

Statement by Ms. Farzana Raja, Leader of Pakistan Delegation
Panel Discussion (Session-I) of First Meeting of South Asia Forum
(New Delhi, 8 September 2011)

Excellency Secretary General Fathimat Diyana Saeed

Excellency Dr. Sheel Kant Sharma

Distinguish Heads of Delegations of SAARC Member States

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a privilege to participate in the first meeting of South Asia Forum. On behalf of my delegation and on my own behalf, I wish to express our profound gratitude to the Government of India for their warm and generous hospitality. I am confident that with this gathering of eminent personalities from public and private sectors in the SAARC fraternity, this forum will meet its expectation of serving as an open platform for generation of debate, discussion and exchange of ideas on South Asia and its future development.



New Delhi: Federal Minister and Chairperson Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), Madame Farzana Raja attending the first meeting of South Asia Forum on "Integration in South Asia: Moving Towards a South Asian Economic Union". (Dated Sep 08, 2011)

Excellencies,

As this Forum is taking stock of SAARC's achievements and challenges, a dispassionate reflection on the Association's performance during the past 25 years is required. SAARC came into being in December 1985. The objectives were to promote the welfare, and improve the quality of life of the people of South Asia by accelerating economic growth in the region and building up mutual trust among the member states. We must make a frank and realistic appraisal, whether SAARC has lived up to the hope and aspirations of the people it represents. Historical legacies, differences and disputes have, in some ways stalled progress, but this frank and honest assessment should also not blind us to the significant progress achieved by SAARC. The whole-hearted commitment of the member states to the goals and objectives of SAARC has remained robust. This is no mean achievement that SAARC's existence has enabled South Asian leaders to meet regularly to discuss their mutual problems. Today, the future is beckoning us to accelerate the process of regional cooperation.



New Delhi: Federal Minister and Chairperson Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), Madame Farzana Raja addressing at South Asian Forum “Integration in South Asia: Moving towards a South Asian Economic Union” (Dated: Sep 07, 2011)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The most important priority for south Asia is development. To achieve socio-economic growth and ensure the well-being of our people, we need to have peace and stability at home as well as in the region. The diversity of SAARC programmes and activities is undoubtedly indicative of our region's resolve to follow a holistic development paradigm. Poverty alleviation, food security, energy security, women empowerment, health and education are common objectives. Socio-economic disparities within the region have to be addressed to attain these objectives. There is a need for greater coordination between national and regional plans. The establishment of SAARC Development Fund with a permanent Secretariat in Bhutan is a welcome achievement of SAARC in this regard. I will have the honor to speak briefly on the theme **Demographics and Development—“Coordinating and Intensifying Poverty Alleviation Efforts Across the SAARC Region, with Special Emphasis on Women and Youth”**.

Excellencies,

Climate Change is another common challenge confronting the SAARC region. Realizing this common concern, the SAARC Convention on Cooperation on Environment was signed last year. While this is again a welcome first step, more must follow. We must focus on sharing best practices and pool our resources to adopt region-wide mitigation and adaptation measures.



New Delhi: Federal Minister and Chairperson Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), Madame Farzana Raja along with the delegates of SAARC member countries attending the first meeting of South Asia Forum on “Integration in South Asia: Moving Towards a South Asian Economic Union”. (Dated Sep 08, 2011)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The SAARC Charter of Democracy signed last year is a commendable move. We must join hands to extend support to such initiatives to strengthen democracy in our region.

Excellencies,

The promise of SAARC can only be realized if we are able to not only deepen our engagement but also benefit from the process of globalization. We appreciate the growing number of Observers of SAARC. We must find ways and means to enable these and other interested states and regional organizations to engage substantially with SAARC. South Asia can become an engine for global economic growth. Our vast markets, our natural and human resources and our innovative spirits are critical ingredients for a promising regional and global economic activity. It is by a deliberate shift from “dependence” to “inter-dependence” that we will be able to forge partnerships that are mutually beneficial.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The theme of this Forum i.e. “Integration in South Asia; moving towards South Asia Economic Union” reflects our common wish of liberalization of trade in the region. It was to materialize this wish that South Asia Free Trade Agreement came into force in 2006 and SAARC Agreement of Trade in Services was signed in 2010. But, the actual trade figures are not very encouraging. The intra-regional trade is less than five per cent. We should address the issues impeding intra-regional trade including the issues of Sensitive list, Rules of Origin, Technical Assistance to LDCs, and Mechanism for compensation of revenue loss to LDCs due to trade liberalization program. There is need to implement SAFTA in letter and spirit to achieve the ideal of a South Asia Economic Union.

Excellencies,

To make SAARC a viable and vibrant organization responsible to the aspirations of its people, it must increasingly adopt a project-based approach, co-opting our private sectors, and capitalizing on many win-win opportunities that our region affords.

The people of South Asia find harmony in their diverse cultures, and this harmony imparts to them a common identity—the South Asian identity. This

cultural affinity between our people is highly conducive towards unleashing our latent potential of regional integration. But it will be possible only if we refuse to be held hostage to history; only when we sincerely work to build trust, resolve disputes, fight negative perceptions and see merit in an enlightened collective interest. We have to make SAARC a really viable organization responsive to the aspirations of its people.

Thank you.