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Saarc must broaden vision

Former Saarc secretary general tells The Daily Star
Sajjadur Rahman and Sohel Parvez

SAARC was formed for the noble objective of bringing benefits to the common people of the region. But 25 years after formation of the regional bloc, the goal of people's welfare remains far from realisation.

Ibrahim Hussain Zaki, former Saarc secretary general, said one of the shortcomings is, Saarc is yet to take civil society, private sector and the press on board and act as an inter-governmental organisation instead of a regional forum to promote economic integration and welfare of the people.

"When you take the elements and components of South Asia, the private sector, civil society and media into cognizance, then you can say, it is a regional organisation," Zaki said. Zaki came to Dhaka to join the Fourth South Asia Economic Summit organised by the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

He said only government officials and ministers sit to discuss issues of regional interest under the Saarc framework.

Unless the private and public sector merge and have full understanding and confidence on each other, the fate of the common man on the road will not change, Zaki said.

He suggested that the South Asia Economic Summit (SAES), a civil society initiative of different think-tanks across the region, should be included in the official structure of Saarc.

Zaki has long experience with Saarc. He has been associated with Saarc since the first day of its inception. He represented the Maldives at the first foreign secretary level meeting on formation of Saarc. Then he became secretary general of Saarc in 1991. He now serves as a special envoy of the president of the Maldives.

"SAES should be an official event of Saarc and then club it with the Saarc Summit," Zaki said. If it happens, the private sector representatives will be able to discuss their issues, he added.

He also advocates that Saarc Summit should be one day and the economic summit on the other day. "If you can develop this, then the real results would start coming in," Zaki said.

The former Saarc secretary general seems frustrated on the outcome of the Saarc.

"If you look back, you'll see successive summits made several promises to its people, but never delivered," Zaki said. "We did not get back returns against our investments in Saarc."

He said the Maldives spends more for Saarc than for the United Nations.

To him, the upcoming summit to be held in his country next month is an opportunity to take the bloc forward.

For the first time, all eight South Asian countries under Saarc are run by democratically elected governments and they are accountable to their people.

He is also optimistic this time because the summit will be held in the southern hemisphere.

"When we started Saarc, many people said it is a poor men's and dictator's club. Not anymore. All the countries are run by democratic governments," he added.

He also talked about Indo-Pak and other bilateral relations in the region.

Zaki said people have been hearing about the Indo-Pak relations for years. "This is an issue, but we can't wait for another 25 years."

"I think bilateral political and contentious issues will be dealt separately, rather than bringing these in the Saarc. Saarc should be concentrated on economic issues," Zaki added.

The special envoy of the Maldives president said there are so many talks on economic integration with little results.

"We've been talking on the South Asian Economic Union, Customs Union and economic integration for so long, and spent enough time," he says.

Still he holds high hopes for a better South Asia.



Ibrahim Hussain Zaki

Zaki said perseverance and resilience are vital to an integrated, peaceful and harmonious South Asia.

"I believe the only breakthrough you can get within the Saarc is economic integration. The earlier you do it, the better it is for the region," Zaki said.

"Now it's time to take action. More delay will make the efforts costlier and complex," he added.

He also urges member countries to take Saarc seriously and include it in their respective countries' election agendas.

"Saarc will be effective when it will become an election agenda for every country."

Zaki reiterates the necessity of civil society, private sector and media's inclusion in the mainstream process of Saarc.

"You cannot have ministers meeting only...Those days are gone. Unless you make collective decisions, it will not work," he said.

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Interview

Better connectivity may boost trade

An Afghan expert shares his take on business potential in South Asia

Sajjadur Rahman and Sohel Parvez

"Visas should not be a paranoid. After all, we all are the same people from the same region," said Bathija who was in Dhaka to attend the fourth South Asia Economic Summit organised by the Centre for Policy Dialogue. South Asia is the least integrated region in the world with intra-regional trade at less than 5 percent

South Asia has tremendous potential. One day it will shine and dominate. The potential can be realised in the shortest possible time by cementing business-to-business and people-to-people connectivity.

"Things will move fast if business-to-business connectivity increases," Sham L Bathija, senior economic adviser to the president of Afghanistan, told The Daily Star in an interview recently.

"Visas should not be a paranoid. After all, we all are the same people from the same region," said Bathija who was in Dhaka to attend the fourth South Asia Economic Summit organised by the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

South Asia is the least integrated region in the world with intra-regional trade at less than 5 percent.

The Afghan economic adviser said Bangladesh produces billions of dollars of garments a year but imports only 18 percent yarn from South Asia.

"If the business community sits and interacts with each other, regional relations will be facilitated," says Bathija.

The land-locked Afghanistan, which is facing internal conflicts, is the latest entrant to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc).

The country was ruled by the religion extremist Taliban, before an interim government led by Hamid Karzai assumed power in December 2001.

Under democratic rule, the country, bestowed with mineral resources from oil-natural gas-copper and gold, is growing at an amazing rate of 16-18 percent a year and per capita income rose to \$600 now from \$150 under Taliban regime.

"Afghanistan is hopefully going to become a new, emerging and frontier market," says Bathija.

As a new comer to Saarc, the senior economic adviser feels Afghanistan has a lot more to receive from the regional bloc.

"We feel that we'll benefit from expertise, capacity building and the technical know-how of member countries," he says.

He discussed outcomes of Saarc so far, the imminent summit to be held in Maldives next month, disputes between India and Pakistan, fear of terrorism and the benefits of economic integration in South Asia, a region that accounts for 15 percent of the world's GDP and home to 20 percent of world population.

On the achievements of Saarc, he says, "I look at it as the glass half-full."

"South Asia will shine one day. Within Saarc, there is tremendous potential."

"We have shortcomings, but goodwill is there," Bathija said.

Commenting on the Saarc summit to be held in the Maldives in November, he said the underlying issue of this year's event is integration.

"Many small elements will come into the integration issue. I believe goodwill of all the member states will remove all these small elements to integration." He said Afghan President Hamid Karzai is deeply committed to Saarc.

On rivalry and bitter relations between India and Pakistan that are believed to be barriers to an effective Saarc, Bathija says things are moving now.

On disputes between India and Pakistan, he advises the two nations to sit together to resolve bilateral issues.

sajjad@thedailystar.net

sohel@thedailystar.net

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Interview

Exploit hydropower to meet power need

Former Bhutanese minister says effective policies can help utilise the potential

Md Fazlur Rahman

"Bhutan is ready to sell electricity to anybody. How do you sell the electricity is most important. It is not something you place on a truck and transport. You have to have transmission lines that will pass through India. So, the arrangement has to be between India and Bangladesh"

"For hydroelectricity, we need catchment areas for rains. In Bhutan, we have some hydroelectric projects. Wherever we do that, we have to maintain the catchment areas, which means, we do not allow the felling of trees and habitation. So, it is important that you tap that potential as soon as possible"

South Asian countries in the Himalayan region should exploit their hydropower potential to help the region meet its growing demand for electricity and spur rapid economic growth, says an expert.

"The potential is enormous," says Lyonpo Om Pradhan, chairman of Druk Holding and Investments (DHI), one of the largest corporations in Bhutan.

He said Bhutan has an economically viable hydro-electric capacity of 23,000 megawatts and Nepal, its next door neighbour, has a capacity of 42,000 megawatts. India also has a potential to generate hundreds of thousands of megawatts of electricity from hydropower.

"But South Asia has exploited only 12.5 percent of its hydroelectric potential. It means nearly 88 percent of its potential is unexplored," he told The Daily Star in an interview on Sunday in Dhaka.

Earlier this week, the former Bhutanese minister was in Dhaka to attend the fourth South Asia Economic Summit organised by Centre for Policy Dialogue, a local think-tank.

Pradhan said the countries should speed up efforts to utilise their hydropower potential before it is too late. "My concern is that if the South Asian countries do not take action to exploit this huge resource, it can deplete."

He says there are two main reasons as to why the resource will deplete -- people could start residing in these areas and when a population builds, it will be difficult to relocate them; and secondly, climate change is taking place.

"For hydroelectricity, we need catchment areas for rains." And if there are no hydroelectric projects, there will be no incentives to maintain these catchment areas, he adds.

"In Bhutan, we have some hydroelectric projects. Wherever we do that, we have to maintain the catchment areas, which means, we do not allow the felling of trees and habitation. So, it is important that you tap that potential as soon as possible."

His concerns are that the potential to generate electricity through hydroelectric projects will deplete in the Himalayan region, including Bhutan, if there are no clear cut policies and programmes.

Pradhan said the Himalayan Kingdom has a clear policy on hydroelectric development. "We have a potential to generate 23,000 MW of electricity. Out of this, we now produce only 1,500 MW."

"We have a programme to install a capacity of 10,000 MW by 2020. By 2020, we would have about 13,000 MW of electricity. So, Bhutan is fully exploiting its potential."

Bhutan's per capita consumption of electricity is 2,100 kilowatt-hours as of 2009, which is the highest in South Asia. Its population stands at 708,500 as of 2010.

"We want other areas in the Himalayan region, such as Nepal, India and Pakistan, to also exploit their potential as well. That will help regional development," he adds.



Lyonpo Om Pradhan

Bhutan runs a programme called 'Electricity for All by 2030'.

"We can set up power-intensive industries like ferrosilicon and calcium carbide. We have no problems in setting these up as we have power. Power is the key ingredient for development."

Bhutan now produces about 1,500 MW of electricity. About 80 percent of the country's electricity goes to India.

"The government of India helped us set up the hydroelectric project. Whatever surplus capacity we have, which we can not use, we sell to them."

Pradhan said Bangladesh should engage in dialogues with India to buy power from Bhutan.

"Bangladesh spoke to us to buy power. We said you will have to talk with India because the transmission line goes through Indian territories. Unless there is a transmission line from India to Bangladesh, the power cannot go."

He said the current climate in the Indo-Bangla relationship could help reach an understanding.

"Bangladesh is now talking with India. Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh came to Bangladesh. I think two advisers to the prime minister are also talking to their Bangladeshi counterparts."

He says, "The relationship between Bangladesh and India has improved, especially after the Indian prime minister's visit. The present government has good relations with New Delhi. As far as Bhutan is concerned, the problem is between Bangladesh and India, not with Bhutan."

"Bhutan is ready to sell electricity to anybody. How do you sell the electricity is most important. It is not something you place on a truck and transport. You have to have transmission lines that will pass through India. So, the arrangement has to be between India and Bangladesh."

He said price of Bhutanese electricity, at less than two Indian rupees a unit, is really cheap.

Bhutan will invest about \$10 billion until 2020 to produce 10,000 MW of electricity. "It's a huge investment. We are giving a lot of employment to South Asians. I also see some Bangladeshis among them."

He said by 2030, the country would definitely be able to ensure electricity for its population. "We are already on our way to achieving the target. We now cover 80 percent of our population."

Pradhan's DHI is a government organisation and owns all the commercial investments of the government from hydropower to telecommunication to natural resources and banking.

fazlur.rahman@thedailystar.net

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