

It is a great pleasure for me, as the current Chair of SAARC, to extend warm greetings and best wishes of the Government and people of Sri Lanka to the Governments and people of South Asia on the occasion of the commemoration of the SAARC Charter Day.

Twenty-four years ago, our nations came together to establish SAARC with the conviction that regional cooperation among countries of South Asia is mutually beneficial, desirable and necessary for promoting the welfare and improving the quality of life of the peoples of the region. The then leaders of South Asia believed that in an increasingly interdependent world, the objectives of peace, freedom, social justice and economic prosperity are best achieved in our region by fostering mutual understanding, good neighbourly relations and meaningful cooperation among Member States which are bound by ties of history and culture.

Since the establishment of SAARC with that noble conviction, our Association has developed and matured steadily over the years with a decisive shift in focus in its third decade, towards implementation.

It is heartening to see increasing interaction between the people of our region. It is in recognition of the importance of this aspect to the regional integration process that the Fifteenth SAARC Summit was held in Colombo in 2008, under the theme *Partnership for Growth for Our People*.

The underlying theme of the ***Mahinda Chintana*** Policy Statement of 2005 is the importance of collective self-reliance for the achievement of socio-economic development. Especially in the context of the current global economic crisis, the promotion and strengthening of collective self-reliance among the countries of South Asia which is enshrined in our Charter as one of SAARC's objectives, assumes greater significance. The four Agreements signed during the Fifteenth SAARC Summit in Colombo last year, namely the Protocol of Accession of Afghanistan to the Agreement on SAFTA, Agreement on the Establishment of the South Asian Regional Standards Organisation, the Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters and the Charter of the SAARC Development Fund, along with the adoption of the Statement on Food Security were important steps in this process.

Since the Summit, there has been further continued progress. The SAARC Food Bank is now fully operational. Project based development through the SAARC Development Fund is

progressing well and the Secretariat of the Fund is to be established shortly in Bhutan. Our regional resolve and commitment to work together to address our problems in a regional-specific framework continues to gather momentum. This is manifest in the SAARC Ministerial Statement on Global Economic Crisis and the SAARC Ministerial Declaration on Cooperation in Combating Terrorism adopted by the SAARC Council of Ministers in February 2009. During Sri Lanka's Chairmanship of SAARC, the Ministers of SAARC Member States dealing with the subjects of Energy, Higher Education, Transport, Parliamentary Affairs, Children's issues, and Science and Technology held meetings in Colombo, enabling important decisions to be taken in specific areas of common interest. During the same period, the Ministers of Agriculture, Finance and Environment also met in other SAARC capitals.

While reaffirming Sri Lanka's firm commitment to SAARC and its objectives, I remain confident of the determination of the Governments and peoples of our region towards fostering the stronger cooperation that is essential for peace, freedom, social justice and economic prosperity in South Asia.

Mahinda Rajapaksa

President of Sri Lanka