South Asia after 9/11

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If the United States was hit hard as a result of September 11, 2001 events, the impact factor was also felt in other regions of the world including South Asia. Two years after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, it is time to analyse why the South Asian countries have not been able to formulate a consensus on dealing with the situation emanating after September 11 and how the region can come out of the vicious

cycle of "blame game" and confrontation so as to catch up with other prosperous regions of the world.

The events of September 11 and after are still a source of debate and discussion in many circles. The US war on terrorism resulting in the overthrow of Taliban and Saddam regimes in Kabul and Baghdad had repercussions on South Asia and thus created an opportunity for building the environment of cooperation, notwithstanding unresolved conflicts.

To discuss in detail the impact of September 11 on South Asia, a two-day regional conference was organised by the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute (BEI) in Dhaka from September 23-24. Under the main theme of the conference, "Strengthening Cooperation and Security in South Asia — Post 9/11", Mr Shamsher M Chouwhdury, Foreign Secretary, Government of Bangladesh, Ambassador (Retd) Farooq Sobhan, President, BEI and Ambassador (Retd) Shafiullah, Senior Research Fellow, BEI in their presentations at the inaugural session of the conference dwelt at length on the necessity on the part of SAARC countries to learn lessons from the events of September 11 and formulate a policy which could at least effectively resume the normalisation process between India and Pakistan on the one hand and also revitalise the task of regional cooperation in South Asia on the other. The issues of religious extremism, terrorism, significance of Track-I and Track-II dialogue, particularly between New Delhi and Islamabad were also examined by them.

To what extent September 11 will continue to influence South Asian politics and foreign affairs is a big question. Even after two years of the outbreak of terrorist events, one can see no letup by the United States to rethink its war on terrorism. American-led military operations in Afghanistan and also in Iraq are not only a source of insecurity for the Muslim world, but the South Asian countries, where large number of Muslim population lives, have become very sensitive to the endless repression and humiliation faced by the Muslims not only in Afghanistan and in Iraq but also in other parts of the world.

The recent visit of the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to New Delhi and the deepening of Indo-Israeli defence cooperation call for more serious discussion among the Muslim countries in the forthcoming summit of Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) scheduled to be held in Kuala Lampur, Malaysia. The sustained violence in the Indian controlled parts of Jammu and Kashmir and the rise of extremism in South Asia also constitute daunt-

ing challenges for the regional countries because if militarisation is unchecked in the region, one can expect more instability and chaos.

In this scenario, three important realities must be taken into account while examining the impact of 9/11 on South Asia. First, the threat of religious fanaticism which has permeated in the South Asian societies, causing havoc to the future of democracy and human development.

Ambassador (Retd) Vinod C Khanna, in his paper, "The impact of 9/11 on India," at the BEI conference, argued that "right from the outset, the objective and the fair-minded among the Indian observers have been anxious not to identify Islam with terrorism. But for many of us in India who regard ourselves as much a Muslim country as any other, who see Islam as a critical ingredient of Indian civilisation, one of the saddest consequences of 9/11 was that it played into the hands of anti-Islam forces worldwide. The latter were able to project 9/11 not simply as proof of the danger from international terrorism or of terrorism driven by religious fundamentalism generally but very specifically as threat from adherents of Islam." However, it is another question, why the Indian state, as the champion of secularism and democracy has been unable to rein in forces of Hindu nationalism who have not only targeted Muslims but also Christians and are day by day getting more intolerant vis-a-vis religious minorities.

Although, Ambassador Khanna expressed his chagrin against religious extremis by asserting that "there can be no justification whatsoever for the anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat but the Hindu middle class participants in criminal attacks on Muslims in Ahmedabad and elsewhere had their narrow-minded prejudices reinforced by the inputs from the non-resident Indian Hindu Gujarati communities who in turn had been encouraged by the rising anti-Islamic fervour in post-September 11 USA". But the question arises that even if the Gujarati Hindus settled in the United States were influenced by the events of September 11, why the Indian Government couldn't prevent them from fanning the flames of communalism in the state of Gujarat and playing havoc with the lives of innocent people. This shows that religious extremist elements have got a new lease of life, both in India and in Pakistan as a result of September 11 and there is an urgent need on the part of civil societies of South Asia to expose all such groups who in the name of ethnicity and religion undermine the process of regional cooperation and human security in the region.

Second, the lack of consensus among the SAARC countries to provide a unified re-

sponse to the events of September 11 and after also created a lot of insecurity in the region. Mr OP Shah, a veteran peace activist based in Calcutta, India said, "Had the consensus taken place between India and Pakistan to jointly deal with the events of September 11, it would have helped the two countries in coping with the challenge which has occurred because of the US war against terrorism." But unfortunately, India and Pakistan followed

different paths after September 11 resulting in the worsening of relations between the two neighbours. If India was accusing Pakistan of cross-border terrorism, Pakistan was charging New Delhi with state terrorism.

For Mr OP Shah, the only way, India and Pakistan can get out of the vicious cycle of confrontation and cold war is by promoting cooperation at the non-governmental level, with the civil society groups involved in developing better understanding but at the same time bilateral talks on contentious issues also continuing. Maulana Fazlur Rehman, the leader of Jamiatul Ulemai Islam and MMA also pointed out the fact during his visit to India in July that the two neighbours should unite in dealing with the external threat to their interests. If India and Pakistan continue to squabble on unresolved issues they shall be the losers and the extra-regional powers will take advantage of the situation. Finally, the issue of terrorism, which has got a great significance after the events of September 11, should be prudently dealt by the South Asian countries. In fact, Pakistan has repeatedly called upon India to discuss ways and means to combat terrorism but unfortunately it has not been able to get a positive response from its eastern neighbour. The SAARC convention on terrorism and the understanding reached among the members on the occasion of the last regional summit held in January 2002 at Kathmandu also discussed the issue of terrorism but so far they have not been able to come up with practical ways of dealing with that menace.

Terrorism is not only a challenge faced by India, but Pakistan along with other SAARC countries is also adversely effected by it because of the role of violent groups who target civilians and cause immense physical and material destruction.

The need of the hour is to understand why terrorism has emerged as a major threat to security and how it can be weeded out. By following a reactionary approach, the issue of terrorism cannot be effectively handled. South Asia should formulate policies which can give priority to the principle of discouraging and preventing

terrorism at all costs. Along with the issue of terrorism which is directly related to the events of September 11, it is also essential for the South Asian countries to unleash the process of conflict resolution through purposeful talks and at the same time take steps for greater cooperation at different levels in the days to come. Hence the relevance of strengthening cooperation and security in South Asia.