

SAARC NEEDS A TERROR-FREE MILIEU: PM

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: SAARC and India

SAARC can only be fully effective in the absence of “terror and violence”, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in a message to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation on its 36th Charter Day anniversary. In their messages, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan and Nepal Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli called for the SAARC summit to be held soon.

“The full potential of SAARC can only be realised in an atmosphere free of terror and violence,” Mr. Modi said in a letter released by the SAARC Secretariat in Kathmandu, that indicated India’s concerns over cross-border terrorism from Pakistan remain a primary obstacle in India’s participation in the summit. He also called for SAARC countries to “recommit to defeating the forces that support and nurture terrorism”.

In his statement released a few hours later, Mr. Khan said, “It is unfortunate that due to long-standing unresolved disputes amongst the member states, SAARC countries have been unable to take advantage of Pakistan’s potential as a melting pot for positive economic interest and consequently the region has not been able to achieve the desired socio-economic cooperation and prosperity in the region so far.” He also claimed that “artificial obstacles” had been raised against the SAARC process.

Nepal is the current chairman of SAARC, a position which moves by rotation through the eight countries of South Asia — Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. It held the last SAARC summit in 2014. In 2016, Pakistan was due to hold the next summit, but it had to be put off after India refused to attend the event in Islamabad, and Nepal continues to hold the chair.

In his message, Mr. Oli too said the “stalled SAARC process” should not be delayed further.

“SAARC is not a choice, but a necessity for meaningful regional cooperation in South Asia... The longer we delay, the more will be the opportunity cost,” wrote Mr. Oli in his message on SAARC Charter Day.

“Giving fresh impetus to the stalled SAARC process including through the early convening of the summit can rekindle hope among our people and provide ground to move forward,” he added.

In an interview to *The Hindu* last week, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar had said Pakistan, not India, was holding up the SAARC process.

In their SAARC day messages on Tuesday, other heads of state conveyed their commitment to SAARC, and commended the SAARC COVID-19 emergency fund proposed by India in March this year when Mr. Modi had convened a virtual conference.

India had pledged US \$10 million to start the fund, the others, including Pakistan, committed about \$9.8 million together, and the SAARC Secretariat committed \$5 million. India has sent medical equipment worth \$1 million to Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and the Maldives.

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