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Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia addressing 11th SAARC Summit meeting at Birendra International Conference Centre, Kathmandu, Nepal on Saturday, January 5.

Khaleda places 8-pt plan to strengthen S Asian economy

KATHMANDU, Jan 5: Bangladesh Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia today proposed an eight-point specific agenda attaching importance to activate the South Asian Development Fund with a minimum capital to finance development-related activities in the least developed areas of South Asia, reports BSS.

The Prime Minister put forward the proposals as seven South Asian leaders assembled at the Birendra International Convention Centre here this afternoon at the overdue 11th SAARC summit.

"Our world, for good or for bad, is interdependent. We must act decisively to make SAARC a true vehicle for peace, progress and stability in our region," said Begum Zia in her speech at the plenary session attended by heads

of state and government of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and the host Nepal.

The summit remained stalled since November 1999 as India refused to attend the moot of the SAARC formed to promote welfare of the peoples of South Asia and to improve their quality of life.

The eight-point specific proposals included utilising new ideas and techniques generated by information technology, implementation of studies by South Asian think-tanks leading to concrete action and the Plan of Action of the Male Environment Ministers Meeting and recommendations of the two SAARC studies on environment, implementation

(See Page 15 Col. 3)

Khaleda's 8-pt plan

(From Page 1 Col. 7)

of the SAARC agenda on poverty eradication without any further loss of time, strengthening social issues, encouraging greater involvement of non-state actors and adoption of a Regional Investment Agreement.

The Prime Minister said the impact of 11 September 2001 has effectively demonstrated that no country can live in isolation. "Real security for all of us lies in promoting sustainable growth, reform and development. That is what SAARC really stands for."

The Prime Minister said, "SAARC has a special place in my heart. Its guiding motivation is rooted in the wisdom of its founder and chief architect, late President Ziaur Rahman, to improve the quality of life of the common people of South Asia in an environment of peace."

She said the strength of SAARC lies in striving to achieve what is attainable, to advance cooperation wherever possible and to concentrate on what unites rather than what divides us.

Begum Zia spoke about the limitations of the SAARC and said the seven-nation body is yet to formulate any regional project. She said national self assertion still impedes regional cooperation, the forum has not yet made any dent in alleviating poverty, international developments impinge little on SAARC progress, it does not work closely with similar organizations and decision making in the organization is slow.

She said, however, despite limitations, SAARC has attained a structured and institutional shape, adding, "We have to some extent closed the critical communication gap separating us, and people to people contact has grown and produced a real sense of South Asian identity."

In this context, she listed a number of achievements including the integrated program of action (IPA) and said instruments like Independent Commissions, Task Forces and Groups of Eminent Persons have proved useful, and cost efficient ways to concentrate on key issues of importance to SAARC. She recalled mechanisms like annual meetings of finance, planning and commerce ministers to engage in dialogues on macro-economic policies as the other achievements. She also mentioned the signing of conventions, treaties and agreements, including those on drugs, terrorism and preferential trading as positive outcomes of the body.

Begum Zia said several initiatives like consolidating the common position of member-states in various international forums, strengthening linkages among professional groups, liberalizing the inter-regional movement of

people, establishment of long range focus on children through measures like Decade of the Child are some other important achievements.

Regarding poverty alleviation, Begum Zia said our main goal is to reduce poverty. SAARC's pledge to eradicate poverty by the year 2002 is unlikely but the agenda remains valid, she said.

In this context, she recalled her "Dal Bhaat" approach which is to ensure food security, basic education, especially for girls, primary health care, safe drinking water, sanitation, shelter, voluntary family planning and the protection of women and children. She stressed the need for focussing on urban poverty in view of rapid urbanization in South Asia in recent years. She said as part of poverty-alleviation measures, special emphasis should be given to ensure the rights of women and children.

Regarding trade liberalization, the Bangladesh Prime Minister said SAARC's success would depend on how we cooperate in core economic areas of trade and investment. She said trade promotion calls for dismantling the non-tariff barriers. It must also reduce value added requirements under the rules of origin. Failure to redress these impediments will affect the creation of region-wide trading space.

She said, "Negotiations for tariff reduction under the SAPTA have taught us some valuable lessons as we are now aware how inadequate they are, if we exclude commodities of interest to all countries and if tariff concessions do not extend to actively traded commodities."

Begum Zia said Bangladesh believes that all future SAARC trade initiatives should reduce bilateral trade imbalances and this calls for decisive steps to encourage trade where opportunities already exist, especially to promote trade creating investments and other facilitating measures. She suggested greater interactions among business people and investors and cooperation among financial institutions.

Speaking on globalization, Begum Zia said, "Our efforts should be directed towards an inclusive globalization from below, which will benefit common people through new ideas, opportunities and technologies as globalization entails greater mobility of capital, labour and technology that transcends national frontiers."

She said though the benefits are obvious, the downside is that the benefits are unequally distributed and ignore social objectives. They also involve dangers of drugs, terrorism, pollution, diseases and arms and movements of people that invade all societies and respect no border.