VIDEO CONFERENCE OF THE SAARC HEALTH MINISTERS, 23 APRIL 2020

REMARKS BY H. E. MR. ESALA RUWAN WEERAKOON, SECRETARY GENERAL OF SAARC

Hon’ble Ministers,

Excellencies,

Distinguished Heads of Delegation,

Good Afternoon!

At the outset, we wish to express sincere appreciation to the Government of Pakistan for organizing this Video Conference to address the outbreak of COVID-19. We also gratefully acknowledge the initiative taken by the Hon’ble Prime Minister of India to convene the Video Conference of the SAARC Leaders on 15th March 2020. These initiatives not only augur well for the health and well-being of our people, but also demonstrate the spirit of regional cooperation and solidarity in the wake of the unprecedented threat posed by the outbreak of COVID-19.

As we are well aware, since WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic in early March this year, its impact, beyond mortality and morbidity, has become apparent. With the slowing down of the global economy in the aftermath of the pandemic, the functioning of global supply chains has been disrupted. Going by the initial estimates of the World Bank and IMF, possible negative impacts of COVID-19 on global economic growth are actually very worrying.

Excellencies,

While we appreciate the bold measures taken by our Member States in containing the further spread of the virus, the reality is that South Asia continues to remain one of the most vulnerable regions in the world. A large proportion of our population live in poverty. Many do not have access to even basic healthcare services. In these challenging times, quarantining affected people and reducing large scale social interaction is an effective response.

Excellencies,

Our Video Conference today is an affirmation that it is time to act collectively to support actions by the Member States to contain the further spread of the virus by sharing good practices and experiences as well as evolving an effective regional response strategy.

Excellencies,

Since the Video Conference of the SAARC Leaders on 15 March 2020, many follow-up activities have been held. Besides the creation of the SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund to which all member countries have pledged their voluntary contributions, meetings of Senior Health Professionals and Trade Officials of SAARC countries were held. The SAARC Disaster Management Centre has been regularly providing COVID-19 related information through its website. Some Member States have expressed their willingness to make use of the SAARC Food Bank Reserve. The SAARC Development Fund has proposed an allocation of US$ 5 million from its Social Window for funding COVID-19 projects in the region. The SAARC Secretariat has been approached by some of its external partners for collaboration to fight the further spread of the virus as well as to mitigate its after-effects. We will seek necessary guidance from the Member States on these offers of collaboration.

In conclusion, I wish to reiterate that the SAARC Secretariat stands ready, as always, to assist our Member States in their efforts to combat this global pandemic.

I thank you.

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