

SAARC Summit begins in Colombo today

Leaders to draft agenda on food, fuel prices, trade gap, climate change

COLOMBO, Aug 1:—South Asian leaders from eight SAARC countries sit for a summit meeting here today (Saturday) to chart a road-map to address the challenges of soaring food and fuel prices, trade imbalances and climate change, and improve the socioeconomic condition of 1.5 billion people in the region, reports UNB.

Amidst extraordinary security measures, Heads of State and Government arrived in the Sri Lankan capital to attend the 15th summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai, Bangladesh caretaker government's Chief Adviser Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed, Bhutanese Prime Minister Lyonchhen Jigmi Rhinley, Indian Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, Nepalese Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala, Pakistan Prime Minister Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani and host Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa will join the two-day summit at Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall.

The SAARC leaders will sign a SAARC Development Fund (SDF) charter with authorized capital of SDR one billion and launch the South Asian Regional Standards Organization (SARSO), headquarters of which will be established in Dhaka.

The summit leaders will sign the Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters to effectively deal with terrorists and criminals hiding in other SAARC countries.

At the inaugural session, the summit leaders will also focus on removal of non-tariff and para-tariff barriers to reduce trade imbalances in some member states and increase intra-SAARC trade.

They will also instruct the

SAARC Ministerial Council comprising the Commerce Ministers of the member nations to start negotiation on Trade in Services under the umbrella agreement of SAFTA.

The summit will emphasize on making SAARC Food Bank operational expeditiously, increase food production and on collective efforts to produce alternative sources of energy, so vital for

overall development in the region.

"The recent price-hike of food globally has reminded us of urgent need to address the situation comprehensively. The food crisis has affected the poorest segment of the society. Food security would constitute an important area of our collective endeavours," Foreign Adviser Dr Ifekhar Ahmed Chowdhury told UNB ahead of the summit.

He said that SAARC Food Bank need to be made operational immediately to give a human face to the organization's work. "We need another Green Revolution based on technology and innovative techniques."

Apart from food, fuel and trade issues, critical issue of climate change, water resources, transport, social issues, terrorism,

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SAARC Summit

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women empowerment and cooperation in science and technology will dominate the summit talks.

At the inaugural session Saturday, SAARC chairmanship will be handed over to Sri Lanka from India. Eight SAARC leaders will then make their country statements.

On the sidelines of the summit, the SAARC leaders have started holding bilateral meetings with each other discussing issues of concerns.

On the second day (Sunday),

SAARC leaders will go for retreat when they will seize the opportunity to discuss more on burning issues that hit the region hard.

The 15th Summit will conclude through the issuance of the Colombo Declaration and Statement on Food Security.

Meanwhile, capital Colombo has been tastefully decorated with portraits of eight SAARC leaders and flags of the member states.

Thousands of army, commandos and special police equipped with automatic weapons spread over the entire city. Sandbag bunkers have been set up in close proximity. General people's movement has been heavily restricted. Educational institutions were closed for three day from Friday.

All these security bulwarks are put in place in the wake of perceived threat from the LTTE guerrillas fighting for their homeland in northeastern Jaffna province. Although the LTTE has declared unilateral truce, the government of President Mahinda Rajapaksa does not want to take any risk and has taken all measures to hold the summit peacefully.