

I am delighted to issue a message to commemorate SAARC Charter Day. It is noteworthy that during the last twenty-four years of its existence, SAARC has moved forward steadily from a declaratory to an implementation stage, with considerable progress in realizing several of the important objectives set out in the Charter.

As current Chair of the Council of Ministers, I welcome the steady focus that has been directed towards implementing the decisions reached by our Heads of State or Government in the Fifteenth Summit Declaration and the Colombo Statement on Food Security. Since assuming the Chair of SAARC, Sri Lanka had the privilege of hosting six SAARC Ministerial Meetings, namely the Third Meeting of SAARC Energy Ministers in January 2009; Conference of SAARC Ministers of Parliamentary Affairs in February 2009; the First Meeting of SAARC Education/Higher Education Ministers in March 2009; the Fourth SAARC Ministerial Conference on Children in July 2009; the Second Meeting of SAARC Ministers of Transport also in July 2009; and the Second Meeting of SAARC Ministers of Science and Technology in November 2009. This heightened activity in SAARC at a high political level complemented by meetings and activities at technical and official level, is an indication of our ever strengthening resolve to pursue our common goals and objectives.

We are currently witnessing an increase in intra-regional trade under the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) and I hope that, especially in the context of the current Global Economic Crisis, trade linkages in South Asia would continue to improve, complemented by trade friendly customs and standards regimes that we are currently striving towards.

The initiation of the SAARC Development Fund that will finance projects in our region through its social, economic and infrastructure windows is an important step in our collective effort to ensure that the decisions we take have a positive impact on the lives of our people. The South Asian University which is scheduled to commence its first academic session next year is another important project that our Organization is engaged in as it marks its Twenty-fourth Anniversary.

The Fifteenth SAARC Summit acknowledged the ongoing contribution of Science and Technology including cutting edge technology in information and bio-technology in improving the quality of life of the people of our region. It is heartening to witness the initiatives taken by Member States since the Fifteenth Summit to strengthen intra-regional cooperation in Science and Technology through two high-level ministerial meetings held in New Delhi and in Colombo and the adoption of the SAARC Action Plan on Science and Technology.

While our Member States actively pursue regional integration through SAARC, it is also necessary to ensure that we succeed in the elimination of the scourge of terrorism in our region, so that growth and development achieves its full potential in an atmosphere of peace and security.

The observance of the SAARC Charter Day will I am sure, further consolidate our unity of purpose, which seeks to work together for the peace and prosperity of the peoples of our region.

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