INAUGURAL SESSION  
(19 DECEMBER 2019)  

FIFTY-SEVENTH SESSION OF THE PROGRAMMING COMMITTEE,  
KATHMANDU, 19-20 DECEMBER 2019  

REMARKS BY H. E. MR. AMJAD HUSSAIN B. SIAL, SECRETARY GENERAL OF SAARC  

Distinguished Foreign Secretary of Nepal and Chairman of the Standing Committee,  
Distinguished Chairman of the Programming Committee,  
Esteemed Delegates,  
Heads of Specialized Bodies and Regional Centres,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,  

It is a great pleasure for me to extend a very warm welcome to all of you to Kathmandu and to the Fifty-seventh Session of the Programming Committee.  

We are greatly honoured by the august presence of the distinguished Foreign Secretary of Nepal. This is for the first time that the Chairman of the Standing Committee is attending Inaugural Session of the Programming Committee. This signifies the importance that he personally attaches to the SAARC process. We look forward to benefitting from his remarks.  

I wish to felicitate Mr. Ram Prasad Subedi, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal, on assuming the Chairmanship of the Programming Committee. Given his vast experience as a diplomat, we are confident of successful outcome of this Session under his able Chairmanship. We wish him every success in his new role.  

I wish to thank distinguished delegates for making it convenient for themselves to attend this meeting of a Charter Body of SAARC.  

Distinguished Delegates,  

SAARC progressed steadily during 2019. During the year, besides several other SAARC activities, five ministerial meetings were held. I am pleased to state that for the first time in the history of SAARC, we were able to convene an informal meeting of the SAARC Finance Ministers on the sidelines of the Annual Meeting of the World Bank in Washington in October this year.  

The year 2019 also witnessed operationalization of the Economic and Infrastructure Windows of the SAARC Development Fund, in addition to the Social Window, which has been operational since 2010. During the year, SAARC’s Specialized Bodies and Regional Centres also remained very active in pursuance of their mandates. Besides, SAARC’s collaboration with regional and international organizations is progressing well. We look forward to receiving proposals from the Member States to initiate substantive project-based collaboration with the observers of SAARC, as desired by our leaders.
Drawing satisfaction from the progress we have made during the year, we should continue to work strenuously to achieve the coveted objectives enshrined in the Charter, as well as the goal of the South Asian Economic Union (SAEU), as envisioned by our leaders. We consider the goal of SAEU as a logical progression from the South Asian Free Trade Area. In the absence of a meeting of the SAFTA Ministerial Council since 2014, we have proposed a meeting of the SAFTA Committee of Experts here at the Secretariat on 13-14 January 2020. We earnestly hope that the Member States will participate in this meeting.

Improved intra-regional connectivity is sine qua non for effective regional integration, including for promoting economic relations, people-to-people contacts and tourism. In this context, we sincerely hope that the three important agreements for improving intra-regional connectivity by air, road and rail, will be finalized soon, as recommended by the Inter-Governmental Group on Transport held in Kathmandu last month.

Distinguished Delegates,

This Committee has important agenda before it pertaining to a number of priority areas of the SAARC process. Besides, consideration of Calendar of Activities for 2020 is another important agenda item before the Committee. We request the Committee to carefully scrutinize the Calendar of Activities and once it is approved, we should make every endeavour to fully implement it. In order to facilitate holding of SAARC activities, the conference facilities at the SAARC Secretariat may be utilized.

We are grateful to the Government of Nepal and Chairman of the Standing Committee for their great help in retrofitting the Annex Building, which was damaged in 2015 earthquake. Now the Secretariat’s conference facilities are available to the Member States.

Matters relating to Specialized Bodies and Regional Centres, including their budgets and Calendars of Activities for 2020, are before this Committee for consideration. Likewise, the proposed budget of the Secretariat is also submitted to the Committee for consideration. We sincerely hope that the Committee will give due consideration to implement its own decisions taken at the Fifty-sixth Session regarding revision of Foreign and Entertainment Allowances of the Secretary General, Directors and GSS-I.

Distinguished Delegates,

The raison d’être for creation of SAARC is to promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and to improve their quality of life through accelerated social progress and economic development. In order to carry forward this people-centric objective, it is of utmost importance to regularly convene the meetings of the Charter bodies at all levels. We have had the longest gap between holding of SAARC Summits. In this context, we sincerely hope that the Member States will soon arrive at a consensus to convene the Nineteenth SAARC Summit at Islamabad. The holding of SAARC Summits, of course, provides renewed impetus to the SAARC process.

This is the last Session of the Programming Committee that I have the privilege to address as the Secretary General of SAARC. Availing myself of this opportunity, I wish to thank the Member States for their support and cooperation in carrying out my responsibilities. I also wish to
thank the esteemed Government of Nepal, as the current Chair of SAARC and host of the SAARC Secretariat, for its valuable support to the SAARC process and the Secretariat. I also thank the Specialized Bodies and Regional Centres for their sincere cooperation.

We wish to once again felicitate H. E. Mr. Esala Weerakoon on his appointment as the Fourteenth Secretary General of SAARC w.e.f. 1st March 2020. We wish him tremendous success in this very important assignment.

Distinguished Delegates,

The Secretariat is at the disposal of the Committee to make this Session a great success. I am personally available for any consultation the distinguished delegates may wish to have.

I look forward to welcoming you all to a dinner tonight that I am hosting in honour of the delegates of the Programming Committee.

I wish the Committee a fruitful outcome and the delegates a pleasant stay in Kathmandu.

I thank you.

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