

A Report from the New Delhi People's SAARC Conference

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The People's SAARC Conference was held in New Delhi on 21-23 April 2010.

26 April 2010, Lahore

A delegation of 53 Pakistani social and political activists returned to Lahore on 25th April after attending the Peoples SAARC held in New Delhi on 22-23 April 2010. While the heads of the states of SAARC countries are meeting in Bhutan, some 300 people from across South Asia from social movements, civil society organisations, labour unions, peasant organisations, women's groups, ecologists and human rights activists gathered in New Delhi from 20th April to 23rd April, 2010 as part of the process of a 'Peoples SAARC' to forge a vision for a union of South Asian peoples'. Among the participants 120 people came from Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Bhutan.

Among the prominent individual participants of the People's SAARC Assembly in New Delhi were Mr Kuldip Nayar (veteran journalist from India), Mr Iqbal Haidar (Former Law Minister and co chairperson of the Human Rights commission of Pakistan), Mohamad Mahuruf (Janavakesha, Sri Lanka), Mr Karamat Ali (cofounder of the Pakistan Peace Coalition and Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research), Kamla Bhasin (Founder of SANGAT -South Asia Network of Gender Trainers), Samina Khan (Sungi), Arjun Karki (coordinator, South Asian Alliance for Poverty Eradication), Rezaul Karim (Equity Bangladesh), Jatin Desai (Peace Mumbai), Mazhar Hussain (COVA), Farooq Tariq (Labour Party, Pakistan), Vijay Pratap (SADED), Choudry Manzoor Ahmad president Peoples Labour Bureau, Mohammed Yousaf Baluch, chairman National Trade Union Federation Pakistan, Nisar Shah advocate general secretary Labour Party Pakistan and Bushra Khaliq general secretary Women Workers Help Line; Amongst the prominent participating organisations were: GEFONT (Nepal), National Trade Union Initiative (India), Migrant Forum South Asia, National Forum of Forest Workers (India), All Ceylon United Workers Congress, INSEC, Focus on Global South, Labour Party of Pakistan, National FishWorkers Forum (India), Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum, Labour Education Foundation, AITUC, Muttahida Labour Federation Pakistan, Bonded Labour Liberation Front (Pakistan), Shirkat Gah, Sungi, PILER, Sindh Democratic Forum, South Asians For Human Rights, Vani, Aman Trust (India), SADED (India), SAP -PK, All Ceylon United Fisherpeople Trade Union, National Trade Union Federation (Pakistan).

The latest People's SAARC assembly held in April 2010 in New Delhi reaffirmed the South Asian Peoples commitment to creating a South Asia free from all forms of discrimination, exclusion and domination. It also called for the peoples of all SAARC countries to struggle against militarism and jingoism; and demanded of the governments to reduce defence spending and make available funds for socially useful spending on public welfare and social security for all; for a regional people's perspective on Climate change and on environmental degradation. It called for the right to mobility

with dignity across South Asia. It calls for equal respect among all countries irrespective of size, and power. The meeting called to solve the issue of water by renegotiating the existing water accords and just distribution of the water among all the SAARC countries. A broad public declaration was adopted at the conference that lists the thematic issues reflecting the concerns of social movements across South Asia. One important event of the conference was the South Asian Parliamentarians Forum in which parliamentarians from India, Pakistan, Nepal, participated. There was overwhelming consensus among them about the need for a collective platform of Parliamentarians of the region for strengthening the SAARC process and to work towards South Asian Union. The Indian Parliamentarian Mani Shankar Iyer argued at length about a shared history and a common heritage among South Asians and the need to actively build regional cooperation.

The conference resolved to lobby the SAARC governments on a set of specific demands:

- The SAARC governments should seriously engage with the issue of Climate Change and apart from adhering to the existing international commitments, should consider a common South Asian Policy on Climate and environmental issues including a regional water sharing framework. The developing countries in the SAARC region should fulfil their responsibilities vis a vis the less developed countries and the most vulnerable in the region via financial and technological means.
- The proposed SAARC University must become operational this year as envisaged originally. Students and faculty of the SAARC University in New Delhi must be granted a restriction free SAARC Visa by the Indian government.
- SAARC Governments should start sincerely and genuinely cooperating according to the commitments made in the SAARC charter and its various conventions and protocols. All governments in the region must put a halt to all kinds of covert activities against each other. They should also establish a joint mechanism to combat terrorism as per the requirements of the SAARC regional convention of 1987 on suppression of terrorism.
- SAARC Development Fund and Food Bank should become operational forthwith, in order to guarantee a right to food for all South Asians. SAARC Agri perspective 2020 should be prepared in participatory way with adequate involvement of civil society organisations.
- All South Asian governments should enter into a No-War Pact with a commitment to resolve all disputes through peaceful and democratic means only. Military expenditures should be reduced by 10% annually and funds be diverted towards social spending.
- All governments without further delay should establish a universal and portable Social security system as envisaged in the SAARC social charter.
- All governments in the SAARC region must ensure freedom of movement, the right to work and to conduct business for SAARC citizens.

At the conclusion of the conference the steering committee of the People's SAARC met and took the following decisions.

1. A secretariat for the People's SAARC process will be established at Kathmandu
2. Thirteen thematic working groups have been formed to develop South Asians regional campaigns
3. A People's SAARC processes will be established in each country to mobilise public opinion towards a union of South Asian people's.

4. A South Asians People's Regional Assembly will be constituted within the next three months

To see the Delhi declaration on ESSF: [People's SAARC: New Delhi Declaration](#)
