

President Mahinda Rajapaksa has emphasized that no country could afford to limit their resolve in the eradication of terrorism to a mere subset of national security. Addressing the 14th Summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in New Delhi on Tuesday (3 April 2007) the President said, "Terrorism anywhere is terrorism and is a global menace. Unless we act collectively as a region, trans-border terrorist groups will find safe havens in other parts of the region. Modern day terrorists operate in a multi-dimensional fashion. They operate politically, militarily, financially and ideologically".



Full text of the speech....

Your Excellency, Dr. Manmohan Singh,  
Chairman of the 14th SAARC Summit,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Summit. Each of my visits to India has been a special occasion. However, this is very special to me since it is for the first time that I am attending the SAARC Summit as the President of Sri Lanka. I, therefore, take this opportunity to convey my sincere appreciation to the government of India; in particular, to Your Excellency, the Prime Minister of India as well as the people of India for the warm welcome and the generous hospitality that I and my delegation have been accorded and also for the excellent arrangements made for the Summit.

Mr. Chairman, let me congratulate you on your election as the Chairman of the fourteenth SAARC Summit. Your stewardship will no doubt see SAARC meet the challenges of the twenty first century, based on the goals set for the third decade of its journey. Sri Lanka will whole heartedly extend its cooperation and assistance to the Government of India in its position as the new Chair of SAARC.

I take this opportunity to pay my tribute to the outgoing Chair, Bangladesh.

I compliment His Excellency Lyonpo Chenkyab Dorji, Secretary General of SAARC and his team for their commitment.

I also take this opportunity to extend a warm welcome to Afghanistan, the most recent addition to SAARC membership.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our region is the proud inheritor of a unique historical tradition. Our common contribution to religion, art, literature, and moral values is second to none. But, today, we are a region of contrasts. There are significant disparities in GDP, income levels, natural resources, populations etc.

Countries, particularly in Europe, have come together to form regional blocks despite major differences in language, culture, religion, income levels and deep seated historical enmities bringing benefits to their people that could not have been possible only a few years ago. I am particularly concerned that SAARC has not realized its enormous potential yet.

I strongly believe that SAARC must become a Union where we will endeavour to achieve our political and economic pursuits. It is also high time that we adopt a single currency, which will enhance the productivity of the region and improve trade without barriers.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

SAARC, as I see, today stands at a critical point. A large majority of our peoples are living in rural environments. We should pause for a moment to ask ourselves, "What have we really done for our rural masses?" Whilst we like to have sprawling cities in our countries, haven't we neglected the majority of our people, the rural poor? The little we have done in our rural areas has been small initiatives. Most villages stand with little or no basic infrastructure.

Our region, home for over one-fifth of the global population, must focus on the livelihoods of most of our people. Let us not forget that the entire SAARC region is still seriously affected by poverty, although during the last two decades, we have concentrated on reducing it. However, for most people in our region life is far from satisfactory. We, as leaders, therefore, have an enormous responsibility on our shoulders to deliver now, and not wait for the future.

We should be able to transform our people to be the producers for the world given the diversity and the rich soils of our region. I request this august forum, to adopt a resolution to work with dedication and commitment to uplift the quality of our people in the rural areas.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am a strong believer of practicality. While endorsing and fully subscribing to the values of SAARC, we badly need to be action-oriented rather than dependent on rhetoric. Merely saying

good things about each other and ignoring the reality will take us nowhere. Therefore, all what we have endorsed over the years, must without any further delay, be transformed into action.

Promotion of intra-regional trade is important to realize the goals enshrined in the SAARC Charter to improve the image of the region as viable economic powerhouse. We must have a region-centric approach to make the SAFTA work in a real sense and give it effective force. I believe that a sincere commitment and a strict timetable to implement the SAFTA will lead to whole of South Asia becoming one massive region for enhancement of trade.

Coincidentally, year 2007 has been named the "South Asia Year of Tourism". Tourism is one of the most lucrative trades that has not been fully tapped and developed systematically in our region. Our governments need to find new avenues to develop inter-regional and intra-regional tourism in a sustainable and eco-friendly manner. More intra-regional travel will promote people to people contact we have advocated for so long.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Deviating from economic issues, I wish to touch upon the question of human rights in the region - an issue that is close to my heart and which has been a critical motivating force in my political career. Human rights have been a part and parcel of the great cultural tradition of the sub-continent for millennia. The edicts of Emperor Asoka scattered around the sub-continent are an ample testimony to that.

Guided by the principles of our great religions, we have respected the rights of our fellow human beings, and it has not been necessary for us to wait for the calamity of global wars or the deaths of millions due to misguided philosophies to recognize their value. We, in our region, will continue to protect and advance human rights, including economic rights, despite having to struggle with differences and poverty left behind by centuries of colonial domination.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Speaking of terrorism, no country could sustain itself and flourish without addressing the need to maintain security and no country could afford to limit their resolve to the eradication of terrorism to a mere subset of national security. Terrorism anywhere is terrorism and is a global menace. Unless we act collectively as a region, trans-border terrorist groups will find safe havens in other parts of the region. Modern day terrorists operate in a multi-dimensional fashion. They operate politically, militarily, financially and ideologically.

Therefore, our effort to curb this menace should also be multi-pronged and sustained and far reaching, and must include their sources of sustenance. The recent air attack at Katunayake by the LTTE must attract attention of all of us to the fact that our region as a whole is not safe from the barbaric terrorist groups. I wish to appeal therefore to this august forum to work jointly on a counter terrorism strategy for our entire region, to defeat terrorism.

My government has placed great emphasis on eradicating terrorism and making Sri Lanka a safe place for our people. It is not lost on us, however, that terrorism, whilst needs to be

suppressed, also has to be grappled with, on a political platform.

Mr. Chairman, I am very much in agreement with your proposal to establish a South Asian university. This university need not be confined to one country. We need to ensure that learning is borderless and that any student in any of our countries could benefit out of this unique initiative.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The time has come to move away from 'fancy rhetoric' and give way for action and relentless effort in our resolve to achieve the collective aspirations of all of us.

In conclusion, may I therefore be permitted to quote a great son of the region, Emperor Asoka, (I quote) "May my sons, grandsons, and great grandsons strive for the welfare of all mankind. But this is difficult without great and sincere effort". (Unquote)

May the Noble Triple Gem Bless you all!