

Saarc decisions

THE conclusion of the two-day meeting of the Saarc council of ministers has ended on an upbeat note. The meeting has set ambitious targets to reduce poverty among the region's 1.4 billion people and has also mapped out plans to replicate prosperity levels enjoyed elsewhere in the world. Before us are examples of the Asean countries as well as the European Union, where member states have derived enormous economic and social benefits from pooling their resources and skills and encouraging regional trade. In this regard, some important discussions were held at the Islamabad meeting. These include specific proposals for collaborative projects in areas of telecommunications, information technology as well as approval of a plan of action on energy, with a meeting of Saarc energy ministers soon to be held to discuss the details of a regional energy grid. Discussions were also held on the problem of poverty, with ministers coming up with suggestions on how to alleviate poverty in South Asia, where nearly 40 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line of \$1 a day earning. These well-intentioned proposals need to be followed up with some tangible action that marks a shift away from more words. In the past few months, Saarc has been able to pursue its agenda of promoting regional economic cooperation, with countries now looking for the establishment of the South Asia Free Trade Agreement and possibly a single currency in the future.

More than half the world's poor live in South Asia where social indicators remain depressing. Despite some improvement in education and health services, the region still has the world's highest rate of illiteracy,

which stands at an average of 45 per cent. Illiteracy among women is higher, with 56 per cent not able to read or write. The region also accounts for one-third of the world's maternal deaths while 50 per cent of children born here remain malnourished. Other areas of concern are rising population, environmental degradation and spread of communicable disease. These are all challenges that Saarc faces at this crucial juncture.

For Saarc to rise to these challenges, it needs to be in a position to deliver on all fronts. Till now, it has been seen as nothing more than a talk shop since tensions between two major members — India and Pakistan — have meant that not much progress has been achieved in collective efforts. All that now seems to be changing. Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri told a press conference in Islamabad on Thursday that the improvement in relations between India and Pakistan had given the organization a shot in the arm. He was hopeful that the decisions taken at the Islamabad meeting would soon be implemented and that this would lead to resolution of larger issues between the two neighbours. The parleys between the Indian and Pakistani foreign ministers on the sidelines of the Saarc meeting give credence to this view. Pakistan has also suggested the creation of a forum within Saarc to discuss peace and security. Currently the charter of Saarc prohibits discussion on any bilateral disputes. Such a forum could indeed prove useful in a region riven by conflict. The idea has not taken hold yet but, if it does, it could provide the organization with an opportunity to settle outstanding disputes and differences often coming in the way of collective progress.