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KEY-NOTE ADDRESS BY H. E. MR. ESALA RUWAN WEERAKOON, SECRETARY GENERAL OF SAARC

His Excellency Abdul Ghafoor Mohamed, Foreign Secretary of the Republic of Maldives,
His Excellency Ahmed Saleem, Ambassador At-Large at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the
Republic of Maldives,
Distinguished Invitees,

It is indeed an honour and a privilege for me to address the distinguished audience present at this programme organized by the Foreign Service Institute of Maldives. This house today is full of senior diplomats and high ranking officials from the Maldivian Government. I hope to benefit from their views and observations from the interactions that will follow my remarks on the SAARC process.

I thank His Excellency Ahmed Saleem, Ambassador-at-Large as well as Dean of the Institute for inviting me to address this Institute. I am privileged to address a forum where two distinguished former officials of the SAARC Secretariat are present. His Excellency Abdul Ghafoor Mohamed served the SAARC Secretariat as Director from 01 June 1997 to 31 May 2000. His Excellency Ahmed Saleem served the SAARC Secretariat as the first Director from the Maldives from 01 April 1990 to 30 September 1993 and as the eleventh Secretary General of SAARC from 12 March 2012 to 28 February 2014.

This morning, I have had the honour to call on His Excellency Ibrahim Solih, President of the Republic of Maldives. I immensely benefited from His Excellency's wisdom and vision in taking the SAARC process forward. Shortly after this event, I will pay a courtesy call on His Excellency Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, Former President of the Republic of Maldives and one of the founding fathers of SAARC.

I have also had the privilege to meet with the high-ranking officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I am thankful to His Excellency Abdul Ghafoor Mohamed, Foreign Secretary, for a fruitful exchange of views and sharing his experience.

Excellencies,
ladies and gentlemen,

Established in December 1985, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) represents the manifestation of the determination of its Member States to promote peace, stability, amity and progress in the region through strict adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter and Non-Alignment, particularly respect for the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, national independence, non-use of force and non-interference in the internal affairs of other States and peaceful settlement of disputes. It is based on the premise that in an increasingly interdependent world, the objectives of peace, freedom, social justice and economic prosperity are best achieved in the South Asian region by fostering mutual understanding, good neighbourly relations and meaningful cooperation among the Member States which are bound by ties of history and culture.

SAARC fully recognizes the common problems, interests and aspirations of the peoples of South Asia and the need for joint action and enhanced cooperation within their respective political and economic systems and cultural traditions. It also recognizes that regional cooperation among the countries of South Asia is mutually beneficial, desirable and necessary not only for attaining national and collective self-reliance, but also for promoting the welfare of its peoples and improving their quality of life.

SAARC is essentially a people-centric organization, created to ameliorate the living standards of its peoples. Though at its initial stage, SAARC concentrated on a few areas for regional collaboration, its ambit continued to grow over the years. In its fourth decade of existence today, SAARC encompasses almost every sphere of human activity, having a bearing on the lives and livelihoods of its peoples.

Three distinct phases have marked the evolution of what is today known as SAARC. The initial phase involved the Foreign Secretaries of the region in an effort to agree on a basic framework of regional cooperation. It started with the First Meeting of the Foreign Secretaries held in Colombo in April 1981. The convening of the Meeting of the Foreign Ministers in New Delhi in August 1983 marked the beginning of the second phase. The development elevated the process from the official to the political level. It witnessed the launching of the Integrated Programme of Action through the declaration of South Asian Regional Cooperation (SARC) and the resultant commencement of cooperation among the Member States. In the third and final phase, the Heads of State or Government met in Dhaka in December 1985 and decided to establish SAARC. It signified the culmination of the process that began as early as 1979 with the late President Ziaur Rahman of Bangladesh initiating consultations in the matter with his counterparts in South Asia.

Excellencies,
ladies and gentlemen,

COVID-19 has created a protracted pandemic entailing high cost in human lives, setbacks in human development and in gender equity and triggering major imbalances and structural changes across the region. South Asia, being home to almost a quarter of humanity and one third of the global poor, is more prone and vulnerable to disasters of this scale. In South Asia, the indirect cost of COVID-19 in terms of economic and social impact had already been the highest globally in terms of decelerating economic growth and rising poverty. We can build back better from the current crisis only through effective regional cooperation.

In this context, we recall the important initiative taken by the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India for convening the SAARC Leaders' Video Conference to map out a regional strategy to combat the pandemic. We also recall the initiative taken by the esteemed Government of Pakistan in convening the SAARC Health Ministers' Conference to strengthen regional cooperation in fighting the pandemic. Drawing inspiration from these two high-level meetings, we need to strengthen regional cooperation to combat the pandemic and its adverse impacts, taking into consideration both the challenges and opportunities that have unfolded since its outbreak.

South Asia can benefit from the diversification of global supply chains, digitization of their economies, higher allocations in the health sector, giving a boost to the pharmaceutical and services sectors, especially IT enabled ones and those in the area of new and innovative technologies. At the Informal Meeting held virtually on 15 May 2021, the SAARC Finance Ministers devoted their discussions to the theme, "Economic Recovery from COVID-19: Towards

Inclusive and Resilient Growth”. In the Meeting, the Ministers, *inter alia*, emphasized the need for regional efforts to recover from the adverse impacts the pandemic has had on the economies of our region.

As we continue to strengthen regional cooperation to address the effects of the pandemic, it is becoming increasingly necessary for us to make available to every individual in the region, effective and affordable vaccines against COVID-19.

In this regard, I wish to refer to the call by His Excellency Abdulla Shahid, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Maldives and President of the Seventy-sixth Session of the United Nations General Assembly for 'universal Vaccination' as a solution for COVID-19 Pandemic. As His Excellency rightly said, COVID-19 will remain as a huge problem and will not be over until we achieve universal vaccination.

It is heartening to note that the Maldives has made great strides to vaccinate a large proportion of the population and create a benchmark for the region.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

As South Asia is home to around a quarter of the global population, ensuring food and nutrition security for such a huge population is an enormous challenge. It is so in spite of the fact that the region is endowed with a vast agricultural landmass and features unmatched agricultural diversity.

Although dependence on agriculture as a major contributor to GDP has declined in a few Member States, agriculture continues to be the mainstay of the South Asian economies. However, the agricultural sector in the region encounters massive challenges, which include, *inter alia*, increasing population, shrinking arable lands and farm sizes, rapid urbanization, impact of climate change and natural disasters.

In this backdrop, ensuring food security and promoting sustainable agriculture constitute a key component of cooperation under the framework of SAARC. Mechanisms such as the SAARC Food Bank and SAARC Seed Bank have been created to ensure food security. The SAARC Agriculture Centre in Dhaka has been successful in addressing the needs of research and development in the field of agriculture. The Centre is also engaged in promoting collaboration with other regional and international organizations to introduce sustainable agricultural development across the region.

SAARC is committed to increase investment, promote research and development, facilitate technical cooperation and apply innovative, appropriate and reliable technologies in agriculture for enhancing productivity and promoting sustainable farming in order to ensure food and nutritional security. SAARC has also initiated an inter-governmental process to contextualize the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the regional level. However, very regrettably, the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to massively derail the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you may be aware, SAARC is committed to achieve the South Asian Economic Union (SAEU) in a phased and planned manner through a Free Trade Area, a Customs Union, a Common Market, and a Common Economic and Monetary Union. At the Eighteenth SAARC Summit in November 2014, the SAARC Leaders pronounced a clear roadmap for its eventual realization. Achieving this target will require commitments from the Member States and adherence to mutually agreed decisions and timelines for their implementation.

The SAARC-ADB Study on Regional Economic Integration shows the way forward towards achieving SAEU in a phased manner, as envisioned by the SAARC Leaders. The seven areas identified by the SAARC-ADB Study for implementation on a priority basis are: (i) reduction and/or removal of non-tariff barriers (NTBs) and para-tariff barriers (PTBs); (ii) energy cooperation; (iii) trade facilitation measures; (iv) investment cooperation; (v) reduction of products in sensitive lists; (vi) SAARC Agreement on Trade in Services (SATIS); and (vii) connectivity improvement in rail, road, air and maritime sectors.

Excellencies,
Distinguished Invitees,

There has been forward movement on trade facilitation, particularly on Verification Mechanism relating to Rules of Origin under the SAPTA and SAFTA. All the Member States have come to an agreement on the basic fields to be incorporated in the Rules of Origin.

It has been long recognized that free movement of capital and investment within the region, including intra-regional remittances, is a precondition for economic development. This would be even more crucial for realizing the eventual goal of SAEU. The forums of SAARC Finance Ministers, Finance Secretaries and an Inter-Governmental Expert Group on Financial Issues are actively pursuing the goal of regional financial integration. SAARCFINANCE, a grouping of Central Bank Governors and Secretaries of Finance, has been engaged in the discussion on harmonizing banking practices to promote enhanced financial integration.

Discussions are underway to finalize the SAARC Agreement on Protection and Promotion of Investments. This would be an important instrument not only for putting at ease fears of potential investors, but would also help in moving towards a common market. Expansion of the scope of the SAARC Agreement on Double Taxation Avoidance is also being discussed.

Excellencies,
Distinguished Invitees,

Improved intra-regional connectivity is the sine qua non for effective regional integration. SAARC's quest for strengthening connectivity is manifested through the declaration of 2010-2020, as the 'SAARC Decade of Intra-regional Connectivity'. Regional Agreements on Motor Vehicles, Railways and Air Services are under consideration. These measures for improving connectivity will promote economic relations, people-to-people contact and tourism.

Excellencies,
Distinguished Invitees,

Endowed with vast hydropower, natural gas, solar, wind and bio-fuel resources, South Asia offers tremendous potential for regional cooperation in energy generation, transmission and trade. The

SAARC Framework Agreement for Energy Cooperation has been signed. In addition, regional and sub-regional projects are being identified in the areas of power generation, transmission and trade with a view to meeting the increasing demand for power in the region.

Regional Cooperation in the social sector is one of the priorities of SAARC. The SAARC Social Charter identifies a number of targets to be achieved in a number of areas, including the promotion of health, empowerment of women, development of youth and protection of children, especially the girl child. Other regional instruments that supplement regional cooperation in the social sector include the “Convention on Regional Arrangements for the Promotion of Child Welfare in South Asia”; and “Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women & Children for Prostitution”.

Excellencies,
Distinguished Invitees,

Poverty Alleviation has been declared as the over-arching goal of SAARC. Having observed 2006-2015 as the SAARC Decade on Poverty Alleviation, a Plan of Action on Poverty Alleviation is being pursued to reduce the incidence of poverty across the region.

As women constitute almost 50% of South Asia’s population, bringing women into the mainstream of development is a high priority for SAARC, paying focused attention to their economic empowerment and skills development. To achieve this end, besides the mechanism of the Ministerial Meeting on Women, a Technical Committee on Women, Youth and Children, and a SAARC Gender Policy Advocacy Group have been activated. Besides, a SAARC Widows’ Charter is under consideration of the Member States. In essence, since its inception, the Association’s focus has been on promoting women’s education; protecting their rights; ensuring that they are free from all sorts of discrimination; and above all, empowering them economically.

Excellencies,
Distinguished Invitees,

Youth represents the region’s future. In order to promote the development of youth across the region, two important regional instruments, namely, the SAARC Youth Charter and SAARC Action Plan on Youth are being finalized. SAARC Youth Camps are held to promote camaraderie and fellow-feeling among the South Asian youth.

SAARC accords high priority to regional cooperation in addressing challenges arising from the degrading environment and climate change under the framework of the Thimphu Statement on Climate Change, which is being followed up by the Inter-governmental Expert Group on Climate Change.

There have been sustained efforts globally to strengthen collaboration and coordination in disaster risk management. South Asia is no exception to this trend, which is illustrated by the 2011 SAARC Agreement on Rapid Response to Natural Disasters, which demonstrates Member States’ commitment to facilitate and regulate international disaster assistance. This Agreement was ratified by the Member States in 2016.

Excellencies,
Distinguished Invitees,

Bestowed with fascinating natural beauty and cultural diversity, South Asia offers huge potential for regional cooperation to promote both intra-regional and international tourism. Accordingly, efforts are underway to improve air, road and rail connectivity as well as instituting a facilitative visa regime in the region through the SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme. At the Eighteenth SAARC Summit, the SAARC Leaders expressed their resolve for making South Asia an attractive common tourist destination in a sustainable manner through effective implementation of the SAARC Action Plan on Tourism, including through public-private partnership.

The SAARC Agenda for Culture identifies measures to preserve and reconstitute the South Asian cultural property. Following the observation of 2016 as the SAARC Year of Cultural Heritage, efforts are underway to facilitate access of persons visiting prominent and holy sites of Islam, Hinduism, Christianity and Buddhism in South Asia. In pursuance of this objective, SAARC has developed Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic Cultural Trails.

SAARC currently has nine observers, namely, Australia, the People's Republic of China, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Mauritius, the Union of Myanmar, the United States of America, and the European Union. As directed by the SAARC Leaders at the Eighteenth Summit, efforts are underway to engage SAARC's observers in productive, demand-driven and objective project-based cooperation in priority areas identified by the Member States, such as communication, connectivity, agriculture, public health, energy, environment and economic cooperation.

Excellencies,
Distinguished Invitees,

The Eighteenth SAARC Summit incorporated migration as an agreed area of cooperation within the framework of SAARC. The SAARC Plan of Action on Migration has been finalized, while a Declaration on Migration is under consideration of the Member States.

Cooperatives is another new area for regional cooperation as identified by the Eighteenth SAARC Summit. Efforts are being made to finalize a Plan of Action for Cooperation on Matters Relating to Cooperatives.

The Blue Economy is a new area of cooperation emanating from the Eighteenth SAARC Summit Declaration. Regional consultations at the experts' level are contemplated to institutionalize regional collaboration in this sector.

Excellencies,
Distinguished Invitees,

Besides being an Observer at the United Nations, SAARC has formal collaborative arrangements with a number of regional and international organizations, with particular emphasis on project-based collaboration. This year being the seventy-fifth anniversary of UNICEF, which is an active partner of SAARC, a joint commemorative event, namely, "Reimagining Opportunities for Children of South Asia", will be held in December this year.

Excellencies,
Distinguished Invitees,

In order to pursue effective regional cooperation in specialized areas, SAARC has established four Specialized Bodies, namely, SAARC Development Fund (SDF), [2010, Thimphu]; South Asian University (SAU), [2010, New Delhi]; SAARC Arbitration Council (SARCO), [2010, Islamabad]; and SAARC Regional Standards Organization (SARSO), [2014, Dhaka].

Established in Thimphu, Bhutan, in April 2010, the SAARC Development Fund (SDF) is the umbrella funding mechanism of SAARC, which funds sub-regional and regional projects under three Windows: Social, Economic and Infrastructure. The SAARC Development Fund (SDF) is mandated to finance sub-regional and regional projects with a view to improving the quality of life of our peoples. The projects being funded by SDF are demand-driven, time-bound and aligned with the developmental priorities of the region.

Since its establishment in August 2010 in New Delhi, the South Asian University has been providing quality education to South Asian students at affordable cost. The University offers post-graduate and doctoral programmes in various disciplines, such as, Economics, Computer Science, Biotechnology, Mathematics, Sociology, International Relations and Law.

Based in Islamabad, the SAARC Arbitration Council provides a legal framework within the region for fair and efficient settlement of commercial, industrial, trade, banking, investment, and such other disputes.

Established in Dhaka as a specialized body of SAARC, the South Asian Regional Standards Organization promotes regional cooperation in the fields of standardization and conformity assessment and is aimed at developing harmonized standards for the region to facilitate intra-regional trade and to have access in the global market.

Excellencies,
Distinguished Invitees,

SAARC has four Regional Centres: (i) Agriculture Centre, [1988, Dhaka]; (ii) Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS Centre, [1994, Kathmandu]; (iii) Energy Centre, [2006, Islamabad]; and Cultural Centre, [2009, Colombo]. These Centres of Excellence have been actively pursuing project-based regional cooperation in their respective area. An Interim Unit of the SAARC Disaster Management Centre is operational in Gujrat, India.

In order to promote people-to-people contacts and to engage civil society in a fruitful manner, SAARC has granted affiliation to a number of civil society groups as its Apex and Recognized Bodies. They supplement inter-governmental efforts in the attainment of the Charter objectives of SAARC.

Excellencies,
Distinguished Invitees,

The key to success of the SAARC process is effective implementation of the decisions taken by the Member States. Therefore, there has to be a more effective system of implementation, monitoring and evaluation. At the same time, there is a need to strengthen regional cooperation in priority areas identified by the Member States and the programmes should be results-based and implemented in a time bound manner. In other words, a focussed approach with emphasis on concrete results is the need of the hour.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Despite many commonalities in terms of geography, history, civilization and culture, South Asia remains one of the least integrated regions in trade and connectivity compared to other regions. In order to realize the goal of effective regional integration, it is necessary to have better air, road and rail connectivity.

Regular holding of Ministerial Meetings in prioritized areas of cooperation such as SAFTA, Transport, Education, Interior/Home Affairs, Poverty Alleviation, Women, Health, Tourism, Agriculture, Environment, and Science & Technology, is important for strengthening regional cooperation.

In conclusion, I wish to emphasize that our region's geography has given us a distinct identity. History binds us! The South Asian countries are heirs to some of the richest cultural traditions in the world. The influences of the major religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity - on the countries of the region have contributed to the richness and diversity in the cultural heritages in this continent. These overriding realities augur well for effective regional cooperation to address the hopes and aspirations of our peoples. There is no alternative to SAARC and deeper and meaningful regional cooperation is the only means to achieve peace and prosperity across the region.

I thank you!

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