INAUGURAL SESSION

70TH EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING OF THE SAARC CHAMBER OF COMMERCE & INDUSTRYTHIMPHU, 23 JULY 2017

KEY-NOTE ADDRESS BY H. E. MR. AMJAD HUSAIN B. SIAL, SECRETARY GENERAL OF SAARC

Honourable Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Royal Government of Bhutan,

H. E. the Ambassador of Japan to Nepal and Permanent Representative of Japan to SAARC,

President, SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry,

President of Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industry-the gracious host,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good Morning.

 I am pleased to address the Inaugural Session of the 70th Executive Committee Meeting of the SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCI) in this beautiful city of Thimphu.

2. I would like to thank SCCI for inviting me to this important event and for the warm welcome and generous hospitality extended to me and my delegation. The arrangements made for this event are commendable.

3. I am grateful to the Royal Government of Bhutan for the courtesies extended to me and the excellent arrangements made for my visit to Bhutan.

4. In the pursuit of the goal of regional economic integration, the private sector in the region led by SCCI, an apex body of SAARC, has continued to play an important role in supplementing the inter-governmental efforts. The Roundtable on Tourism and Connectivity being organized by SCCI following this event is a testimony to its commitment to facilitate the attainment of this goal. I am also pleased to note that SCCI is also organizing SAARC Young Entrepreneurs Forum in Thimphu soon after this Executive Committee meeting. I wish SCCI great success in these endeavours.

Hon’able Minister,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

5. As all of us know, SAARC represents the largest geo-economic bloc of the world, as nearly one quarter of the world population lives in South Asia. Its combined average GDP growth is over 7%, and consumer base is over 800 million people in the middle class bracket. Therefore, the region bears tremendous potential of contributing immensely to the global economy. In this context, the Agreement on the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) should be seen as a landmark achievement.

6. While concerted inter-governmental efforts are already underway to promote intra-regional trade under SAFTA, it is equally important for the private sector of the region, in particular SCCI, to create awareness about the benefits of SAFTA’s preferential tariff regime among the business community to boost intra-regional trade. We know that SCCI has already done commendable work in this regard. But we feel that more needs to be done by SCCI to fully realize the objectives with which SAFTA was launched. I assure SCCI of continued cooperation by the SAARC Secretariat for achieving these objectives.

7. Although tariffs under SAFTA have now fallen within the range of 0 to 5%, several studies conducted by various SAARC bodies, including SCCI, reveal that trade under SAFTA is yet to attain its actual potential. I would like to take this opportunity to request SCCI to come up with suggestions on bringing intra-regional trade, both formal and informal, that is already taking place among the Member States, under SAFTA.

Hon’able Minister,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

8. I am glad to inform the SCCI Executive Committee that several intergovernmental initiatives are already underway for the promotion of trade, harmonization of standards, promotion of investments and for the improvement of connectivity in the region. These efforts fall under the purview of several SAARC mechanisms, including the SAARC Development Fund (SDF). It is expected that SDF will operationalize its Economic and Infrastructure Windows soon, to facilitate regional collaboration in boosting connectivity, trade and investment across the region.

9. As you are aware, at the Eighteenth SAARC Summit, our leaders renewed their commitment to achieve the eventual goal of the South Asian Economic Union in a phased and planned manner through concrete measures. Both the public and private sectors have to make strenuous and concerted endeavours to achieve the goal of the South Asian Economic Union.

10. In our view, the foremost requirement for achieving the objective of the South Asian Economic Union is improved connectivity through air, road, rail and sea. In this context, I am happy to inform the SCCI Executive Committee that a SAARC Ferry Service will soon commence its operation between India and Sri Lanka. SAARC Motor Vehicles and Railways Agreements are under active consideration of the Member States. SAARC Air Services Agreement was introduced last year and will be considered by a group of experts later this year.

11. The other essential requirement is facilitation of visa for the promotion of people-to-people contacts, including contacts among business communities in the region. In this connection, the Member States are actively engaged in improving the SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme, which also includes businessmen in the region. I am pleased to share with you that the proposal made by President of SCCI during the Meeting of SAARC Immigration Authorities in Colombo on 11 July 2017, has been circulated among the Member States for their consideration.

12. The improvement of economic relations is the key to promoting the welfare of our peoples, which is the cardinal objective of the SAARC Charter. When our economies flourish, our people will reap the dividends.

13. SCCI, as the apex body of SAARC, representing the business community in the region, is well placed to strengthen economic relations in the region for the promotion of the welfare of our peoples.

14. I wish SCCI’s Executive Committee fruitful deliberations.

 I thank you.

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