

INAUGURAL SESSION

(TUESDAY, 15 DECEMBER 2020)

FIFTY-EIGHTH SESSION OF THE PROGRAMMING COMMITTEE

REMARKS BY H. E. MR. ESALA RUWAN WEERAKOON, SECRETARY GENERAL OF SAARC

Your Excellency Bharat Raj Poudyal,
Foreign Secretary of Nepal and Chairman of the Standing Committee,
Mr. Bharat Kumar Regmi, Chairman of the Programming Committee,
Distinguished Members of the Programming Committee,
Heads of Specialized Bodies and Regional Centres,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour and a privilege for me to address, for the first time, a Session of the Programming Committee.

I wish to extend a very warm welcome to all the Delegates to the Fifty-eighth Session of the Programming Committee, which is being convened today in virtual mode.

We are honoured by the august presence of the distinguished Foreign Secretary of Nepal and Chair of the Standing Committee. His presence in our midst today signifies the importance that Nepal as the Chair and host of the SAARC Secretariat attaches to the SAARC process. We look forward to benefitting from his insightful remarks.

This Session of the Programming Committee convenes amid the unprecedented situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic. I take this opportunity to express condolences to the people and Governments of the Member States of SAARC over the loss of life caused by the pandemic. I express confidence that with firm resolve and strengthened regional cooperation, the Member States will be able to overcome the challenges posed by the pandemic. It has now become imperative to ensure availability of affordable and effective vaccines to our peoples to protect their health from this deadly virus.

This Session of the Programming Committee convenes soon after the commemoration of the Thirty-sixth SAARC Charter Day. We avail ourselves of this opportunity to sincerely acknowledge the Charter Day messages from the SAARC Leaders and their unfailing commitment to the SAARC process.

Distinguished Delegates,

The outbreak of COVID-19, which is described as an “once-in-a-generation” threat, has posed unprecedented challenges to the region. The region is likely to face its worst economic performance in the last 40 years, with contractions and massive unemployment. As a result, regional cooperation has become all the more necessary to address these challenges. It is in this context that we recall the initiative of the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India to convene the SAARC Leaders' Video Conference in March this year to discuss measures to contain the spread of the

virus and mitigate its after effects in the region. In April this year, the SAARC Health Ministers met virtually to carry forward the aspirations of the SAARC Leaders in combating the pandemic.

I am glad to state that the SAARC Foreign Ministers and SAARC Finance Ministers also met virtually in the wake of the pandemic. Likewise, the SAARC Ministers of Education and SAARC Ministers of Planning held virtual meetings to carry forward regional cooperation in these important areas. Senior trade officials and health professionals from the Member States also met to devise measures to safeguard the region from adverse socio-economic impacts. Moreover, meetings in the fields of education, energy and food security have been held. For the first time, the food grains maintained under the SAARC Food Bank Reserve have been utilized. The SAARC Agriculture Centre has signed a US\$ 1.5 Million grant agreement with the International Fund for Agricultural Development for the regional Project Consortium for scaling-up Climate-Smart Agriculture in South Asia. The SAARC Specialized Bodies and Regional Centres have continued to hold their activities in virtual mode during the pandemic.

We are thankful to the Interim Unit of the SAARC Disaster Management Centre for hosting a web portal for regular dissemination of information on the Coronavirus. We are also grateful to the SAARC Development Fund for approving US\$ 7.7 million for COVID-19 related projects in the region.

Distinguished Delegates,

Convening at the end of this year, this Session of the Programming Committee has before it the proposed budgets and programmes of the SAARC Secretariat, Specialized Bodies and Regional Centres for the financial year 2021, for consideration.

In view of the uncertainties triggered by the pandemic, there is an urgent need to adopt austerity measures in order to generate savings for our Member States in 2021, while keeping the momentum of regional cooperation through holding of activities in virtual mode, until such time it is safe to have meetings and gatherings in physical mode.

In conclusion, I wish to thank the Member States and the host, the esteemed Government of Nepal, for supporting the SAARC process and the Secretariat. We remain at the service of the esteemed Member States to carry forward the SAARC process under their guidance.

I wish the Committee a fruitful outcome of its deliberations.

I thank you.
