

# A conference of journalists

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The News

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**T**he South Asian Media Conference organised by *The News* in Islamabad (July 1-2) scored many firsts. It was the first conference of its kind, attracting about 60 journalists from India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka and enabling them to interact with over 100 of their Pakistani counterparts. It was also the first time that so many top Indian journalists, 46 to be precise, came to Pakistan in a group and were able not only to take part in a regional media conference but also do some professional work and sightseeing. Again, it was the first time that so many South Asian journalists, especially Indians, got an opportunity to put questions to Pakistan's Chief Executive General Pervez Musharraf in an impromptu press conference in the concluding session on July 2. And it was also the first time that a real effort was made to bring together South Asian mediapersons on one platform by launching the South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA).

Unlike most other conferences and meetings in which Indian and Pakistani participants get bogged down in polemics on Kashmir, the South Asian Media Conference was remarkable in the sense that it stayed clear of any major controversy. Diverse opinions were expressed and plurality was the name of the game and yet the media luminaries from the five South Asian nations managed to agree on a declaration which called for a joint struggle to achieve worthy goals. In fact, it could serve as a model for resolving disputes that have plagued the sub-continent for far too long.

Journalists, by temperament and training, are democrats—a fact borne out by regular elections to their professional bodies and press clubs and their tendency to support all democratic causes. It was thus not surprising that mediapersons participating in the conference patiently heard opinions which differed from their own and refused to become involved in point-scoring. Their tolerance level is definitely exceptional on account of their interaction with diverse outlooks during the course of their professional work.

Not that there were no disagreements. The Bangladeshi delegates wanted insertion of clauses in the joint

statement against a nuclear arms race and in support of multi-party democracy in South Asia. The first clause was directed both at India and Pakistan while the second appeared to be Pakistan-specific. Most Pakistani delegates had no objection to adopting both the proposals. However, after a long discussion it was decided that the draft statement should suffice as it somehow echoed the Bangladeshi sentiments. Though some of the Bangladeshi editors didn't appear to be fully satisfied they nevertheless went along with the majority and backed the declaration in its original form. *The Times of India* editor, Dileep Padgaonkar, also voiced his reservations with regard to the joint statement as he felt its adoption in the original shape could compromise his newspaper's editorial independence. He suggested certain changes in the wording of the declaration and was readily accommodated by the participants, an obvious case of the keenness shown by all the participants to achieve a consensus and make the conference a success.

**T**here was also a difference of opinion about the location of the SAFMA headquarters. The committee constituted to draft conference recommendations and comprising three delegates from each of the five participating countries had unanimously proposed that the SAFMA secretariat should be based initially in Pakistan with sub-offices in every South Asian country. However, well-known Indian journalist Kuldeep Nayyar, who has also served as a diplomat and parliamentarian, was averse to the idea of having the secretariat in either Pakistan or India on account of their adversarial relationship. He forcefully pleaded that the secretariat be located in Bangladesh, or as a second choice in Nepal, to avoid becoming embroiled in controversies that usually accompany anything concerning India and Pakistan. This issue was resolved when Bangladeshi delegates expressed their inability to handle the responsibility owing to lack of preparedness and resources. Beside, it was felt that the host country should run the SAFMA secretariat and thus Pakistan as the sponsor of the first gathering of South Asian mediapersons was in a better position to serve as the headquarters of the association. The next

annual South Asian Media Conference most likely would be hosted by India and the SAFMA secretariat would shift there in case no agreement is reached until then to permanently establish its headquarters in Bangladesh or Nepal.

It is pertinent to mention here that a little-known body South Asian Media Association (SAMA) is already in existence. The federal information minister, Javed Jabbar, who claimed to be its founding chairman, even delivered copies of documents about SAMA and its work to the hotel rooms of the delegates. It was revealed that SAMA was founded in Colombo and Dhaka in 1991 and had organized over 50 events including round-tables, seminars and conferences on a wide range of issues ranging from the role of media in regional conflict resolution to strengthening democracy and governance. The SAMA was also said to have formulated a "media charter for South Asia" in 1995 and circulated it to Saarc member governments. Several proposals contained in the charter reportedly became part of the Saarc information ministers' joint statement adopted in 1998 in Dhaka. The SAMA also finalised a draft declaration on freedom of expression and media development in South Asia at the end of a series of workshops in Colombo, Kathmandu and Dhaka in October 1998 on "Harmonization of media laws in South Asia."

It was interesting to know that India's Ajit Bhattacharjee and Bangladesh's Enayetullah Khan, who both attended the recent South Asian Media Conference in Islamabad, were presently the chairman of SAMA and head of its Bangladesh chapter, respectively. However, all this didn't stop the organisers and delegates of the South Asian Media Conference from launching a new organisation, SAFMA, by adding the word "Free" to SAMA's name and writing down a new charter. How much would SAFMA achieve in light of SAMA's experience is too early to say but such organisations spread out in several countries cannot do much without the active support of major publishing and broadcasting houses and the blessings of the concerned governments. In the highly competitive media world, print and electronic media more often than not are rivals rather than partners for a cause. Still the first crucial steps to

form the SAFMA have been taken and one hopes it would be able to achieve some of its lofty objectives.

**T**he aims and objectives of SAFMA are fairly ambitious. It is expected to make representations to the governments in South Asia to allow free exchange of publications, information and movement of mediapersons between their countries and also to Saarc to adopt a protocol to guarantee their people the right to know and be informed. The SAFMA secretariat is required to devise effective mechanisms for meetings between mediapersons from the region, placement of journalists from one country in the publishing houses of the other countries, exchange of columns, features and reports, and joint studies on issues of common concern including the preparation of a South Asian media charter.

The delegates in their joint declaration also resolved to defend members of the media community in any country of South Asia in case of an attack on them or on press freedom and to strive to have uniform legal guarantees for ensuring freedom of the press and seek dismantling of law conventions and practices which are used to muzzle dissent or discourage diversity of opinion. It is thus clear that SAFMA has combined the functions of both a professional and advocacy body to safeguard the interests of the print and electronic media as well as the people of South Asia by striving the need for freedom of the press and intra-regional flow of information and highlighting the cause of people's democracy, rule of law, equity and prosperity.

Bringing together so many names in South Asian media and linking them for several days is a difficult task in terms of both logistics and costs. *The News* was able to accomplish this task with support from UNDP, CIDA, Dewan Farooq, Media organisations in the host country should pool resources and seek financial support from industrial and commercial establishments and international organisations while planning future South Asian media conferences to make such events viable. Only by meeting regularly and linking SAFMA active can South mediapersons hope to achieve goals they set for themselves. 2, 2000 in the Islamabad joint