

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ



**Address by
His Excellency Mr. Maumoon Abdul Gayoom,
President of the Republic of Maldives,
at the Inaugural Session of the Fourteenth SAARC Summit**

New Delhi, India
Tuesday, 3 April 2007

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

Mr. Chairman, Your Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to begin by thanking you, Mr. Chairman, and the government of India for the warm welcome and the generous hospitality extended to my wife and me and to the members of my delegation.

I congratulate you, Mr. Chairman, on your election to preside over the 14th SAARC Summit. You have taken over the reins of our Association at a very crucial time – a time of expansion, opportunity and challenge. Your vast

experience in regional and international affairs and dedication to the SAARC ideal will no doubt inspire our Association to further advancement during your tenure.

Allow me also to express the appreciation of the Maldives for the dedication with which Bangladesh, as the Chair of the Thirteenth Summit, had steered the work of our Association over the past two years.

The Maldives welcomes Afghanistan to the SAARC family as a full member. I am confident that the commitment of the Afghan people towards regional development will greatly benefit our Association in the time ahead.

I also welcome the observer delegations from China, the European Union, Republic of Korea, Japan and the United States.

Mr. Chairman:

SAARC is now at the threshold of a new dawn, one which opens up new vistas of cooperation, global partnerships and a more robust regional identity.

In SAFTA we have a very useful springboard for deeper integration. It can launch us on the journey towards a Customs Union and an Economic Union. But for SAFTA to become that platform, we must make it fully operational.

Our region has made many strides in the past few decades. Liberal market reforms in all countries have contributed to gains in the war against poverty.

But a huge amount of work still needs to be done. Economic openness has not so far strengthened regional co-operation. Nor has greater integration into the global economy provided equitable benefits for this region. Vast numbers of South Asians have moved out of destitution, but inequality has not decreased.

A market plus approach is needed to ensure that benefits of higher intra-regional trade are equitable and inclusive. Other advances in the core economic agenda, including the promotion of investment, and improved logistics and services are vital.

The key to regional success is greater connectivity. South Asia must re-connect with itself, as well as with the rest of the world. Bilateral co-operation programmes and regional economic projects can identify and expand complementarities and synergies.

Regional co-operation must address the most critical areas that affect the quality of life. We must address gender equality as a priority

2007 has been designated as the SAARC Green Year. We must intensify efforts to save the environment and minimise the impending threat of climate change.

The mid-term review of the Decade for Children must be completed soon, as should action plans to observe the Decade for Poverty Eradication.

The emergence of a “security community” in South Asia is not a dream. We support the vision of a South Asian community with unhindered flow of goods, services, peoples, capital, culture and ideas in the region.

It is in this spirit that we support your proposal, Mr. Chairman, of setting up a South Asian University. The University will be a great asset in the development of the region’s intellectual resources, and a nursery for a revitalised South Asian identity.

Mr. Chairman:

Consolidation must go hand in hand with renewal. SAARC must become more dynamic and forward-looking. It must become less of a monopoly of governments, and belong more to the people.

The Maldives attaches great importance to the SAARC Business Leaders’ Conclave. It is now convened several weeks ahead of our gathering. We must give this initiative a stronger endorsement. The captains of industry should make a more direct impact on the Summit. We should convene a Business Forum simultaneously with SAARC Summits. The goal is to develop stronger government-private sector partnerships, to promote economic initiatives that produce tangible benefits for the peoples of this region.

SAARC belongs to over 1.4 billion people. It must have a people-centric foundation. The Maldives had proposed the idea of a Social Charter to

achieve that objective. We must develop mechanisms to strengthen the pursuit of the Social Charter.

Mr. Chairman:

I happen to be the only head of state or government who has had the good fortune of participating in every SAARC Summit held so far.

In that capacity, may I say that SAARC must speed up its progress and deepen its impact.

SAARC was born out of a political vision. It again needs a similar political commitment to achieve another historic change. We must embrace the concept of regionalism fully and irrevocably.

The Holy Quran teaches us: “Never will Allah change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves”.

A new dawn for South Asia is not only desirable. It is a necessity. It is also attainable. We must embrace this aspiration at this Summit.

Thank you!