

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ



Address by

His Excellency Mr. Maumoon Abdul Gayoom,
President of the Republic of Maldives,

at the Inaugural Session of the Thirteenth SAARC Summit
Dhaka, Bangladesh

Saturday, 12 September 2005

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

Madam Chairperson, Your Majesty, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is always a great pleasure to visit Bangladesh, a country famed for its beauty, rich cultural heritage and the friendliness of its people. Allow me to express my sincere appreciation to you, Madam Chairperson, and the Government and people of Bangladesh for the warm welcome and generous hospitality extended to me, my wife and to the members of my delegation.

Let me also extend my congratulations to you, Madam Prime Minister, on your election as the Chairperson of the Thirteenth SAARC Summit, and express our fullest cooperation as you take over the reign of the Association today. Your dedication to the ideals and aims of SAARC and your vast experience in regional and international affairs will, I am sure, help you lead our Association to further progress and achievement.

I also take this opportunity to thank the Prime Minister and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan for the outstanding manner in which they had steered the work of the Association since January 2004.

This Summit will be the last SAARC Summit at which we can call upon the wisdom of President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, who retires in a few weeks after leading Sri Lanka over the past decade. On behalf of the people and the Government of the Maldives, I extend our sincere good wishes to you, Madam President, for your continued good health and success in all your future endeavours.

I would be failing in my duty if I do not acknowledge the valuable contribution of the former Secretary-General, Mr. Q. A. M. A. Rahim, to the SAARC process during the past three years.

May I also express a warm welcome to Lyonpo Chenkyab Dorji, a distinguished diplomat from Bhutan, who has succeeded Mr. Rahim as the Secretary-General of SAARC from March of this year.

We are gathered here today at a time when the people of Pakistan are trying to recover from a human tragedy of epic proportions. Nearly 74,000 people are confirmed dead and over three million have been left homeless, following the devastating earthquake that struck the country last month. The tragedy also took nearly 1,400 lives in India. Let me, therefore, extend once again our sincere condolences to the peoples and governments of Pakistan and India, and to the members of the bereaved families.

Before I proceed any further, let me also extend once again our sincere condolences to the peoples and the governments of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India following the tragic deaths and massive destruction caused by the tsunami of 26 December 2004. We in the Maldives also lost many of our loved ones and our islands suffered extensive damage in the tsunami tragedy. We can therefore relate to the anguish and pain that is being felt by the millions of victims of the earthquake in Pakistan and the tsunami of last December.

Madam Chairperson:

We meet today at a historic juncture in the life of our Association. This year marks the culmination of two decades of regional cooperation under the SAARC umbrella.

It is not merely a pleasant coincidence but a fitting tribute to Bangladesh that we are gathered here today in Dhaka, the birthplace of SAARC. Twenty years ago, SAARC was born here with the noble objective of improving the quality of life of the peoples of our region.

It was a highly inspirational concept proposed by a fine statesman from this land. We salute the foresight and wisdom of the late President Ziaur Rahman in leading the creation of a formal structure for regional cooperation. Thus, it was most befitting to witness a few minutes ago the posthumous conferment of the first SAARC Award upon this great leader.

Madam Chairperson:

SAARC has over the past twenty years provided us with many a cause for celebration. It has made considerable progress in promoting

friendship, peace and prosperity in the region. It has contributed significantly to the development of our social and cultural sectors.

Likewise, it has been a catalyst in the rapid progress in the economic sphere. Years of dedication and focused approach towards greater economic integration in the region has resulted in the SAARC Preferential Trading Arrangement. Adding to its momentum, a landmark agreement on the South Asian Free Trade Area was signed during the last Summit.

The SAFTA agreement which is due to enter into force from 1st January 2006 is certainly a major step towards our declared goal of creating a South Asian Economic Union. Our real challenges begin there.

As we speed towards this goal, the institutionalisation of trade facilitation measures, including harmonization of customs rules and procedures, and the elimination of non-tariff barriers remain crucial challenges.

Undoubtedly, concerted efforts are required for the early and comprehensive implementation of these measures. I am heartened by the fact that four separate agreements that address trade facilitation measures are ready for signature today.

The Maldives has always advocated free trade in the region which should usher in a fairer and more equitable distribution of the benefits under a free trade regime. Countries in our region possess varying degrees of resource endowments creating differences in their potential to gain from such a regime. That is where we should ensure a more balanced distribution of benefits. The Maldives is happy that the SAFTA agreement contains an appropriate mechanism to address these differences.

Madam Chairperson:

The SAARC Social Charter concluded in January 2004 is another important achievement in our quest for regional cooperation. The Charter addresses major social issues in the region, and provides us with much hope in the promotion and protection of child rights, and in fostering the general wellbeing of all South Asians.

We now have the onerous task of implementing what is on paper. I am happy to say that the Maldives has set up our National Coordination Committee to implement the goals of the Social Charter.

South Asia is home to one-fifth of the world's population. Our human resources are a great blessing that should make us one of the most

vibrant and dynamic regions in the world. For that, we need to invest in education and human resource development. Many of our countries have excellent institutions of higher learning. Greater collaboration in this area can therefore release tremendous energies in taking our region forward in leaps and bounds.

Madam Chairperson:

Cooperation in combating terrorism has also been a crucial area under the SAARC framework from its very inception. The SAARC Convention on Suppression of Terrorism signed in 1987 remains a major achievement of our Association, and is one of the first of its kind by any regional organization. The conclusion of an Additional Protocol to that Convention in January 2004 buttresses our resolve to fight this insidious threat.

We should not, however, allow our successes to lull us into complacency. We should always keep in mind the challenges that lie ahead and persevere in our endeavours to achieve greater regional cooperation.

Madam Chairperson:

We have signed numerous instruments ranging from suppression of drug trafficking and terrorism to the promotion of human rights and welfare. As we embark on the third decade of SAARC, I believe there is a strong case to create mechanisms for further co-operation in the field of human rights in South Asia.

It is time that an autonomous SAARC Centre for Human Rights, based on civil society, is established. Such a Commission could promote international standards, facilitate co-operation among lawyers and jurists, and share expertise and resources in the advocacy of human rights and democracy in the region. The path may not be easy. But it is one that must be pursued with diligence and conscience.

Madam Chairperson:

The tsunami that struck the Indian Ocean countries last year, the recent earthquake in Pakistan and India and Hurricane Katrina in the United States are grim reminders of the ferocity of the elements and the helplessness of communities exposed to natural disasters. While we reiterate the importance of a tsunami early warning system for the Indian Ocean region, we need to develop SAARC-specific regional

programmes for early warning preparedness and management of tsunamis and other natural disasters.

Although the health of the environment is crucial to achieving a better quality of life for our peoples, the progress achieved by SAARC in the area of environmental conservation has been far too slow. The Environment Action Plan adopted by the Environment Ministers Conference held in Male' in October 1997, is still to be fully realized.

We must redouble our efforts and accelerate action to avert all potential dangers emanating from environmental issues. Our region should exert itself to keep up with regional and international commitments to protect the environment.

Another of our current concerns is the threat of Bird Flu. We need to work together with the international community to contain the disease before it becomes a catastrophic epidemic with the potential to kill millions across the world. As reiterated by the SAARC Health Ministers at their second meeting held in Islamabad last July, SAARC members need to enhance inter-country cooperation for emergency preparedness and regional disease surveillance.

Madam Chairperson:

International developments are increasingly impinging on our lives as the world grows more and more interdependent. The forces of globalization make it imperative to look for ways in which SAARC could intensify cooperation with other regional and international organisations.

That we are heard on the international stage is not only vital for regional interests, but is becoming ever more integral to our very survival too. It is in this context that I note with deep satisfaction the decision of the United Nations to accord observer status to our Association. This development would greatly facilitate coordination of our existing practice of presenting common positions at major international conferences.

To further consolidate SAARC's international credence, it is important that we develop effective networking arrangements with other international and regional organizations as well in this era of increased networking.

Madam Chairperson:

Before I conclude, I want to underline a very important matter – the need for the effective implementation of our decisions. Over the years, agreements have been signed, declarations have been adopted and plans of action have been drawn up. I think that we would all agree that action on some of these commitments have not moved at the desired pace.

It is crucial that we address this matter as a priority for SAARC. May I, therefore, propose that we begin the third decade of SAARC with a pledge to implement our past undertakings and to diagnose problems impeding the implementation of our decisions?

SAARC was founded with the principal objective of achieving higher levels of economic and social development in order to improve the quality of life of our peoples. As we cross another milestone in the history of our Association, it is vital that we focus our energies on attaining this supreme objective. This is the only guarantee to ensure peace, stability and progress in our region.

For that to happen, SAARC must bridge the gap between words and deeds, rhetoric and reality, and promises and their delivery.

Thank you.