

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

A new boost for regional cooperation

The second summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation made solid gains.

The process of regional cooperation in south Asia, where broad and ancient cultural commonalities are overlaid with bitter modern-day animosities and political cultures, can not be expected to yield quick breakthroughs.

Nevertheless, real, if slow, progress has been made, as indicated by the final communiqué of the second heads-of-state summit of the year-old South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in Bangalore on Nov. 16-17, and a series of administrative decisions and extracurricular bilateral consultations.

The problems of terrorism and drug trafficking, put on the agenda at the first summit at Dacca, were addressed head-on. So far, political obstacles prevent anything more than a general condemnation of terrorism. This, with an avowal not to organize, aid, or assist "acts of civil strife or terrorist acts in another state," as per the U.N.'s formulation.

Given the current strains between India and Sri Lanka and India and Pakistan, respectively, it is significant that bilateral contacts inched forward in this delicate area. Intense exchanges with Sri Lanka's President Junius Jayewardene and his party on settling the island's ethnic crisis are showing promise. Less dramatically, a new schedule for moving Indo-Pakistani relations forward, including an early December secretary-level meeting on illegal border crossings, smuggling, and terrorism, was announced.

Broader, more practical progress

was made on drugs, and an anti-drug strategy was given priority going into the summit. The technical committee on drug trafficking and drug abuse was formally established, and three recommendations adopted. These called for establishment of a regional committee—to be headed by Pakistan, where the problem is most severe—to deal with the subject, establishment for a regional center for research and training in prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation of drug addicts, and setting up a regional drug-testing laboratory.

To give force to the cooperative impulse, a permanent secretary will be set up in Kathmandu—also designated as the site of the next summit—in January. Bangladeshi diplomat Abul Ahasan will be the first secretary general and, as with the SAARC chairmanship that passed to Rajiv Gandhi in Bangalore, the position will rotate alphabetically. The secretary will facilitate the shift from workshops and seminars and other academic discussions to concrete projects and institutions in the areas identified for action, including, agriculture, health and population, meteorology, postal services, rural development, science and technology, sports and culture, telecommunications, transportation, and, recently added, women in development, and drug trafficking.

On the immediate agenda for 1987 are two projects—establishment of a Regional Neurological Research center (RNR) in India and an agricultural information center (AIC) in Dacca. A

number of additional proposals found a favorable consensus, joint programs for radio and television, promotion of tourism, establishment of a regional documentation center, and an exchange program for volunteers working in agriculture and foreign students.

India's conviction that joint action must be undertaken in core economic areas of trade, industry, energy, money, and finance, was echoed by others; in particular, Bangladesh put on the table a proposal for establishment of a regional investment institution to generate capital for production, infrastructure, and technology buildup in the region.

But if interregional economic cooperation is temporarily stalled by Pakistani reticence, there was complete unanimity of views on the urgency of the international economic crisis. Nearly one-third of the final communiqué was devoted to the fact that "the world economy continues in the throes of crisis, with particularly harsh and severe consequences for the economies and development processes and aspirations of the developing countries."

The conclusion of a SAARC ministerial meeting on international economic issues in Islamabad, detailing the negative factors behind the "exceptionally negative external economic environment" were endorsed. Significantly, the difference between promise and performance in advanced sector economies was highlighted, along with depressed commodity prices, rising protectionism, lower exports and export earnings, net outflow of resources of developing countries, and aggravated debt crises.

The leaders called for international monetary reform through a conference on money and finance, and vowed to coordinate national efforts over the next few years.