

Valedictory Address of Dr. Fehmida Mirza, Speaker National Assembly of Pakistan & the President 6th Conference of the Association of SAARC Speakers and Parliamentarians, November 6, 2012

BismillahIrrRehmanIrrRaheem

Excellency Mr. Abdul Hamid, Speaker of the Jatiyo Sansad of the Republic of Bangladesh!

Excellency Mr. Jig-May Tshul-tim, Speaker of the National Assembly of Bhutan!

Excellency Smt. Meera Kumar, Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Republic of India!

Excellency Mr. Abdulla Shahid, Speaker of the People's Majlis of the Republic of the Maldives!

Distinguished delegates, observers, Ladies and Gentlemen!

Assalam-o-Alikum and good day to all of you!

I am extremely grateful for the vote of thanks, proposed by Excellency Abdulla Shahid, the Vice President of the Association and the Speaker of the Maldives, which was seconded by all other distinguished Speakers and leaders of the delegations from SAARC Parliaments, present here.

The sentiments expressed by each one of you have indeed humbled us and on behalf of the National Assembly of Pakistan, I whole-heartedly thank you for your kind appreciation.

I also consider the successful and timely holding of the 6th Conference our joint achievement. I warmly acknowledge the personal interest of Smt. Meera Kumar in making this possible and also congratulate all other worthy Speakers for their valuable contributions. The wisdom and foresightedness, reflected in their respective keynotes to this Conference, enabled the discussions of this Conference to remain focused and mutually beneficial. I am sure that under our collective leadership, the Association will continue to progress in future.

Distinguished delegates!

The 6th Conference of the Association of SAARC Speakers and Parliamentarians enabled the parliamentarians of the member countries to forge close links.

The acceptance of the idea by the Speakers' Council to institute a Women's Committee of the Association is a historic landmark. It has not only given shape to the long-cherished desire for a regional network of women legislators but has also set the course for the Association's possible future expansion in other areas of mutual cooperation.

The six sessions of this august General Assembly witnessed useful discussions on the themes of the Conference. 18 honourable members spoke on the topic of "Meaningful Participatory Democracy — Parliament's Affirmative Actions", while 17 members took part in the deliberations on "Targeting Food Security for the Region: Parliament's Role in Accomplishing Millennium Development Goals".

All these esteemed speakers gave informative accounts of their respective societies, took stock of the affirmative actions of their concerned legislatures in promoting participatory democracy at the grassroots and invited the collective attention of fellow parliamentarians on the common challenge of food security in the overall context of Millennium Development Goals. It is satisfying to note that democracy is the chosen path for all nations of South Asia and concerted efforts are being made by their respective parliaments to make it inclusive through progressive law making. The Conference has rightly identified terrorism as the biggest challenge to democracy in South Asia and stressed for Parliaments' pro-active role in comprehensively addressing this issue. In addition, the discussions have also revealed a strong agreement on strengthening the political parties structures at all levels, while calls were also made for greater parliamentary interventions in addressing issues of corruption, class-divide and trends of rising intolerance in South Asia.

In the realm of food security, it was noted by the worthy delegates that although SAARC Food Security Bank was established in 2007, the pace of its progress has remained far too slow. A combined parliamentary political intervention has been recommended to give it a boost. The proposal of a regional agenda for cooperation in research and sharing of agriculture and forest technology is also another important suggestion.

As for the MDGs, it has been rightly found that owing to the “top-down approach” of these targets, there has been a general lack of ownership towards them while the space for local participation is also limited. What is even more alarming is the reference made to an international survey, involving 118 countries and including some of the SAARC nations, which reveals that in “only 22% cases, the Parliamentarians formally discussed the MDGs.” The delegates therefore sought greater parliamentary oversight in this important area and called for establishing parliamentary committees on MDGs, as has been done in the National Assembly of Pakistan.

It is equally important to note that these deliberations have also pointed to the need of evolving a joint strategy on “Beyond 2015-Post MDGs” scenario. It was genuinely felt to take into account the realities of:

- Climate change and related risks
- Chronic poverty and growing inequalities
- Uncontrolled population growth and unplanned urbanization and
- the global financial crisis.

These are indeed serious threats to the progress and promotion of a vibrant democracy and owing to their inter-connected nature, they require a holistic approach on the regional level. This meeting’s general consensus on jointly addressing such challenges through closer inter-parliamentary cooperation at SAARC level is, therefore an encouraging sign. It is equally heartening for me to note that the idea of a “South Asian Parliament”, as proposed by me last year in New Delhi, was repeatedly echoed as the possible future vision for our Association.

The need now is to sustain this meaningful parliamentary dialogue. As the President of this Conference for 2012-13, I will be working on finding ways to increase the momentum of parliamentary exchanges among member Parliaments. The women legislators have already taken the lead by calling for their meetings on biannual basis. This practise can be replicated by organising parliamentary seminars, workshops and discussions on mutually agreed issues on regular basis.

I also intend to visit all member parliaments to explore the possibilities of further expanding cooperation in our Association. I am confident that with the able support of the distinguished Speakers of SAARC, we will succeed in taking the Association.

As I conclude, I, once again, whole-heartedly thank them for their support in the holding of this Conference and for reposing their confidence in me by electing me their President for the current year.

Distinguished Delegates!

I also express my sincere appreciation to each one of you for your valuable contributions. Some of you travelled long distances and I hope that your brief stay was comfortable, which enabled you to benefit from this Conference. The Parliament and people of Pakistan will eagerly wait for your return, as and when you may desire to visit your second home, Pakistan.

I am particularly indebted to the Honourable President of Pakistan for inaugurating this Conference and setting the tone of our meeting through his thought-provoking address.

My deepest appreciation is also due to the Government of Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf for all the needed support, which was made readily available to the National Assembly through the allied departments in the organisation of this important Conference.

The Provincial Speakers and their delegations were also a welcome addition to our Conference, who attended the sessions as Observers. I am sure they will be taking useful experiences to their respective legislatures.

The Secretary General and his entire staff in the Secretariat deserve our joint accolade for their tireless efforts in making this Conference a success from start to its end. The participation of young and innocent volunteers in welcoming our guests is also highly acknowledged.

I also thank our friends in print and electronic media, who remained keen partners in all events of this Conference and provided amicable coverage to the deliberations and decisions taken here.

With these words --- and with immense pleasure --- Ladies and Gentlemen --- I declare the 6th Conference of the Association of SAARC Speakers and Parliamentarians formally closed.

Wish you all safe return back home.

Pakistan Zindabad