

## From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

### Anti-terrorism top regional priority

*The fledgling South Asian regional organization breaks new ground at its November summit.*

The third annual summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in Kathmandu on Nov. 2-4 saw further steady, if slow, progress by the heads of state of seven culturally similar but politically diverse states, to cooperate to maximize the social, economic, and diplomatic resources of the region as a whole.

Perhaps the most surprising development, and a measure of the group's resolve, was the conclusion of a regional convention on the suppression of terrorism which defines the content of bilateral extradition agreements among the various nations.

The convention identifies acts of terrorism, and no offender would henceforth be able to exempt himself from prosecution on grounds that he was motivated to violence for political reasons.

It also prohibits the use of a nation's territory for terrorist activities against other countries. At the same time, the contracting states are not obliged to extradite if they judge the request to be trivial or in some way not in good faith.

They may in that case prosecute the offender according to their own national laws.

Though the convention is in fact rather flexible, its adoption is important in light of the fact that the region's ethnic diversity, generally indifferent to national borders as it is, has long provided opportunities for subversive meddling among the neighbors.

By the same token, SAARC member nations have found it almost im-

possible to agree with each other on specifics when it comes to how they define "terrorism."

Undoubtedly the breakthrough made by Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lanka President Junius Jayewardene on the bilateral accord to end the terrorism and ethnic strife on that island nation, which had spilled over into India's southern state of Tamil Nadu, was the key to moving this item on the agenda.

Another milestone of the summit was the decision to create a 210,000-ton food security reserve, consisting of wheat and rice stocks specifically earmarked and scientifically stored by the SAARC member-nations in the event of emergency requirements by any one of them.

Each member pledged to store a certain amount of foodgrain, according to its capability.

Third, a study on the protection of the environment and the mitigation of natural disasters was commissioned. Certainly existing studies, if not simple observation, point clearly to the urgency of reversing the ecological devolution that has been prompted by a persisting lack of power and basic infrastructure in this densely populated region.

But, as some commentators here have pointed out, one more study may not be appropriate, when it is, in fact, the absence of tough action on the ground that has proved the main obstacle.

The SAARC heads of state also decided to explore prospects for inter-action with similar regional organiza-

tions at the end-December meeting of member-nation foreign secretaries in New Delhi. The proposal had been made by Pakistan Premier Junejo that SAARC initiate a dialogue with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

A host of other issues, including some contentious items Pakistan's proposal to declare the region a nuclear-free zone, opposed by India, were tabled for future discussion. Also tabled was India's proposal for the inclusion of Afghanistan in SAARC, an action desired by the Kabul government, but supported in SAARC only by India. These issues of contention—which all revolve around super-power presence in the region—did not succeed in diverting discussion from the more productive question of regional economic cooperation.

Though nothing concrete has yet emerged, exploration of possibilities for collaboration in industry, trade, money, and finance has begun under the prodding of India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh.

Debate arose over Bangladesh's proposal to establish a multisectoral financing facility to channel foreign capital into regional projects. India's strong objection to reliance on foreign funds resulted in referring the matter to a SAARC experts group, for transformation into an outline for a regional project development facility with strictly delimited conditions for seeking outside assistance.

Expansion of the group's cooperation into the economic sphere is seen by India as essential to fully utilize the complementarities and comparative advantages of the member-states.

"In the ultimate analysis," as Indian Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Natwar Singh stated, without cooperation in economic areas, "regional cooperation itself cannot be sustained and nurtured."