



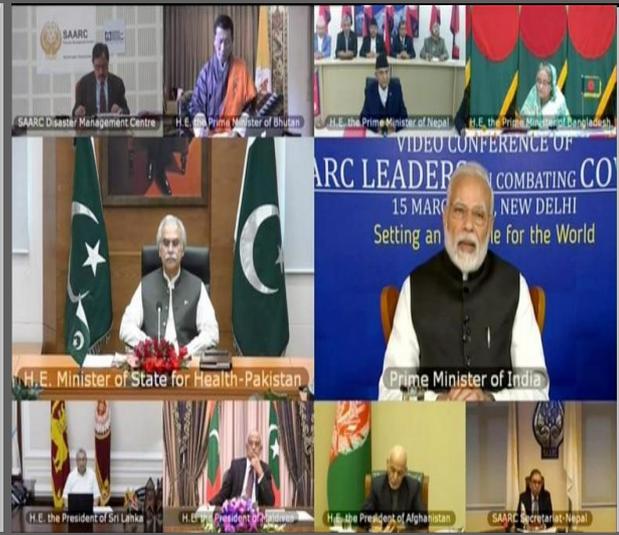
SAARC LEADERS UNITE TO FIGHT COVID-19

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



As the world grapples with the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the South Asian leaders held a video conference on March 15, 2020 to formulate a joint strategy that would help in curbing the rapid spread of the virus in the region.

Dr. Zafar Mirza, Prime Minister's Special Assistant on Health represented the Pakistani side. The video conference which was proposed by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, was attended by Bangladesh Prime Minister Hasina Wajid, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Maldivian President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih and other South Asian leaders. This was the first time after the 18th SAARC Summit held in Nepal in 2014 that the South Asian leaders got together.

Pakistan proposed the development of a "regional mechanism" by the SAARC member countries in order to exchange disease surveillance data and control the spread of COVID-19. During the video conference, Dr. Zafar Mirza stated, "The pandemic forces us to think not in terms of nations and states, but as a collective".¹ He also stated that the SAARC member states should learn from China in order to curb the spread of COVID-19. Dr. Zafar Mirza highlighted the ongoing situation in Kashmir and stressed on the need to lift the lockdown in Kashmir considering the health emergency after the coronavirus outbreak.²

¹ Naveed Siddiqui, "Dr Zafar Mirza at Saarc conference proposes 'regional mechanism' to cope with coronavirus", *Dawn*, March 15, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1541128/dr-zafar-mirza-at-saarc-conference-proposes-regional-mechanism-to-cope-with-coronavirus>

² Naveed Siddiqui, "Dr Zafar Mirza at Saarc conference proposes 'regional mechanism' to cope with coronavirus", *Dawn*, March 15, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1541128/dr-zafar-mirza-at-saarc-conference-proposes-regional-mechanism-to-cope-with-coronavirus>

Bangladeshi Prime Minister Hasina Wajid suggested that, “Health ministers of SAARC nations can hold video conference to discuss specific issues related to COVID-19”.³ Maldivian President Ibrahim Solih was of the opinion that no country can deal with this situation alone; hence a coordinated approach is the need of the hour.

The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi proposed to set up an emergency fund to fight the coronavirus outbreak and offered \$10 million for the fund. Sri Lanka and Bangladesh offered \$5 million and \$1.5 million respectively, Afghanistan and Nepal have promised \$1 million each, Maldives has pledged \$0.2 million and Bhutan has committed \$0.1 million to the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) Emergency Response Fund for COVID-19.⁴ Pakistan has yet to contribute to the fund and has asked for more clarity regarding the fund. Pakistan also wants it to be administered by the SAARC Secretary General. Moreover, Pakistan has contacted several SAARC member states to hold a video conference of the health ministers for which dates have not been finalized yet.

As of March 28, 2020, more than 2600 cases were reported in SAARC member states with 42 deaths.⁵ The figure below shows the exponential rise in the coronavirus cases in South Asia since March 10.⁶

The Rise of Coronavirus in South Asia
CONFIRMED CASES (AND DEATHS) OVER THE PAST THREE WEEKS

Country	March 10	March 17	March 24
 Pakistan	16 (0)	236 (1)	958 (7)
 India	56 (0)	137 (3)	519 (10)
 Sri Lanka	1 (0)	43 (0)	102 (0)
 Afghanistan	5 (0)	22 (0)	74 (1)
 Bangladesh	3 (0)	10 (0)	39 (4)
 Maldives	6 (0)	13 (0)	13 (0)
 Bhutan	1 (0)	1 (0)	2 (0)
 Nepal	1 (0)	1 (0)	2 (0)
Total	89 (0)	463 (4)	1,709 (22)

SOURCE: WHO, CDC, NHC, AND DINGXIANGYUAN, VIA JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY AND WORLDOMETER

³ Sultan M. Hali, “SAARC spirit reignited by COVID-19”, *Pakistan Today*, March 20, 2020 <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2020/03/20/saarc-spirit-reignited-covid-19/>

⁴ “Bangladesh, Nepal, Afghanistan pledge \$3.5 mn to SAARC COVID-19 Fund”, *Business Standard*, March 22, 2020, https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/bangladesh-pledges-usd-1-5-mn-to-saarc-covid-19-emergency-fund-120032200897_1.html

⁵ Worldometer, March 25, 2020 <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

⁶ Ravi Agarwal, “South Asia’s Looming Disaster”, *Foreign Policy*, March 24, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/24/south-asia-looming-disaster-coronavirus-india-pakistan-lockdown-public-health-crisis/>

So far, Pakistan, India and Nepal have gone under a lockdown to prevent the spread of Coronavirus. India has announced a complete lockdown for 21 days. Nepal has imposed a countrywide lockdown till March 31, 2020. Sri Lanka has imposed a curfew and is arresting the violators.

South Asia is home to one-fifth of the world population and the region spends the lowest percentage of its GDP on health. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh spend 3.7 percent, 2.8 percent and 2.4 percent of their GDPs on health expenditure respectively.⁷ The novel coronavirus has put pressure on the already limited and poor health infrastructure of the South Asian countries. The current crisis has shown the SAARC countries that there's a severe need to prioritize health sector and increase their respective health budgets. Modern day challenges are no more like the traditional threats in which defending the border was the primary concern. Due to globalization and technological advancement, the treats the nations face today are different in nature and have enhanced the role of health sector and economy in national security.

The SAARC member states need to reprioritize the health sector, especially India and Pakistan who have always kept defense as a priority. The challenge needs to be dealt through a regional approach considering that the South Asian nations have similar demographics and socio-economic problems. Their leaders and health ministers would be in a better position to draft policies to fight this pandemic by coming together and formulating a uniform policy to fight COVID-19 and its economic repercussions for SAARC countries. The silver lining in all this situation is that it has once again activated the SAARC forum. This opportunity should not be wasted by playing petty politics. Hence, it is important that all the SAARC member states, especially India and Pakistan come together to face this challenge by putting aside their politics for the prosperity of the region.

⁷ Ravi Agarwal, "South Asia's Looming Disaster", *Foreign Policy*, March 24, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/24/south-asia-looming-disaster-coronavirus-india-pakistan-lockdown-public-health-crisis/>