

Welcome Address

of Dr. Fehmida Mirza

Honourable Speaker of the National Assembly of Pakistan

at the

6th Conference of the Association of SAARC Speakers and Parliamentarians

November 4, 2012

Bismillah Irr Rehman Irr Raheem

Excellency Mr. Asif Ali Zardari,

The President of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan!

Excellency Smt. Meera Kumar,

President of the 5th Conference of the Association of SAARC Speakers and Parliamentarians and the Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Republic of India!

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

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

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

Excellency Mr. Chandima Weera-kkody, Deputy Speaker of the Parliament of the Republic of Sri Lanka!

Distinguished Members of the Parliaments of the SAARC Countries, delegates, Ministers, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen!

Assalam-o-Alikum and a good afternoon to all of you!

It is an honour and a privilege to welcome the distinguished Speakers, Parliamentarians and members of the delegations from the SAARC Region on behalf of the people and Parliament of Pakistan.

I am grateful to all of you for being here to participate in the deliberations of the 6th Conference of the Association of SAARC Speakers and Parliamentarians.

Your presence in Islamabad is of great significance for strengthening Parliaments' role in evolving consensus on critical regional issues and finding ways of addressing them.

My foremost gratitude is due to the President of Pakistan, Mr. Asif Ali Zardari, who has honoured us by inaugurating this important Parliamentary Assembly. I take this opportunity to recognize his unwavering commitment to democracy, regional peace and stability. Indeed, his voluntary surrendering of all discretionary powers, concentrated in the office of the President, to an elected legislature is unprecedented.

I also congratulate all worthy Speakers and delegates of SAARC Parliaments on the first-ever holding of the Association's Conference within a year of its previous meeting. This could not happen in the 17 years' long history of the Association —despite a clear articulation in its Charter to hold the meetings on annual basis.

This reflects the commitment the Speakers of SAARC National Parliaments have shown towards reviving and giving shape to the important Parliamentary forum in the wake of myriads of challenges faced by the Region.

However, I would especially like to express my deepest appreciation to Excellency Shirimati Meera Kumar, Chairperson of the 5th Conference, for her efforts in making this a reality.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

South Asia houses more than one-fifth of the world's population, spreading over 4.6 million kilometres. It represents unique diversity in its unity of history, culture and traditions. All of us in the SAARC family cherish the ideals of freedom, equality and

justice with a deep commitment to global and regional peace, prosperity and parliamentary democracy.

It is in this spirit, that SAARC parliamentarians have been closely working on numerous multilateral parliamentary forums like the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the Asian Parliamentary Assembly.

This cooperation can further yield substantive results if we are able to forge common grounds through a vibrant SAARC Parliamentary Association. This will ensure a stronger voice for our region in all such international forums.

In the forthcoming sessions of our Conference, the parliamentary delegations of SAARC will be sharing their thoughts on two pertinent themes, namely:

- “Meaningful Participatory Democracy in South Asia —Parliament’s Affirmative Actions” and**
- “Targeting Food Security for the Region: Ensuring Parliament’s role in accomplishing MDGs”.**

These issues merit attention of the elected representatives since the Region faces challenges vis-à-vis human security, development, and climate change. Poverty, unchecked population growth, haphazard urbanization, resource imbalance, high illiteracy rates, health risks, growing unemployment and shrinking economic opportunities have contributed significantly to the stress on our traditional habitat and in breeding intolerance and extremism in the region.

Parliaments— representing the will of the people— provide ideal platforms for addressing these core issues. As public representatives, we cannot remain oblivious to the plight of the masses and must seek out-of-the-box solutions. In an inter-connected world, individual policies and problems of any nation have a rippling effect on its neighbourhood. So, the parliamentarians must have a greater role through parliamentary diplomacy in the policy formulations concerning foreign relations and international cooperation.

It is in the light of this, that I had shared my vision of a “SAARC Parliament”, at our previous Conference in New Delhi. This proposed forum can enable our respective parliamentarians to build consensus through continued dialogue on the multiple challenges affecting us.

I had also called for setting up a Joint Committee of SAARC Parliamentarians to regularly monitor the pace of implementation of the MDGs and suggest workable collaborative actions in this regard.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

Women play critical role in the progress of democracy. The Association recognised this fact last year in Delhi where we amended the Charter to reaffirm the importance of women parliamentarians. It is encouraging to note that **this morning**, the women legislators of the SAARC region held their first meeting to delineate their role in strengthening democracy and social justice in South Asia. A substantive outcome of their deliberations is a proposal to create a permanent network for women’s empowerment under the umbrella of our Association. I am glad to inform that the Speakers’ Council of our Association has agreed to this proposal.

Furthermore, with the expanding role of technology, the concept of paperless E-Parliament is increasingly gaining importance. It does not only ensure resource-efficient legislatures but also make them accessible and transparent. The Secretary Generals and Secretaries of SAARC Parliament have reviewed this vital subject. I am confident that their discussions will lead to meaningful cooperation amongst our respective secretariats in this vital field.

We must build upon these advancements, share our experiences and continue to expand the scope of the Association in order to make it vibrant to the needs of our respective Parliaments. South Asia has the most dominant youth factor in its population. It’s time we give them voice from our forum.

Honourable Delegates!

Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto once said and I quote:

“Unless South Asia pulls itself out of the quagmire of poverty, prejudice and past conflicts, our people will remain slaves within the global economy.”

When the history will be written, it will record how we —the elected political forces of South Asia—managed to steer this region through the most troubled of its times only by the power of reasoning, dialogue, compromise and consensus. The future of a democratic, progressive and peaceful South Asia is closely linked to this policy of reconciliation.

Let this policy be our joint legacy to the coming generations.

As I conclude, I wish the best to the delegates and hope for a meaningful outcome of this Conference. Many of you may be visiting Pakistan for the first time. So let me share that for centuries, the Sufis, saints and the sages have preached humanity and humility to us. We, therefore, bear a natural desire of peace and camaraderie with our neighbours. I, therefore, hope you take fond memories back home.

I thank you all

Pakistan Zindabad