

INAUGURAL SESSION
(31 JANUARY 2018)

SOUTH ASIA WORKING GROUP MEETING “*CRISIS RESPONSE IN SOUTH ASIA*”
KATHMANDU, 31 JANUARY-01 FEBRUARY 2018

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY H. E. MR. AMJAD HUSSIAN B. SIAL, SECRETARY GENERAL OF SAARC

Distinguished Representatives of Centre for South Asian Studies and Near East and South Asia
Centre for Strategic Studies,
Distinguished Participants,

It is indeed a great honour for me to address the South Asia Working Group Meeting, “*Crisis Response in South Asia*” this morning. The participation of prominent scholars and experts signifies the importance of this meeting.

I appreciate the invitation by Dr. Nischal Pandey to address this Meeting.

The relevance of this Meeting to SAARC stems from the fact that South Asia, which is home to about one fourth of humanity, is a disaster-prone region. It has witnessed varying disasters of various magnitudes. Last year alone, floods affected about 40 million people across the region, causing massive destruction of property and loss of human lives.

Distinguished Participants,

As you are aware, six out of the eight countries of South Asia, namely, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Pakistan, are located within the most seismically active Himalayan-Hindukush belt, which has seen some of the worst earthquakes recorded in the history. Likewise, the Maldives and Sri Lanka and most of the coastal areas of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan are vulnerable to tsunami-genic earthquakes in the Indian Ocean.

The region’s vulnerability to natural disasters is further aggravated by unplanned human settlements, unsafe building practices and high population densities. As a result, earthquakes, cyclones, floods, tsunamis, droughts, heat and cold waves and other disasters continue to take their heavy toll on human and animal lives, property, and livelihoods across the region.

Against this backdrop, ever since the devastations wrecked by the Tsunami of 2004 and the Earthquake of 2005, SAARC has been promoting regional cooperation in the area of Disaster Management. More precisely, following the Tsunami of 2004, a Special Session of the SAARC Environment Ministers adopted the Malé Declaration on a collective response to large scale natural disasters. This Declaration paved the way for signing of the SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters in November 2011, which is in force since 09 September 2016. This Agreement is considered to be a milestone achievement of SAARC that puts into effect an effective regional mechanism to garner rapid response to disasters in order to reduce loss of lives and social, economic and environmental assets of the Member States.

Other important instruments instituted by SAARC to strengthen regional cooperation in the areas of Environment, Climate Change and Natural Disasters are SAARC Environmental Action Plan

(1997), Comprehensive Framework on Disaster Management (2006), Dhaka Declaration and SAARC Action Plan on Climate Change (2008), Thimphu Statement on Climate Change (2010), and SAARC Convention on Cooperation in Environment (2010). The SAARC Environment Ministers meet regularly to review progress in the implementation of these initiatives, besides giving policy guidelines in furthering regional cooperation in these areas. The mechanism of the SAARC Environment Ministers is assisted by the Technical Committee on Environment and Forestry.

The SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC), which is operational in India since November 2016, is the specialized organ of SAARC in the area of disaster management and disaster risk reduction. SDMC, which merges into its fold three erstwhile SAARC Regional Centres, namely, SAARC Meteorological Research Centre, SAARC Forestry Centre and SAARC Coastal Zone Management Centre, has an expanded mandate to support the Member States in Disaster Risk Reduction through application of Science & Technology, and knowledge from multiple disciplines; exchange of best practices; capacity development; collaborative research; and networking in line with the Global Goals and other relevant frameworks either adopted by the Member States or to which they are signatories. One of the primary objectives of SDMC is to strengthen the regional response mechanism to reduce loss of lives and injuries, and provide timely humanitarian assistance to people affected by disasters.

In 2017-18, SDMC conducted seven capacity building programmes, out of which four were devoted to subjects like "Short Range Early Warning System", "Advance Search and Rescue Techniques", "Application of Space Technology in Monitoring and Managing Risks" and "Seasonal Climate Forecast Mechanism for South Asia".

In order to strengthen regional response to cope with the impacts of natural disasters, the South Asian Annual Disaster Management Exercise (SAADMEx) was conducted in New Delhi in 2015 and it will be organized in future as well. SAADMEx provides participants with an opportunity to discuss disaster response plans and to review capabilities of an affected country by both national authorities and external multilateral organizations, with a particular focus on national on-site emergency command and control, decision-making, notifications, and coordination and integration of regional and international humanitarian supports.

In addition, in order to benefit from the expertise of the specialized agencies working in the fields of disaster preparedness and disaster risk reduction, SAARC has established collaborative arrangements with regional and international institutions like the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) and Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre (ADPC) through Memoranda of Understanding. I am glad to state that SAARC's collaboration with these agencies have been fruitful.

Distinguished Participants,

SAARC is committed to attaining the Sendai Framework global targets, which set forth the achievements required to reduce both disaster loss and risk, and increase resilience. The Sendai Framework Priority 4, in particular, contributes to achieving these targets through enhancing preparedness for an effective response. As SAARC's Centre of Excellence, SDMC is seized with

the task of developing a comprehensive Early Warning Mechanism, Strategic Evacuation Plans and Timely Search and Rescue Mechanisms in line with the Sendai Framework.

After all is said and done, I would like to emphasize that as we cannot avert natural disasters, we must commit ourselves to work collectively for disaster preparedness and mitigation of the impact of disasters.

Distinguished Participants,

I wish to now briefly touch upon the initiatives taken by SAARC in promoting peace and security in the region, which is the sine-qua-non for wellbeing of the people and socio-economic development of the region.

During successive SAARC Summits, our leaders have condemned terrorism in all its forms and manifestations. Such condemnation by the South Asian leadership culminated in the signing of the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism in 1987. An Additional Protocol to the SAARC Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism was signed in January 2004. Both these instruments are in force and facilitate regional cooperation in combating the menace of terrorism. These two instruments are supplemented by the SAARC Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters which was signed in 2008.

The mechanism of the meeting of the SAARC Ministers of Interior or Home oversees the implementation of these instruments. Besides, the mechanism of the SAARC Conference on Cooperation in Police Matters promotes collaboration among the Police Authorities in the region.

In addition, a SAARC Terrorist Offences Monitoring Desk established in Colombo in 1995 disseminates information on crimes related to terrorism and facilitates exchange of expertise and experience to combat terrorism and organized crimes. Another important initiative is the SAARC Anti-Terrorism Mechanism, which has held two meetings so far. I am glad to mention that efforts are underway to establish a SAARC Cyber Crimes Monitoring Desk.

Distinguished Participants,

In concluding my remarks, I wish to once again thank the hosts for organizing this Meeting, bringing together eminent scholars and experts. This Meeting provides a welcome opportunity to the distinguished participants to learn from one another's knowledge and experience.

I wish the distinguished participants fruitful deliberations.

Thank you.
