

Let me begin by extending sincere congratulations to the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, her Excellency Begum Khaleda Zia on her election as Chairperson of SAARC. I also express my heartfelt appreciation to the Government and people of Bangladesh for the excellent arrangements made for this historic Summit. We have been overwhelmed by the warm and friendly hospitality extended to us since our arrival in Dhaka. I would also like to take this opportunity to express our sincere appreciation to the <sup>80</sup>immediate past Chair, Pakistan, for the unfailing commitment and zeal with which it pursued the revival of the SAARC process. Our region has seen intense suffering caused by major natural disasters this year. Sri Lanka, Maldives and India were victims of the Tsunami in the early part of the year and now Pakistan and India have suffered from a major earthquake which has wiped out entire towns and villages. We grieve for our citizens and fellow South Asians who lost <sup>160</sup>their lives and resolve to continue to help others affected rebuild their lives. These disasters once again remind us of the need for forging even closer ties to enable us to pool our collective resources to deal with such calamities. This Summit should evolve regional mechanisms for effective and timely cooperation in disaster relief and management. We have extended modest help to our neighbours in a spirit of solidarity and are prepared to do more. We are glad that India's <sup>240</sup>offer to host the SAARC Centre for Disaster Preparedness has been accepted. Disaster management is an issue whose urgency compels us to address it with seriousness of purpose. The possibilities for meaningful cooperation range from early warning systems to relief and reconstruction. It is incumbent on us to do more in this area, drawing on existing experience in South Asia. For instance, I understand Bangladesh has developed innovative approaches for reducing the impact of disasters through community involvement in planning <sup>320</sup>and risk management. The use of micro-credit both for pre-disaster risk reduction and for post disaster reconstruction and rehabilitation are cited as global best practices that are worthy of replication in other countries of South Asia. SAARC is entering the 20<sup>th</sup> year of its existence. It was in this very city that we began our journey towards a shared goal. Because the basis of the Congress ethos and its economic and social policy has been independent national economy. A country <sup>400</sup>like India if it has to follow an independent policy of non-alignment it cannot follow that policy unless it builds up a national economy. It should be an independent national economy based on social justice, commitment to socialism, democracy and secularism which Jawaharlal Nehru put forward and behind which in Parliament and in the country there was a national consensus. Our consensus Prime Minister when he talks of the unity and independence of the country, threats from outside and the economic. <sup>480</sup>