to help each other.

Sri Lanka is fighting Tamil Tiger rebels who are campaigning for a homeland for the country's 3.2 million minority Tamils. The government calls the rebels terrorists. They are also banned in India, but there is much sympathy for their cause among India's large Tamil population.

Neighbouring India is also fighting Muslim separatists in Kashmir and often accuses Pakistan of promoting cross-border terrorism. Pakistan denies it supports the militants based in its territory, but says it supports their cause.

Security was tight at the conference venue with military commandoes guarding all entry points and sniffer dogs deployed. The rebels on July 24 attacked Sri Lanka's only international airport and an adjoining air base, leaving 20 people dead.

Besides India and Sri Lanka, the other SAARC members are Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and The Maldives.