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GOVERNMENT OF INDIA**

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**2<sup>ND</sup> MEETING OF SAARC EDUCATION MINISTERS HELD**

**UNION HRD MINISTER SMT SMRITI IRANI ADDRESSES THE SAARC MEET**

**New Delhi, October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2014**

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting of SAARC Ministers of Education/Higher Education was held at New Delhi today. The Union HRD Minister of India, Smt. Smriti Zubin Irani, was unanimously elected to the Chair. While addressing the Meeting she reiterated India's initiatives for strengthening mutual cooperation amongst the Member States and the need for a well focussed strategy for growing together in the SAARC region. She said "Resolve of our nations to work, study and think together has materialized in the form of South Asian University which is funded jointly by all the member countries and has started functioning nearly 4 years ago in New Delhi. It should be our joint endeavour to see it emerge as an institute of excellence which could contribute to creation of knowledge in the region through quality higher education at an affordable cost."

On the recent Declaration of the SAARC Summits the Minister added, "I would like to remind all of us the recent Declarations of the SAARC Summits and the importance accorded to education in all the Summits for which we need to work more closely for a rapid change in the existing scenario. Harmonization of academic standards; establishment of long-term linkages amongst universities, research institutions and think-tanks in the region; recognition of educational qualifications; institutionalization of students; academics, teachers and youth exchange programs etc. have been stressed for long term sustainable people-to-people linkages."

India's initiatives for inclusive education, quality improvement, use of ICT in education, development and sharing of e-resources, connectivity, e-learning and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), mutual capacity building, more exchanges of students and researchers, etc. were also discussed in the meeting and it was agreed to share the best practices and achievements in education by each Member State for leveraging on mutual strengths.

The Ministers of Education from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives and Nepal, Chairman, Higher Education Commission from Pakistan and Senior Officers from Sri Lanka participated in the Meeting. They re-affirmed their commitment to inclusive learning and gender equitable quality education. The Ministers further emphasized the need for expanding opportunities for skill development revitalizing higher education system in the SAARC Member States through expansion of higher education institutions as well as coordinating learning modes such as open and distance learning and enhancing the accessibility and quality of education to achieve universalization of secondary and higher secondary education. The Secretary General SAARC, Shri Arjun Bahadur Thapa was also one of the dignitaries present at the Meeting.

A **New Delhi Declaration on Education** was also adopted at the conclusion of the Meeting identifying SAARC Perspectives on the Post-2015 Education Agenda and Regional Priority Areas of Action and it was agreed to expand the scope of cooperation.

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**DS/RK/SAARC**