



INDIA
भारत

Informal meeting of the SAARC Council of Ministers

Statement by

External Affairs Minister Smt. Sushma Swaraj

27 September 2018

Your Excellency Mr. Pradeep Kumar Gyawali,

Foreign Minister of Nepal and Chairperson of the Meeting;

Your Excellencies,

Foreign Ministers of SAARC Member States;

Secretary General of SAARC;

Distinguished delegates,

It is my pleasure to join my esteemed colleagues at this informal meeting of the SAARC Council of Ministers.

I thank the Secretary General for giving us a comprehensive update on the progress made thus far on various fronts under SAARC since our last informal meeting here one year ago.

India is committed to regional cooperation. We attach highest priority to the development and prosperity of our region, under our "Neighbourhood First" policy. Our commitment to sharing our progress with our neighbours was best articulated by the vision outlined by our Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi at the 18th SAARC Summit.

India is willing to share the fruits of its economic, scientific and technological progress with the South Asian community. We have taken various initiatives including asymmetrical responsibilities for enhancing regional cooperation under SAARC.

Excellencies,

The South Asia Satellite, a first of its kind initiative, was launched in May 2017. The project will touch the lives of the people even in remote areas of our region, through its wide ranging applications in health, education, disaster response, weather forecasting and communications.

I would like to thank esteemed colleagues from participating countries for their strong support and cooperation in advancing this project that would bring the benefits of advance space technologies to our peoples. We would be hosting a Workshop to discuss and finalise roadmap for its full utilisation for benefit of our people.

The SAARC Disaster Management Centre in Gandhinagar is now in its second year of operation. A wide-ranging calendar of activities in area of disaster risk reduction and response prepared by the Centre is being implemented with the active participation of all Member States.

The South Asian University held its Third convocation in June this year. The University is providing high quality education to our youth, and has already produced about 1000 scholars. India is fully committed to bear the capital cost for the new campus of SAU. Construction is in full swing. We will ensure speedy completion of the project.

Excellencies,

Improving connectivity in all forms remains vital for progress of our region and for increasing people-to-people contacts. We are working on extending India's National Knowledge Network to participating SAARC countries.

I am happy to inform that the First leg of its extension to Sri Lanka was inaugurated in January 2018. Development of seamless physical connectivity is key for achieving regional growth, employment and prosperity.

Towards this objective, we collectively decided to finalize a SAARC Motor Vehicle Agreement and SAARC Regional Railways Agreement, which, however, still remain pending.

India also hosted several official and technical level SAARC meetings including Governing Board meeting of South Asian Regional Standards Organisation (SARSO), and meetings related to disaster management, agriculture, livestock and healthcare.

Excellencies,

Regional cooperation can only be successful if it meets the expectations of the people. The world is moving ahead to become more integrated and connected where movement of goods and people is becoming easier with each passing day.

SAARC needs to deliver on its commitments or risk being left behind. To realise our immense potential for trade, it is imperative that the further trade liberalization under South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) and operationalisation of SAARC Agreement on Trade in Services (SATIS) are done at the earliest.

Cooperation in the Energy sector is critical for meeting our high Energy needs. The SAARC Framework Agreement for Energy Cooperation that our leaders signed at the 18th SAARC Summit has not yet entered in to force due to non-ratification by some Member States.

Excellencies,

An environment of peace and security is essential for regional cooperation to progress and achieve economic development and prosperity of our people. The number of threats and incidents that endanger South Asia's are on the rise.

Terrorism remains the single largest threat to peace and stability in our region, and indeed in the world. It is necessary that we eliminate the scourge of terrorism in all its forms, without any discrimination, and end the ecosystem of its support.

Excellencies,

In closing, I would like to stress that meetings, including high-level ones can only be effective if expressions of resolve are translated in to concrete action on the ground. South Asia region has the potential to be the front-runner of growth and prosperity and is one of the fastest growing regions of the world.

But the true potential of the region can be realized only if all countries contribute constructively towards delivering on the commitments SAARC has made to the people of the region. We remain hopeful for a brighter future of SAARC together.

Thank you.