

sub-regional frame work for the development, in particular of the eastern and northeastern regions of India. All the leaders unanimously agreed on the need to cooperate in combating international terrorism and important step in this direction is the setting up of the BIMSTEC Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism.

(b) and (c) No such agreement was signed at Summit. However, the BIMSTEC Framework Agreement on Free Trade Area was signed during the Sixth Ministerial Meeting in Phuket, Thailand in February, 2004 by Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Bangladesh joined the Agreement in June, 2004. The Framework Agreement provides a roadmap for Free Trade Area Agreements in goods, services, investment and other areas of general economic cooperation. The negotiations on FTA in goods are to begin in September, 2004 and to be concluded by December 2005. The negotiations on FTA in services and investment shall commence in 2005 and be concluded by 2007.

(d) The Framework Agreement aims at strengthening and enhancing cooperation in economic, trade and investment among the parties through the progressive liberalization and promotion of trade in goods, services and investment.

SAARC Summit

2451 SHRI LALIT SURI: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state

(a) whether a joint declaration was signed and issued after the conclusion of the SAARC Summit held at Islamabad in January this year, and

(b) if so, the details thereof and to what extent it is expected to improve bilateral relations between India and Pakistan?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI RAO INDERJIT SINGH): (a) Yes.

(b) The Declaration welcomes the signing of the Framework Agreement on the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) as a major milestone and reaffirmed the commitment of SAARC Members to moving towards a Free Trade Area with the objective of eventually arriving at a South Asian Economic Union.

The Declaration emphasizes the importance of cooperation in energy, transportation and communication links in promoting accelerated and balanced economic growth issues. The Declaration refers to, *inter alia*, cooperation on economic and financial matters, tourism, science & technology, health, culture, environment, and information and communication technology. The Declaration also underscores the importance of poverty alleviation and the need for investment in human resources and skills development.

Hailing the signature of SAARC Social Charter, the Declaration notes the far-reaching impact it could have in areas such as poverty alleviation, population stabilization, empowerment of women, youth mobilization, human resource development, promotion of health and nutrition and protection of children. The need to focus attention on the issue of HIV/AIDS through a SAARC Awareness Year for TB/HIV AIDS is also incorporated in the Declaration.

Apart from this, the Declaration also condemns terrorist violence and stresses that the signing of the Additional Protocol on terrorism is a further manifestation of the determination of SAARC Countries to eliminate all forms and manifestations of terrorism from South Asia.

In accordance with Article X of the SAARC Charter, bilateral issues were excluded from the deliberations at SAARC meetings. However, bilateral issues relating to India and Pakistan were discussed on the sidelines of the meeting by the respective sides.

SAARC Summit in Islamabad

2452 SHRI DARA SINGH Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether any meeting of the SAARC Council of Ministers was held in July, 2004 at Islamabad;

(b) what are the details of Agenda/issues raised at 25th Session of SAARC Foreign Ministers, particularly by India's Foreign Minister; and

(c) what was the outcome of discussions held in Pakistan and the details of the future agenda drawn up by Council of Minister of next SAARC meeting?