

## Terrorism a 'big issue' at SAARC summit next week

India will call for a collective fight against terrorism and push for greater economic integration and connectivity in South Asia at the 'landmark' SAARC summit here next week that will include Afghanistan as the eighth member of the regional grouping.

The focus will be on making the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation a more efficient organisation and move it towards implementing some of the crucial regional projects that have been long under discussion, Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon told reporters here.

The dream of a South Asian University will move a step closer to reality at the two-day SAARC summit that begins April 3. SAARC leaders will discuss the nitty-gritty of the project to make the proposed university - a large part of which will be based in India - 'the best in the world that attract best students and best faculty'.

An inter-governmental agreement will be signed first to form the university before the details are worked out, Menon said.

Other important intra-regional projects that will be discussed include SAARC Development Fund, Regional Telemedicine Network and Regional Food Bank.

Menon described the summit as a 'landmark' event that will see the inclusion of Afghanistan in the regional grouping and the presence of the US, the European Union, China, Japan and South Korea as observers for the first time in the 22-year history of the grouping.

China, Japan and South Korea will be represented by their foreign ministers. The US will be represented by Richard Boucher, assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asia.

India will make a strong pitch for transit to Kabul through the land route in Pakistan and emphasise on the implementation of the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) to spur greater economic integration in the region.

This week's air strike on a Sri Lankan Air Force base by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has put the focus on the larger problem of terrorism and extremism in South Asia, which will be one of the major issues that will be actively debated.

'We know this (terrorism) will be one of the issues, and it will be one of the big issues at the SAARC summit,' Menon stressed.

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse is likely to raise the issue of growing terrorism in his country at the summit.

Sri Lanka has pressed for a revision of the 1987 SAARC convention on suppression of terrorism and updating it in the light of new developments.

The SAARC has been discussing various ideas to boost intra-regional cooperation in combating terrorism including the use of legal instruments and targeting funding of terrorists, Menon said. These discussions have not, however, resulted in a common agreement or strategy to tackle

terrorism, he added.

Promoting greater connectivity - physical, economic and mental - in the region will be the key theme of the summit. A meeting of the standing committee of the SAARC at the level of foreign secretaries and the council of ministers will precede the summit.

A reception will be organised to welcome a SAARC car rally, flashing the motto 'Connecting people and Strengthening ties', at India Gate here Monday and will be flagged off from Vigyan Bhavan the next day.

'I am quite impressed by the response it has evoked,' said Menon, who cited the rally as a symbol of connectivity in the region.

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