

## SAARC nations call for transparency in social sector

Social development ministers of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) nations have called for transparency and access to information in order to address social sector issues, including health and education.

At the conclusion of the two-day Second Regional Forum of Ministers of Social Development of SAARC countries here Thursday, India's Minister of State for Human Resource Development D. Purandeswari told reporters Thursday that the member countries shared common issues.

'We have discussed issues which concern all of us. We have common problems. There needs to be accountability on us as a government,' she explained.

Representatives of those member countries that do not have the right to information, a legal measure introduced in India, called for such a law to bring about transparency and accountability in social sectors.

Pakistan's High Commissioner to India Shahid Malik said the issue of public accountability was of great concern to the Pakistani government.

'Though efforts have been made for some form of accountability through a Freedom of Information Ordinance, still more is needed to be done,' he told reporters.

Bhutan's Education Minister Lyonpo Thinley Gyamtsho said his country does not have such an act. 'The RTI would benefit us in implementing social sector projects, as everything would come under the public domain,' he pointed out.

The Association would have a mid-term review again later this year to ensure that the member countries make progress on the outcome of the meeting, Purandeswari said.

'We have to ensure that issues which are taken up here (at the SAARC meeting) should be considered by policy makers. Only then can we expect things to change in the social sector,' she said.

However, the SAARC Forum did not discuss issues concerning literacy plaguing these countries. 'We had a passing reference on the state of literacy,' said Purandeswari.

It also ignored vital issues like funding of HIV related projects.

The Forum aims to establish a network among the countries of the region to address issues related to social justice and development.

Ministers of social development from the Maldives and Afghanistan and ministers of women, child and social welfare from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan, besides officials from the region, took part in the meeting.

South Africa, which is not part of the Saarc, also participated in the meeting, as it has been associated with social sector projects undertaken by the member countries.

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