**Telecommunications and ICT**

Recognizing the escalating revolution in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector and the tremendous opportunities and daunting challenges emanated there-from, the issue of communications received due prominence in the SAARC process. The Heads of State or Government at their Ninth SAARC Summit (Male’, May 1997), noted that inadequate communications facilities amongst the Member States were a major hindrance to closer economic cooperation. They stressed the importance of developing infrastructure and adequate communications networks among Member States to reinforce the process of economic cooperation. In this regard, they highlighted the need for the simplification of complex documentation procedures and transactional software to facilitate economic interaction across the region.

Pursuant to the above decision, the SAARC Communications Ministers held their First Conference in Colombo in May 1998. They agreed that telecommunications should not be looked upon purely as a source of revenue but rather as a multifaceted process enhancing socio-economic development in the region. They also agreed on specific steps to further promote cooperation among Member States on a sustained basis. The Conference adopted a Plan of Action on Telecommunications.

The SAARC Communications Ministers held their second Conference in Islamabad in June 2004. In view of the rapid and innovative developments in the telecommunications sector, they had in-depth discussion on the earlier Plan of Action. They agreed on a comprehensive strategy for cooperation to facilitate the enhancement and expansion of telecommunications facilities in the region and adopted a Revised SAARC Plan of Action on Telecommunications – 2004 with the following goals and objectives:

* To promote cooperation in the enhancement of telecommunication links and utilization of information technologies within the SAARC region;
* To minimize disparities within and among Member States in the telecommunications field;
* To harness telecommunication technology for the social and economic upliftment of the region through infrastructure development by optimal sharing of available resources and enhanced cooperation in technology transfer, standardization and human resource development; and
* To evolve a coordinated approach on issues of common concern in international telecommunications fora.

In order to achieve these goals and objectives, the Ministers adopted the Revised SAARC Plan of Action on Telecommunications.

The Second Conference also adopted Common Position on issues of concern to the region in Telecommunications sector that was presented at the World Summit for Information Society (WSIS), held in Tunis in November 2005. The Conference felt the need to have more concerted endeavours to address the issue of digital divide and urged the Member States to share their successful initiatives for development of ICT within the region. It decided that fellowships and training programmes for the development of human resources would be offered by Member States.

The Working Group on Telecommunications and ICT was established, by the Council. of Ministers during its Twenty-fourth Session held in Islamabad in January 2004. This was done after a comprehensive review of the SAARC Integrated Programme of Action by the Standing Committee at its Fourth Special Session held in Kathmandu in August 2003.

The First Meeting of Working Group on Telecommunications and ICT was held in Ghaziabad, India on 21-22 September 2004 which considered measures for effective and early implementation of the SAARC Plan of Action on Telecommunications – 2004 adopted by the Second Conference of SAARC Communications Ministers.

The Second Meeting of the Working Group on Telecommunications and Information and Communication Technology, held in New Delhi on 3-4 April 2008. The Meeting observed that Member States have made substantial progress in digitalization of inter-country links. The Meeting also agreed for the sharing of successful experiences in R&D as well as access to new technologies and posting of such information on the website of SAARC Secretariat.

At the Fifteenth SAARC Summit, Colombo, 2-3 August 2008, the Leaders observed that an effective and economical regional tele-communication regime is an essential factor of connectivity, encouraging the growth of people-centric partnerships. They stressed the need for the Member States to endeavour to move towards a uniformly applicable low tariff, for international direct dial calls within the region.

The Third Meeting of the Working Group on Telecommunications and Information and Communication Technology was held in Ghaziabad, India on 3-4 March 2009. The Meeting discussed on the proposal of Up gradation of National and Regional Telecom Infrastructure and agreed in principle that the capacity of the existing inter country links needs to be increased; that the maximizing the use of terrestrial system such as optical fiber, micro­wave link and that the growth of telecom traffic, both voice and data meant for SAARC countries will require to remain within the region. The Meeting decided that India may start taking necessary action with the objective to set up South Asian Postal Union as proposed. The Meeting was informed that the commissioning of the project on Tele-Education E-Network requires signing of an MOU and recommended that the Member States may sign MOU to this effect in next six months. The Meeting also discussed on various issues Cross-border interference of Radio signals, Revision of accounting rates and collection charges among SAARC Countries, Multilateral utilization of terrestrial communications routes among SAARC countries, Cyber Security etc.

At the Eighteenth SAARC Summit (Kathmandu, 26-27 November 2014), the Leaders directed for collaboration and engagement among public authorities and private stakeholders in the Member States to lower telephone tariff rates for facilitating greater contacts among the people of the region and called for rationalization of the tariff structures.

The SAARC mechanism to deal with this important area - Working Group on Telecommunications and Information & Communication Technology**-** has met four times during the past 12 years (2004, 2008, 2009 and 2015) and the last meeting of the Working Group was held in New Delhi on 26-27 March 2015, after a gap of six years.

The Working Group in its last meeting in March 2015 reviewed the decisions taken in its previous meeting (2009) and since it was meeting after a gap of six years, decided to drop a few issues which had lost significance with the passage of time. The meeting, therefore, came up with new recommendations on some of the following important issues:-

* Review of progress in the implementation of the revised SAARC Plan of Action on Telecommunications:-
* Reduction of Call Rates among SAARC countries and rationalization of tariff structures
* Multilateral utilization of terrestrial communications routes among SAARC countries; Up-gradation of National and Regional Telecom Infrastructure;
* Utilization of Existing Infrastructure, including SASEC Project by SAAARC Member States;
* Connectivity among Member States;
* Utilization of National Knowledge Network facilities by Member States;
* Establishing Regional Connectivity Hub and its utilization;
* Universal Access to Telecommunications Services;
* Development of the Performance Indicators on Telecommunications sector in the Member States of SAARC
* Consideration of Matter regarding signing of MOU on Tele-Education E-Network
* Cross-border interference on Radio Signals
* Cyber Security
* Improving the Telecommunication Linkages to Reduce Call Rates and Telecommunication Tariffs and Interconnection Termination Charges among SAARC Countries and Development of Regional Telecommunications Infrastructure.

4. The Meeting also noted the recommendation of the Forty-sixth Session of the Programming Committee (Kathmandu, 29-30 August 2014) regarding closure of two Regional Centres, i.e. SAARC Information Centre (SIC) and SAARC Documentation Centre. The Meeting, while considering the recommendation of the Forty-first Session of the Standing Committee (Kathmandu 23-24 November 2014 to place the mandates/areas pertaining to the above-mentioned two Regional Centres before the Fourth Meeting of the Working Group on Telecommunication and ICT, decided to retain the following areas with the Group:-

* Use of Information and Communication Technology in the fields of education, public health, agriculture, disaster management, etc;
* Communication and Information Policy for SAARC Member States;
* Contemporary Trends in Communication in SAARC;
* People to People Contact through Communication Tools and Techniques;