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SAARC leaders: Make child rights a priority

Leaders of the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), gathering for their annual summit in Colombo between 29 and 31 July, should place child rights at the centre of their agenda if they are really committed to a better future for the region, Amnesty International said today.

All the SAARC governments have made a commitment to uphold the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). At the Malé Summit in 1997, the governments agreed to pursue a holistic approach to address the problems of disadvantaged children in the region.

“To be truly holistic all governments must address the entire range of abuses that children suffer -- in custody, in the family, in the community and in armed conflict,” Amnesty International said.

“There is a gap between rhetoric and reality. This must be closed if the forthcoming SAARC ‘Decade of the Rights of the Child’ is to bring about real change in South Asia. Governments must take decisive measures to ensure that state officials, businesses, schools and parents do not deny children their rights.”

Earlier this year, Amnesty International released a report which detailed widespread abuses facing children in the region. The report also highlighted the use of bonded labourers in conditions of “virtual slavery”, and trafficking of huge numbers of girls from Nepal and Bangladesh to work in the sex industry in India and Pakistan, often with the acquiescence of state officials. In addition, the report documented how armed groups in the region have deliberately killed, tortured, and intimidated children, and recruited them to fight as soldiers, despite the safeguards in international human rights and humanitarian law which forbid these activities.

The organization is calling on government leaders attending the SAARC summit to amend domestic legislation to bring it fully in line with international standards; give clear signals to law enforcement officials that those who violate the rights of children will be punished; and ensure that funds are available to secure the smooth operation of the judicial process for children.

Amnesty International also called on SAARC governments to join in international efforts to prevent the recruitment of child soldiers and halt the use of landmines, which have devastating consequences for the lives of many children.

“The recent preoccupation with the nuclear issue in the region may deflect critical resources and attention away from the needs of children,” Amnesty International said.

“Children are the real key to the region’s future. It is only when society ensures the freedom and dignity of children -- creating the conditions in which they can develop their potential -- that

they have the chance to grow to a full and satisfying adulthood and assume a constructive role in society.”

Amnesty International believes that ensuring the provision of adequate education, social welfare, health and juvenile justice systems is an essential step towards the enforcement of children's fundamental rights.

SAARC initiatives should address the full range of human rights problems faced by children in each country and should not fall short of obligations governments have made when ratifying the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). As frequently recommended by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the monitoring body of experts established under the CRC, governments should fully consult with NGOs in the region to ensure that all initiatives reflect the many dimensions of the problem.

“This year’s SAARC summit takes place in the 50th anniversary year of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” Amnesty International said. “South Asian governments should mark this anniversary by taking concrete action to improve the lives of the region’s children, rather than making another round of unfulfilled promises.”
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