

Date: 23 September 2020

To,

H.E. Mr. Mohammad Haneef Atmar, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Afghanistan

H.E. Dr. A.K. Abdul Momen, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh

H.E. Dr. Tandi Dorji, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Bhutan

H.E. Dr. S. Jaishankar, Minister of External Affairs, India

H.E. Mr. Abdulla Shahid, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Maldives

H.E. Mr. Pradeep Kumar Gyawali, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Nepal

H.E. Mr. Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Pakistan

H.E. Mr. Dinesh Gunawardena, Foreign Minister, Sri Lanka

H.E. Mr. Esala Ruwan Weerakoon, Secretary General of SAARC

Your Excellencies,

Re: Open letter to the SAARC Council of Ministers urging the establishment of a South Asia regional human rights mechanism

The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) and its member organisations welcome the virtual meeting of the Council of Ministers of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to be held on 24 September 2020.

On the eve of the SAARC Council of Ministers meeting, we wish to reiterate our long-standing demand for the establishment of a South Asia regional human rights mechanism.

It is time that an independent and effective regional human rights mechanism that advocates and implements international human rights law and standards is established in South Asia to advance the protection of human rights for all South Asia peoples. We believe that a regional human rights mechanism is essential to create a common platform to collectively address the issues faced by South Asian countries. These include gender discrimination, human trafficking, migration, poverty, climate change, natural disasters, and the lack of protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms and liberties in plural societies.

The establishment of a regional human rights mechanism in South Asia would strengthen the work of South Asian states as well as SAARC realise the objectives of the SAARC Charter and these include peace, freedom, social justice and economic prosperity. While we welcome the meeting on combatting COVID-19 that convened the heads of SAARC Member States in March 2020, we believe that a common platform through a regional human rights mechanism in South Asia would be an effective way to deal with common issues the pandemic has exacerbated across the region.

We also call upon the SAARC Member States to introduce an article on human rights in the SAARC Social Charter. This move would serve as an important step towards the establishment of a regional human rights mechanism.

We urge the Council of Ministers and the SAARC Secretariat to consider this call from civil society organisations across South Asia, by initiating steps towards creating a consensus among the SAARC Member States to establish a regional human rights mechanism at the earliest possible.

We hope that our call will be given due consideration, and we wish the Council of Ministers and the SAARC Secretariat a successful meeting that will culminate in improved cooperation across the South Asian region.

We stand ready to support you to implement the measures suggested in this letter. To request further information or to set up a meeting or a call to discuss our recommendations please contact Debendra Adhikari, South Asia Programme Manager, FORUM-ASIA, at sasia@forum-asia.org

With assurance of our highest consideration,

Endorsing Organisations

1. Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)
2. Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), Bangladesh
3. Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP), India
4. Awaz Foundation – Centre for Development Services, Pakistan
5. Banglar Manabadhikar Suraksha Mancha (MASUM), India
6. Bytes For All, Pakistan
7. Center for Communication and Development Studies (CCDS), India
8. Centre for the Sustainable Use of Natural and Social Resources (CSNR), India
9. Civil Society and Human Rights Network (CSHRN), Afghanistan
10. Community Self Reliance Centre (CSRC), Nepal
11. Dalit Foundation, India
12. Human Rights Alert, India

13. Informal Sector Service Center (INSEC), Nepal
14. Jagriti Child and Youth Concern Nepal (JCYCN), Nepal
15. Karnali Integrated Rural Development and Research Centre (KIRDARC), Nepal
16. National Alliance for Human rights and Social Justice – Nepal
17. People's Watch (PW), India
18. Rights Education and Development Centre (READ), India
19. Law and Society Trust (LST), Sri Lanka
20. Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC), Nepal
21. Youth Action Nepal (YoAC), Nepal