

## INAUGURAL SESSION

**(09:30 AM, SAARC SECRETARIAT, WEDNESDAY, 06 MARCH 2024)**

### FIFTY-NINTH SESSION OF THE PROGRAMMING COMMITTEE

SAARC SECRETARIAT, KATHMANDU, 06-07 MARCH 2024

Distinguished Chief Guest, Your Excellency Ms. Sewa Lamsal, Foreign Secretary of Nepal and Chair of the SAARC Standing Committee,  
Chairpersons of the SAARC Programming Committee and National Focal Points from the Member States,  
Heads of SAARC Specialized Bodies and Regional Centres,  
Distinguished Delegates,

Dear Colleagues,

Good Morning, Namaste and As-Salamu-Alaikum.

It is indeed a great privilege for me to welcome you to the Inaugural Session of the 59th Session of the Programming Committee at the SAARC Secretariat in this beautiful city of Kathmandu, Nepal.

It is also a great honour for us to host this Meeting at the SAARC Secretariat and we thank the SAARC Chair, Nepal, and esteemed Member States for making this Session possible.

We extend a very warm welcome to the distinguished National Focal Points of the Member States, delegates and Heads of Specialized Bodies and Regional Centres, to this very important meeting, which is taking place after more than three years. The SAARC Secretariat remains at your disposal to make this meeting fruitful and make your stay comfortable in Kathmandu.

We are indeed grateful to Her Excellency Ms. Sewa Lamsal, the Foreign Secretary of Nepal and Chair of the SAARC Standing Committee for gracing this Inaugural Session with her august presence, as Chief Guest. Her presence amongst us this morning is amply demonstrative of the Chair's steadfast commitment to the SAARC process as well as her personal attachment to

SAARC. We look forward to benefitting from her Inaugural Address this morning. As the current Chair of SAARC and the host of the SAARC Secretariat, the esteemed Government of Nepal has been playing a crucial role in steering the SAARC process during the testing time. We all are thankful to Nepal for her commitment to the SAARC Process.

Excellencies,

Distinguished Delegates,

Having assumed office as the 15th Secretary General of SAARC in October last year, I am privileged to attend this in-person Session of the Programming Committee for the first time. Availing myself of this opportunity, I thank the esteemed Government of Nepal, as Chair of SAARC, and other Member States for swiftly endorsing my nomination as the Secretary General of the Association.

I, along with my colleagues from the Secretariat, will make every endeavour possible to meet the expectations of the Member States and high standards set by my predecessors under the guidance of the esteemed Chair and Member States.

In keeping with SAARC's tradition, I have had the opportunity to pay respects to the Nepalese leadership following my assumption of office. I hope to pay introductory visits to the other Member States to pay respects to the SAARC Leaders as well as to call on the distinguished Ministers for Foreign/External Affairs and Foreign Secretaries to benefit from their wisdom and vision in taking the SAARC process forward.

We observed the 39th Charter Day of SAARC in December last year. We thank the esteemed Member States for facilitating issuance of special messages from their Excellencies the Heads of State or Government and Ministers for Foreign/External Affairs. We are grateful to the leadership in the region for their outright commitment and support to the SAARC process, demonstrated through their messages commemorating the 39th SAARC Charter Day.

We are happy over the progress made by SAARC during the past three and a half decades. However, we are not very happy about the slow progress in some areas, which deserve our immediate attention and several of these issues are on the agenda of this Session of the Programming Committee, for guidance. In the meanwhile, we feel that there is more to do to fully

realize SAARC's endless potentials and strength as the largest regional organization, representing one quarter of the global populace.

It is in this context that I wish to highlight the urgent need to make SAARC more and more "people-centric" so as to win the trust and confidence of the peoples across the region. In the meanwhile, there is also the need to promote people-to-people contacts as well as Public-Private Partnership to complement inter-governmental efforts in attaining the Charter objectives of SAARC. In this regard, we do hope that this Session of the Programming Committee will give guidance in renewing the status of SAARC's Apex and Recognized Bodies. Likewise, we need to put more focus on the regional Centres and Specilized bodies, which have direct impact on the people of the region. Establishment of South Asia University is considered to be one of the most important investments for future of SAARC and I would urge this meeting to invest some of their thoughts for the betterment of this institute which is so dear to all of us.

To give further momentum to the SAARC process and effective integration of the region, I wish to stress the need to activate Action Committees, as provided for in Article VII of the SAARC Charter, to give way to project-based sub-regional cooperation with the involvement of more than two Member States. You will be happy to know that, considering the present scenario, the SAARC Secretariat has redoubled its efforts to bolster SAARC's engagement with its development partners and the observer states to keep the process of regional cooperation vibrant as well as to augment SAARC's visibility globally.

Excellencies, distinguished delegates,

As you all are aware that, there has been no Summit since the 18<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit held in Kathmandu in November 2014. The 19<sup>th</sup> Summit, offered to be hosted by Pakistan in November 2016, remained pending for over 7 years due to some unfortunate developments in the region and the subsequent global Pandemic, which caused loss of over half a million human lives in our region. As the Summits are life line for SAARC process as well as most important for the prosperity of the region, I sincerely request this Session of the Programming Committee to come up with some innovative suggestions for consideration of our leaders to agree, which will facilitate for early holding of the 19<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit.

In the Meanwhile, this Session of the Programming Committee may also kindly consider suggesting an extra-ordinary session of the SAARC Council of Ministers as provided for in Article IV of the SAARC Charter. We agree that a Summit cannot be replaced by a Ministerial-level meeting. We are, however, convinced that the Council's extra-ordinary Session will pave the way for a Summit of our Leaders in the near future, while clearing a huge amount of backlog that has accumulated since the last regular Session of the Council of Ministers in March 2016.

As the SAARC Charter provides the holding of Standing Committee meeting at least once in a year, convening a Session of the Standing Committee is also in the agenda of this Session of the Programming Committee for consideration, since the meeting of the Standing Committee is also long overdue. Moreover, the 57<sup>th</sup> and 58<sup>th</sup> meetings of the Programming Committee also suggested to convene the Meeting of the Standing Committee at the earliest. I would request this meeting to look into the matter and kindly make your valuable suggestions in this regard.

Distinguished Chief Guest,  
Esteemed Delegates,

At this critical juncture of global geo-politics and geo-economics, when SAARC spirit is more needed, I wish to state the following to conclude my statement:

- a) We are strong individually, but we are the strongest collectively.
- b) If we are tall, we can touch the roof, but if we are together, we can touch the sky.

With these few words, I once again thank Her Excellency the Foreign Secretary and Chair of the Standing Committee for her august presence this morning.

As your host, I wish to invite you all to please join the dinner that I am hosting tonight in your honour at Hotel Radisson. I also invite the distinguished National Focal Points to kindly make it convenient to join us over a retreat to Chandragiri Hills on the 08 March.

I thank you for your kind attention.