

11th summit opens amid doubts

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Chance of Vajpayee-Musharraf meet remote SAARC summit put off by one day due to Musharraf's delayed arrival

From Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury

KATHMANDU, Jan 4:—The 11th SAARC summit got a jolt before its kick off when the formal inaugural session at the Birendra International Convention Centre (BICC) was postponed at the last moment this afternoon for a day due to delay in the arrival of Pakistan President General Parvez Musharraf in this capital city.

Leaders of seven South Asian countries will now meet at 10 a.m. tomorrow (Saturday) at BICC for their long-awaited 11th SAARC summit to redeem their pledge to consolidate regional cooperation and thus save the seven-nation SAARC from irrelevance. Despite all the sabre-rattling between the South Asian's only nuclear powers, India and Pakistan, during last few weeks and emergency in the host country Nepal, the 11th SAARC summit is finally being held tomorrow after a gap of over three years showing positive indications that not 'all gloom and doom' for SAARC that started its journey from Dhaka in December 1985.

All the seven leaders of SAARC countries are now in this capital city of the Himalayan Kingdom. Indian Premier Atal Behari Vajpayee, Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga, Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom and Bhutanese Prime Minister Lyonpo

Khandu Wangchuk arrived in Kathmandu on Thursday and were waiting for their counterparts from Bangladesh and Pakistan to join them. Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia reached here from Dhaka this noon after seeing off her guest British Prime Minister Tony Blair who paid an official visit to Bangladesh. General Parvez Musharraf, military ruler of Pakistan, arrived here from his visit to Beijing this afternoon by a special Chinese plane as India banned Pakistan planes to fly over Indian air space from January 1. He was scheduled to arrive by noon and the formal inauguration of the summit was planned at 2-30 p.m. to accommodate the flight schedule of Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia and President Musharraf.

The formal inaugural ceremony was cancelled at the last moment as President Parvez Musharraf failed to reach Kathmandu as per schedule. Excepting the summit leaders, all guests and the big press corps of local, regional and international media were present inside the BICC Hall. After a long-waiting, the Chief of Protocol of Nepal's Foreign Ministry announced the postponement and the fresh programme of the inaugural session.

When the summit finally begins

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SAARC summit

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tomorrow morning under shadow of heightened Indo-Pak tension, the hope of and speculation for a formal meeting between Prime Minister Vajpayee and President Musharraf now seems to be remote. Optimists still hope that the Foreign Ministers of India and Pakistan might have talks on the sidelines of the summit. That too is still uncertain as Indian External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh told a Press conference yesterday. "I am here to conduct bilateral meeting between India and Pakistan as several issues are not discussed in SAARC summit". Officials accompanying Prime Minister Vajpayee who arrived here yesterday afternoon remained tight-lipped when journalists asked about the possibility of "even a chance encounter" between the Indian Premier and Pakistan President when they will go along with their SAARC counterparts to mountain resort at Nagarkot, 35 kilometers from Kathmandu, where they will have glimpse of the Everest during their retreat after the inaugural session tomorrow.

Usually the India-Pakistan divisions overshadow the SAARC summits. But the fresh escalation of tension between the two nuclear neighbours after the suicide attack on the Indian Parliament on December 13 have already created doubts and uncertainty over the positive outcome of the 11th SAARC summit, the unimpressive scorecard of SAARC in the absence of any meaningful regional cooperation and the unresolved India-Pakistan factor have now put the South Asian body to its litmus test of survival.

However, host country Nepal and Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, who will be the new SAARC Chairman tomorrow, can justifiably claim success in rescuing the SAARC summit from uncertainty and bringing the two leaders of nuclear rivals to a summit table where they will at least exchange pleasantries for a moment if not decide to hold each other's hands to restore peace across their borders where red-alert soldiers of the two countries have taken positions pointing guns at each other that may any moment lead to the fourth Indo-Pak war.