

Declaration of South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE) Annual General Meeting (AGM)

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4-6 September 2010

Nagarkot, Nepal

Fighting Unitedly against Poverty, Hunger and Injustice in South Asia

Context

We, the members of SAAPE from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka met at the AGM from 4-6 Sep 2010 to deliberate on the theme- "fighting unitedly against poverty, hunger and injustices in South Asia". We affirm our commitment to 'intervening' on issues of poverty and exclusion contributing for the eradication of poverty and injustice, rejecting the neo-liberal development paradigm and economic strategies and striving for sustainable alternatives that are pro-poor people'.

Poverty in countries of South Asia is accompanied by disparity. The increase in the number of poor is common in all countries. However, this number only indicates the 'absolute poor'. The number would be far higher if other aspects of a dignified quality of life are considered. The problem of poverty, even in a big country like India that boasts of substantial economic growth, is persistent. Some sections seem to even lapse back into poverty. The situation is thus one of perpetuation of poverty.

There is reason to believe that the ruling elite in all our countries is enamoured by "economic growth" as the "be all and end all" of the development process. On the contrary, ground reality strongly indicates that even when the country registers high growth rate, there is huge exclusion and marginalisation. SAAPE feels that the time has come for all of us to work not only with the exploited classes but also with the excluded social groups.

We are profoundly saddened by several recent incidents which has had long lasting implications for the rights of people and their livelihood. The armed conflict in Sri Lanka came to an end with a large number of people from Vanni being displaced and held in internment camps with restrictions imposed on their mobility and fundamental freedoms.

The current global crisis of climate change is a big challenge facing the South Asian countries which are witnessing increasing natural disasters causing devastating impacts. The recent floods in Pakistan are disrupting the lives of over 20 million people, nearly 12% of the population and this is a reminder of this gruesome reality.

We appreciate the historic judgement given by the supreme court of Bangladesh reviving secular character of the constitution and declaring past military regimes illegal. The court also made it clear

that the World Bank does not enjoy any immunity. At the same time we are disappointed by the fact that the government of Bangladesh has succumbed to the pressure of the factory owners by imposing wages at a level much below the demand of the garment workers.

Democratic and human rights continue to be threatened with the imposition of new regulations and the curtailment of civil society activities. In the rise of people's resistance their leaders are threatened, and face extrajudicial killings and disappearances.

We are alarmed that the 18th Amendment to the Constitution in Sri Lanka is facilitating immense powers to the Executive virtually creating a Constitutional dictatorship thereby threatening democratic parliamentary norms. It is also regrettable that GOSL has failed to provide a long lasting political solution for the ethnic problems/national problems based on an effective power sharing model.

The economic crisis has been used to attack trade union struggles and curtail worker's rights. We condemn the killing of two trade union leaders in Pakistan.

We condemn ethnic cleansing and demand unconditional release of all the political prisoners and repatriation and rehabilitation of the Bhutanese refugees to their homestead with dignity.

As South Asians, we watched with great appreciation the unique manner in which the Constituent Assembly of Nepal was created. We were particularly overjoyed with the introduction of proportionate representation and equal representation for women, and men in the Constituent Assembly, but today we are disappointed that the work of Constituent Assembly has come to a standstill because of the political impasse. We urge all concerned and especially the members of the Constituent Assembly to rise above narrow considerations reach consensus and put in place a Constitution which will be a trend setter for all other countries in South Asia and beyond. We call for an immediate resolution of the political impasse in Nepal for the consolidation of the democratic processes and introduction of effective agrarian reform.

Similarly, we stand in solidarity with the people of Afghanistan and Maldives in their struggle to achieve democracy and long lasting solutions for securing human rights and fundamental freedoms. The region continues to be militarised combined with nuclearisation.

We demand accountability from our political leaders. As demonstrated in Pakistan though natural and human induced calamities are a frequent occurrence in South Asia, the common element in all this is our shocking lack of preparedness (in physical, economic, administrative, legal and other aspects), coupled with a lack of long term vision, especially, to help the excluded groups.

We are disappointed with the south Asian governments and SAARC as a body for their failure to develop a common regional disaster management policy and a mitigation plan. We urge the immediate adoption of a common plan and the establishment of a Task Force to handle disasters in the future arising from climate change and global warming.

We also demand the repudiation of all debts of Pakistan and provide the necessary resources and funds for relief and rehabilitation of communities affected by the recent floods.

Ad hoc approaches and an absence of a policy framework for relief and rehabilitation and reconstruction is a denial of the legitimate rights of the survivors. On the other hand, in a democratic polity the right to relief with dignity and development are the fundamental right of every disaster victim and it is the responsibility of the state and civil society to ensure that.

This is also a unique opportunity for South Asian countries to express their solidarity in terms of aid

and political solidarity with the beleaguered Pakistan, and develop common disaster management mechanism in line with the relevant SAARC Charter.

Women in South Asia

The majority of women in South Asia remain excluded and impoverished. They form the bulk of the displaced in South Asia. The post conflict situations are fraught with increased insecurity, gender based violence and lack of protection which is directly linked to poverty.

We appreciate the efforts made by Afghanistan, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and India to facilitate and recognise the greater and effective participation of women in politics and governance challenging the age old prohibitions of patriarchal ideology through legislative enactments and policies. It is regrettable that Sri Lanka has not been able to achieve it's heights in this regard and wish to express our support to all efforts taken by civil society and women's groups working for urgent reforms in this area.

It is important to stress the need to respond immediately to specific needs of women affected by floods in Pakistan as our gesture of solidarity to empowerment of women in practice.

International and Regional Power Dimensions

We recognise the need to evolve consistent multi-pronged strategies to combat the influence of globalisation, continuing repression and militarisation in the name of war on terror, growing international re-alignments including India-US, and China, shrinking democratic space, marginalisation of human rights, unsustainable development paradigm.

Our Challenges...

Dominant development models and paradigms have failed. It has exhausted all possibilities. We see the accentuation of deprivation at all levels of the people. We see poverty as deprivation of capabilities of people which deny them freedom and human rights and keep them continuously in a state of disempowerment social, economic and political.

We are aware that old slogans are not sufficient for organisation and mobilisation. We need to call for all excluded women, dalits, indigenous, all minorities ethnic, religious and linguistic based on our contemporary understanding to unite to struggle against poverty, hunger and injustice.

The fight for entitlements such as employment, food, education, health, housing, human security, social security, dignity and the like needs to be carried out through the agency of the exploited masses as well as the excluded social groups. SAAPE will work with excluded groups and associations of the poor to alert governments on their responsibilities and to bring a collective sense of social responsibility within the region for future reduction of poverty and the attendant risks of living in that condition for the millions of the poor in South Asia.
