

Dhaka Monday, November 2, 1987

The Third SAARC Summit

The Third Summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) opens today (Monday) in the picturesque capital of Nepal, Kathmandu. Situated at the foot of the Himalayas, the venue of the summit symbolises challenge and prospects of regional cooperation that the seven member countries of the SAARC face. The Himalayas is awesome but serene as well. The climbing of the Himalayas is a daunting and hazardous enterprise but once accomplished, it is a grand achievement.

Formally launched only two years ago, the SAARC has been proceeding cautiously towards its goal of improving the lifestyle of one billion people of the region through cooperation. Every SAARC summit is a milestone in the tortuous path of collective development of the seven peoples with their varied experiences. We wish the Kathmandu summit a success.

The SAARC is said to have adopted 'functional approach'. The SAARC has identified 18 areas of cooperation. These are: agriculture, health and population, meteorology, postal services, prevention of drug trafficking and abuse, rural development, science and technology, sports, arts and culture, telecommunication, transport, women in development, audio-vision exchange, organised tourism, documentation centre, SAARC chairs, fellowships and scholarships, youth volunteer exchange, prevention of terrorism and international economic issues. A large number of seminars and workshops have been held, some studies have been conducted and establishment of institutions like SAARC Agricultural Information Centre, SAARC Meteorological Research Centre and SAARC documentation centre has been approved.

The SAARC leadership has obviously opted, at least for the present, for a low-profile performance. But the dynamics of cooperation have inexorably been forcing the SAARC to expand its scope of activities. For example, Bangladesh Foreign Minister Humayun Rasheed Chowdhury proposed at the fourth session of SAARC Council of Ministers on Sunday that the SAARC takes up disaster management as an area of cooperation. There is also a growing urge for a larger field of regional economic cooperation.

Even though its programmes are modest, they have raised expectations far beyond what its leadership has promised to do. The SAARC has already come to be viewed as an institution serving the cause of 'stability and progress' of the region. That is, it is expected that the SAARC, like the EEC or the ASEAN, will take a vigorous and comprehensive approach to regional cooperation. But the present scope of the SAARC does not allow one to evaluate its effectiveness as a clearing-house for sorting out inter-state contentious issues.

The SAARC is performing its role of reconciling the distrust, problems of the member countries in an indirect manner. It provides the government leaders of the seven countries a scope to meet and exchange views freely about their problems. It keeps communication open. And communication is an important input for peace, cooperation and progress.