

SAARC meet to discuss visa exemption, terror issues

New Delhi, Jan 23 (PTI) A proposal to exempt certain categories of people from visa requirement for travel within South Asia is expected to be one of the main issues along with initiatives to forge greater integration and end terror in the region at the upcoming SAARC meet in Thimphu. The SAARC Foreign Ministers' meeting in Thimphu on February 8 is also expected to take stock of various other initiatives, including economic integration, utilisation of the SAARC Development Fund and the Food Bank and formation of the South Asian Forum. The SAARC Visa Exemption Scheme is expected to be one of the major issues on the agenda of the meeting which would be attended by External Affairs Minister S M Krishna and his counterparts from other seven member nations, sources said here. There has been a proposal for expanding the list of people from various fields of life to be exempted from visa requirement for travel within eight SAARC member countries. At present MPs, judges, 100 identified business leaders, sportspersons and 150 journalists are availing SAARC Visa facility. Seeking a modification in the scheme, India wants that the prior approval should be accorded to the three categories -- business persons, sportspersons and journalists. Once the prior approval is taken, they may be given special stickers with long-term multi-entry provision, sources said, adding the idea was to improve the system so that it can be implemented effectively without any fear of misuse. The SAARC Council of Ministers' meeting is also expected to discuss the progress made in the implementation of regional Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty (MLAT). The MLAT was agreed upon at the SAARC Summit in Colombo in 2008. Since then, India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Maldives have ratified it but Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nepal are yet to do so, the sources said. The SAARC countries, at the Home Minister's conference in Islamabad in June last year, had also agreed to step up cooperation in fight against terror and consider a proposal to form a SAARC Police force (SAARCPOL) on the pattern of Interpol. These proposals are expected to be discussed further at the upcoming meet. Aspects related to the SAARC Food Bank are also expected to be deliberated upon amid requests from some countries that the threshold of the items to be drawn from it needed to be brought down so that the bank could serve its utility better. PTI AKK