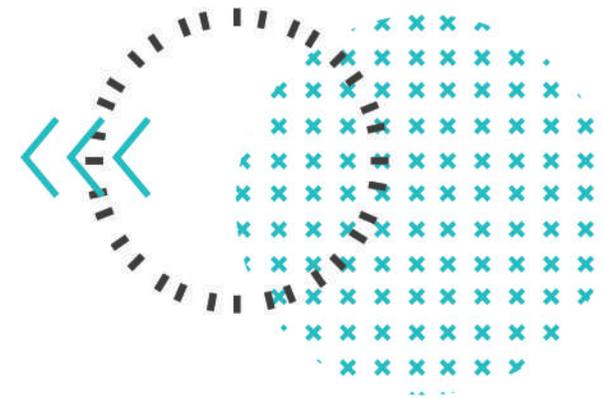




Bridges, Not Boundaries



Building regional
rights-based
movements in
South Asia





Bridges, Not Boundaries

Building regional rights-based movements in South Asia



Executive summary

With politics stalled, trade negligible, and people-to-people exchanges constrained, South Asia is a stark portrait of fragmentation and unrest. Borders once meant to be bridges are now rising as walls ever harder to bring down. These divisions have made it difficult for even human rights defenders to unite in the struggle for people's rights across the region, where 'they are often treated as enemies', as Hina Jilani, former chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) and South Asians for Human Rights (SAHR), pointed out.

This concern for defending human rights in South Asia lay at the heart of discussions during the two-day conference, 'Bridges, Not Boundaries: Building Regional Rights-Based Movements in South Asia', held in Lahore, Pakistan, on 26–27 July 2025, and co-organised by HRCP and SAHR. The event was designed as a hybrid conference, with most participants attending in person and others joining virtually, either due to their inability to travel or current visa restrictions between India and Pakistan.

The conference featured three core sessions. The first, 'Peace, Democracy and Human Rights in South Asia: Where Do We Stand?' analysed the dangers to democracy, particularly after the May 2025 conflict between India and Pakistan. The second, 'Pluralism in Peril: The Erasure of Religious and Ethnic Minorities in South Asia', examined how the systematic marginalisation of minorities and unchecked majoritarianism constitute not only a human rights crisis but also a direct challenge to regional peace and democratic integrity. The third, 'Invisible Lines: Climate Diplomacy and Environmental Justice in South Asia', explored the cross-border impacts of the climate crisis—such as dangerous air quality and water scarcity—on marginalised communities, and the potential for cross-border collaboration on climate change.

Participants unanimously agreed on the urgent need to revive regionalism and strengthen cross-border solidarity among states and its people. Many expressed great concern over how platforms such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) had become ineffective while regressive laws related to free speech and expression, particularly in Pakistan and India, continued to restrict the right to information.

Speakers at the plenary discussed the importance of digital collaboration for climate justice and digital rights and warned that the region was becoming 'surveillance-heavy,' with laws on surveillance and data protection increasingly weaponised to silence dissent and criminalise individuals.

All participants agreed that any conversation about human rights today must acknowledge the ongoing genocide in Gaza, where the very foundations of international human rights law had collapsed. Gaza has laid bare the deep colonialism, racism, and double standards entrenched in global human rights systems.

Yet, despite the gravity of human rights violations in Palestine as well as in South Asia, hope ran through every discussion. Speakers reiterated the need to rethink what solidarity could look like if civil society were to bring regional concerns to global forums such as the Universal Periodic Review. They agreed that it was time to focus on concrete actions such as supporting fact-finding missions across borders, documenting resistance and building a resource pool of civil society groups.



Harris Khalique (Pakistan)

Opening sessions

'Salaam, adaab, namaste, sat sri akal, and a very good morning.' With this warm greeting, Harris Khalique (Pakistan), secretary-general of HRCP, inaugurated the two-day conference titled 'Bridges, Not Boundaries: Building Regional Rights-Based Movements in South Asia' and evoked the diverse spirit of the region. This diversity is expressed in its prose and poetry, in its music and food, and in countless other traditions shaped by ancient civilisations, spiritual philosophies, and people's movements. Yet the region remains divided and meaningful dialogue distant.

Mr Khalique described the present situation as a 'poly-crisis', marked by rising poverty and destitution of marginalised classes, growing displacement due to conflict and climate change, and the intensification of the neoliberal economic order alongside the resurgence of right-wing populism, misogyny, and racism. 'When the human condition is shabbier than before, we must come together, consult, reflect, and act,' he said.

The event, co-organised by HRCP and SAHR, was held at the Dorab Patel Auditorium in Lahore on 26–27 July 2025, and brought together academics, lawyers, writers, artists, journalists, and human rights defenders from Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives to build a collective voice

**COME
TOGETHER,
CONSULT,
REFLECT, AND
ACT**



Deekshya Illangasinghe (Sri Lanka)

against rising poverty, gender inequality, persecution of minorities, religious extremism, militarisation, and climate change in the region.

Deekshya Illangasinghe (Sri Lanka), executive director of SAHR, reminded the audience that South Asia had historically produced powerful alternatives to global domination—whether through independence movements, the non-aligned movement, South Asian women’s movements, or cross-border solidarity during times of crisis. ‘This rich political and intellectual heritage offers both a moral and strategic foundation to reimagine a new, post-Westphalian political order—one in which South Asia is not the periphery but a central actor in shaping the global future, especially across the Global South,’ she said, adding that ‘When all of us act as South Asians and continue to build bridges and knock down the borders that separate us, a better world is possible.’

The mood for the conference was set by the recitation of selected stanzas from the Punjabi epic poem *Heer Waris Shah* by Taimur Afghani, accompanied by Ijaz Khan on the flute.





Dr Syeda Saiyidain Hameed (India)

THE CHAMPIONS SPEAK

Keynote addresses

Dr Syeda Saiyidain Hameed (India), delivering her online keynote address, titled 'The Urgency of Building Cross-Border Movements for Peace and for the Rights of the Most Vulnerable and Excluded in South Asia', reminded the audience that the region today is at its lowest ebb. 'Where can we find a glimmer of hope? We must. This is a turning point; we are collapsing under the rage of the regime,' she warned. Dr Hameed is a feminist, author, translator, founding member of the Muslim Women's Forum, and former member of the National Commission for Women and the Planning Commission in India.

Having recently returned from Kashmir, she observed that the aftermath of the Pahalgam attack has been framed through reductive gendered narratives: 'The ruling regime has sought to project a hyper-masculine identity for the nation, while peace itself is feminised within the discourse of hyper-nationalism.' As an example, she cited Himanshi Narewal, widow of one of the victims, Narender, who appealed in the media not to target Muslims and Kashmiris in the wake of the attack, but was viciously trolled online.

Dr Hameed further argued that mainstream media has actively sustained this hyper-nationalist framing. Referring to a 25 July news report, she recalled a statement made by Kunwar Vijay Shah, tribal affairs minister of Madhya Pradesh, regarding Colonel Sophia Qureshi, a senior Indian

Where can we find a glimmer of hope? We must. — Dr Syeda Saiyidain Hameed

army officer deployed to oversee operations. Shah had claimed that 'India taught a lesson to those responsible for the Pahalgam attack by using their own sister.' Such rhetoric, Dr Hameed said, reduces Muslim women to symbols in nationalist narratives:

'Any Muslim in India should be considered a sister; Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and others as well are sisters.'

She warned that majoritarianism and the rhetoric of hyper-masculine nationalism are pervasive across South Asia, placing the most marginalised communities at the heart of multiple crises. What is urgently needed, she said, is cross-border solidarity and collective advocacy to confront shared challenges and secure a just future.

Drawing a historical comparison, she recalled a statement from 1994, when it was noted that the diversion of precious resources toward war preparations plunged millions into poverty, depriving them of basic needs and fundamental rights such as health and education. 'That was in 1994,' she reflected. 'How are things any different today?' as the people of South Asia continue to demand peace, democracy, justice, tolerance, and equal opportunities regardless of ethnicity.

Sharing the platform with Dr Hameed for the keynote address, Hina Jilani (Pakistan), former chairperson of HRCP and SAHR, acknowledged that South Asia is grappling with crises of rule of law and climate change. But more than that, she remarked, 'My biggest challenge comes from the way people think. Populism does not originate with leaders; it stems from the desire to echo what people demand. We must ensure that what people say reflects the values of democracy, human rights, humanity, tolerance and respect for minorities, as well as an acceptance of the diverse populations we live with.'

She stressed that in the present political climate working in isolation is not an option. 'Human rights cannot be promoted or protected without a keen understanding of the political environment—and that awareness must always remain present.' She recalled that her earliest realisation, when she and her colleagues began the women rights movement, was that rights do not advance in isolation. 'The



Hina Jilani (Pakistan)

movement grew stronger when we forged links with other struggles: the movement for the restoration of democracy, the socioeconomic struggles of peasants, and many others. These alliances gave us strength, and they remain crucial today.'

We cannot afford the luxury of pessimism.— Hina Jilani

Next, she turned to the grave situation in the Middle East: 'I say to you today, that what is unfolding before our eyes in Palestine is a textbook case of genocide, while the world stands by and fails to stop it.'

She called on the audience to hold international leaders accountable, to shame them for their silence, and to condemn their failure to take meaningful and effective measures. 'We cannot afford the luxury of pessimism. We must believe in our struggle.'

Both Dr Hameed and Ms Jilani interspersed their speeches with reflections on the early days of the human rights movement. Dr Hameed fondly recalled the contributions of stalwarts such as Justice Dorab Patel, I. A. Rehman, Tapan Bose, Asma Jahangir, Dr Mubashir Hasan, Kamal Hossain, and Narinder Panday. She also remembered attending South Asian conferences in the past, concluding with emotion: 'Today, my heart aches that I cannot place my foot in the land I would love to.'

Ms Jilani reflected on the origins of HRCP and SAHR from their inception to the present, recalling that stalwarts such as Iqbal Haider had envisioned not merely a network, but a collective platform to carry forward the idea of an inclusive South Asia.

Sara Hossain (Bangladesh)



THE FAULTLINES OF DEMOCRACY

Session 1

Peace, Democracy and Human Rights in South Asia: Where Do We Stand?

Since the start of 2024, South Asia has witnessed a flurry of electoral activities. Bangladesh and Nepal went to the polls in January, followed by Pakistan in February, India between April and October, the Maldives in April, and Sri Lanka in November. Yet, democracy and rights across the region remain under severe strain. Fittingly, the conference's first session explored how the region might reclaim its lost democratic spirit.

The session brought together leading voices from across the region, including Sara Hossain, a senior advocate of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh and honorary executive director of the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust; Dr Bipin Adhikari, professor of law at Kathmandu University in Nepal; Bhavani Fonseka, a senior researcher and attorney-at-law at the Centre for Policy Alternatives in Sri Lanka; Palwasha Hassan, programme director of Mina's List and a founding member of the Afghan Women's Network; and a senior rights activist from India. Munizae Jahangir, journalist and co-chairperson of HRCP, moderated the session.

The Taliban refuse to recognise women as leaders.
— Palwasha Hassan

Ms Fonseka described Sri Lanka's post-2022 political shift as hopeful yet depressing. She said presently there is slightly more space for dialogue on issues such as securitisation and the release of political prisoners, still the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) continues to normalise the policing of dissent, disproportionately targeting minorities, the media, and 'essentially anyone seen as a problem.' Efforts to repeal the PTA have not materialised, in fact, she pointed out that 'the very ministers who supported the repeal are now using the law themselves.'

Similarly, the colonial-era laws like the Penal Code persist, while new measures such as the Online Safety Act are framed to protect women and children but in practice restrict free expression. The key lesson, Fonseka said, is clear: 'Victims must be heard. Passing laws is not enough. Political culture must change.' She stressed that Sri Lanka's deeper structural issues remain unresolved. 'The real question is how do we hold the elite accountable?' she asked.

The core issue in Sri Lanka is democratising political parties and ensuring transparency.
— Bhavani Fonseka

Munizae Jahangir (Pakistan), Bhavani Fonseka (Sri Lanka), and Dr Bipin Adhikari (Nepal)





Dr Bipin Adhikari (Nepal)

As a positive, she mentioned how the people in Sri Lanka have resisted repressive laws, citing the constitutional coup of 2018, which challenged extreme autocracy. 'All of it was backed by citizens.'

Turning to the critical issue of enforced disappearances in Sri Lanka, Ms Fonseka said that decades of activism has finally led to the criminalisation of enforced disappearances, still problems persist with the law and its implementation. 'A conservative estimate puts the number of disappeared over 50,000, and the discovery of a new mass grave has reignited debate about the state's responsibility.'

Dr Adhikari noted that compared to other countries in the region, democracy in Nepal is faring relatively better, with a modestly liberal environment, where 'people can speak their mind'. For him, in Nepal, the foremost concern is the effective implementation of the 2015 constitution. 'While the constitution is progressive and unique in mandating representative democracy and inclusive state institutions, its provisions remain largely unimplemented,' he observed.

Dr Adhikari added that though the constitutional bodies, such as National Dalit Commission and the Indigenous People's Commission, were established to prevent discrimination, they lack genuine representation and independence. The constitution also guarantees 33 percent women representation in the parliament. But 'the challenge is democratising political parties and ensuring transparency. In many towns you won't find a post office, but you will find party offices,' he said, reflecting on the overwhelming dominance of political patronage.

Proportional inclusion in Nepal is recognized as a right but remains unrealised in practice.
— Dr Bipin Adhikari

The democratic climate in Bangladesh is as concerning. Ms Hossain said that while debates on judicial and constitutional reforms are ongoing, serious concerns persist over the

independence of judiciary and the continued targeting of individuals associated with former Awami League government of Sheikh Hasina.

She pointed at some positive developments in her country, such as the cyber-security act. 'But in practice these laws continue to be used to threaten dissenters and minorities,' she said. 'The 2024 student protests showed that people will not tolerate unlimited repression,' said Ms Hossain, but she cautioned that lasting change in upholding universal human rights will require stronger cross-border solidarity and sustained intergenerational engagement.

The 2024 student protests in Bangladesh showed people will not tolerate repression.
— Sara Hossain

Likewise in India, the speaker from India noted that the 'egregious application of bad laws', many crafted not by the present regime but the previous ones too, are being weaponised against civil society actors, young people and political activists. 'What is most alarming is not the state's role in enabling rights violations, but the growing complicity of society itself,' he said.

Highlighting the crackdown on civil society in India, he said that over 2,400 organisations and NGOs, such as Oxfam, Action Aid and Green Peace are facing criminal action on tax laws, indicating that their voices in India have been shut down.

On minority disenfranchisement in India, he said that the 'three Ds—demolition [of their homes], deportation, detention' are being used against Muslims, fearing that ahead of elections in West Bengal, Muslims may be branded "Bangladeshis" and disenfranchised despite possessing valid documentation. 'This trend reflects a wider dispossession of vulnerable communities,' he observed. So far, he said, India has struggled to imbibe the true spirit of its Constitution, adding that 'the challenge now is to recraft the society back into the path of constitutionalism.'

Most alarming in India is not the state's role in rights violations, but society's growing complicity.
— Indian rights activist

The Indian speaker wrapped up the discussion by saying that change



must begin within each country to create space for meaningful dialogue. 'Jingoism is on the rise, and the India-Pakistan peace agenda must once again move to the centre of regional discourse,' he remarked.

He added that the younger generation, increasingly shaped by state-driven narratives, remains detached from the lived realities of the subcontinental partition. At the same time, there is China's vested interest in keeping India and Pakistan divided, which must be countered through logical, unified messaging.

He concluded by emphasising that long-term transformation will be possible only if the South Asian region is willing to fundamentally rethink its economic model: 'The peace narrative must be sought more actively, reclaim shrinking constitutionalism in our own respective countries, and a new moral compass that South Asians can look forward to'.

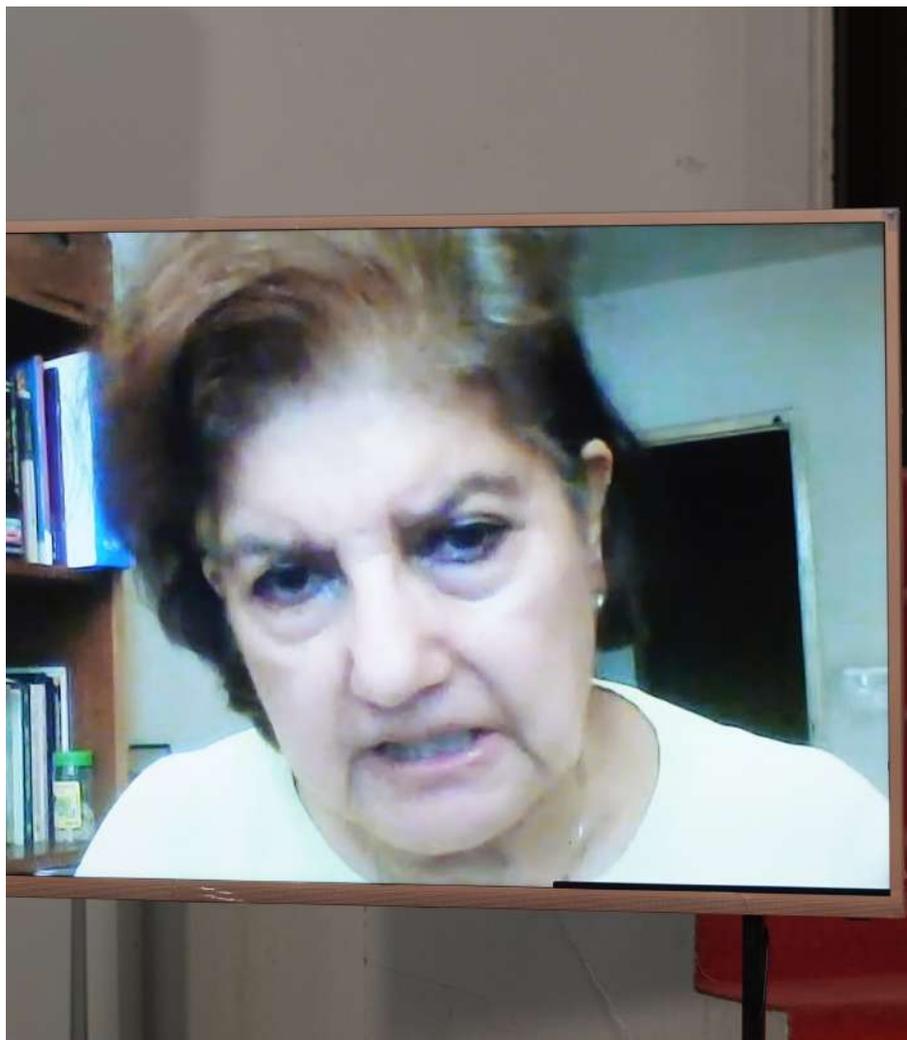
In South Asia, no discussion on peace, democracy, and human rights can be complete without addressing the grave violations of women's rights in Taliban-run Afghanistan. It remains the only country in the world

where girls are banned from education beyond Grade 6. Ms Hassan explained that economic opportunities for women are largely confined to small-scale activities such as handicrafts, while distance learning is hampered by poor internet connectivity. 'The Taliban refuse to recognise women as leaders,' she said.

Ms Hassan added that although there are some pragmatic elements within the Taliban who appear more open to girls' education, they too face severe consequences, since conservative forces are in power. In her view, the forced return of Afghan refugees [from Pakistan] is putting lives at risk. Therefore, 'SAHR must amplify our collective voice,' she said, adding that Pakistan's support to the Taliban has given it adverse leverage.



Farah Zia and Hina Jilani (Pakistan)



Rita Manchanda (India)

Session 2

Pluralism in peril: The impending erasure of religious and ethnic minorities in South Asia

The second session blended personal testimony with rigorous analysis to reveal how the sustained persecution of marginalised communities continues across the region.

Among the speakers were Dr Amena Mohsin, professor of international relations at the University of Dhaka in Bangladesh; Rita Manchanda, a feminist scholar from India and former executive director of the South Asia Forum for Human Rights; Dr Ali Usman Qasmi, associate professor of history at the Lahore University of Management Sciences in Pakistan; and Shreen Abdul Saroor, co-founder of the Mannar Women's Development Federation and Women's Action Network in Sri Lanka. Dr Adnan Sattar, assistant professor of law at the Lahore University of Management Sciences, moderated the session.

Delving into the complexities surrounding the definition of 'minorities', Dr Mohsin said that often

**DIALOGUE
ACROSS
DIVIDES**

the state itself constructs minorities. She reminded the audience that the numerical majority of East Pakistanis was turned into a 'minority' because it is power that determines this status. In present-day Bangladesh, while Muslims make up 90.5 percent of the population, the shift from secularism to Islam as the state religion and the rise of Bangladeshi nationalism has rendered other groups 'minorities'.

The state constructs minorities.
— Dr Amena Mohsin

For Ms Manchanda, 'A minority is best understood as the distance between an individual and community and the power structure.' To support her argument, she cited the example of Tamil Brahmins in Tamil Nadu, who make up just 3 percent of the population but dominate positions of influence. 'We cannot expect minority communities to fight their battles alone. Those of us who have the privilege of being in the majority must be willing to take up these issues,' she argued.

Ms Manchanda also introduced the term 'margins' instead of minorities as more inclusive, encompassing depressed castes, subjugated minorities, and the poor, as 'it better captures the shared struggles of those excluded from power'.

Unless societies embrace each other's complexities, they risk erasing the very existence of the other.
— Rita Manchanda

According to Ms Saroor, the definition of 'minority' must consider 'historical inequalities, deprivation of rights, and existing power structures, along with intersectionality'. She highlighted the internal complexities within minority communities, stating how Muslim women must struggle for their rights against patriarchal interpretations even while their community faces external oppression. This, she argued, 'shows that being a numerical majority, such as women making up 56 percent of Sri Lanka's population, does not necessarily translate into freedom from discrimination'.



Adding another dimension to the concept of 'minorities', Dr Qasmi noted that the idea of 'minority' is largely shaped by political and social discourses aimed at protecting and accommodating certain communities. 'Can protection be ensured without relying on the "minority" legal framework? Can invoking historical embeddedness be a more powerful alternative, when communities assert their longstanding presence rather than depending solely on legal documents for identity?' he asked.

A numerical majority does not necessarily translate into power or freedom from discrimination.
— Shreen Saroor

Ms Manchanda voiced concern over the rising trend of 'unknowing the other'. She alluded to the erasure of references to Pakistan and Muslim history from textbooks in India, warning that such omissions foster simplification, stereotyping, and ultimately dehumanisation. 'Unless we start to understand each other's complexities, we really are going down the path of dehumanising the other,' she cautioned.

For her, appeals to 'constitutional rights' and 'democracy in danger' often resonate more broadly than the narrower language of 'minority rights,' citing the case of the Shaheen Bagh protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act in India, where mobilisation had proved stronger when framed around threats to the constitution rather than solely Muslim exclusion.

She also warned of state-driven 'technologies of exclusion' such as the National Register of Citizens and Citizenship Amendment Act, as well as special reviews of electoral rolls, which strip citizenship and rights, especially from Bangla-speaking people and Muslims, and Rohingyas who have been deported as illegal migrants.

The fact that Rita Manchanda [and other Indian participants] could not attend the conference in person, despite a shared commonality in terms of history, culture, and language, shows how borders and the innate violence associated with state institutions prevent a free exchange of ideas, said Dr Qasmi. For him, 'these ideas—about the ways we confront sights and sounds of the state, and various institutions of power, and the violence these institutions inflict on individuals and communities—become a motivation for study [on pluralism].'

Bridges
not boundaries

IN SOUTH ASIA

26 to 27 July 2025 | Lahore



Shreen Saroor (Sri Lanka), Dr Ali Usman Qasmi (Pakistan), Dr Amena Mohsin (Bangladesh) and Dr Adnan Sattar (Pakistan)

Dr Qasmi spoke of the plight of the Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan. Legally declared non-Muslims in 1974 and further restricted by a 1984 ordinance that forbids them from identifying as Muslims, 'Ahmadis face systematic exclusion,' he said. Although the Supreme Court once called them a protected minority, 'they are denied the right to practice their religion... they are labelled a "special minority" on the insistence of religious groups,' he explained. Presently, in his opinion, 'Ahmadis in Pakistan are like Jews living in Nazi Germany.'

The speakers agreed that the only way forward was a revival of dialogue and exchange to rebuild understanding across divides. Ms Manchanda elaborated that to counter the dehumanisation that has grown out of ignorance, 'we must work to understand the other'. Dr Qasmi felt that the way out of this situation was perhaps through the 'politics of friendship' as a crucial ethical and political act, allowing individuals and communities to come together beyond legal or constitutional demands.

The politics of friendship is a crucial ethical and political act, allowing individuals and communities to come together beyond legal or constitutional demands.
— Dr Ali Usman Qasmi

**COMMON
CRISIS,
SHARED
RESPONSIBILITY**



Session 3

Invisible lines: Climate diplomacy and environmental justice in South Asia

At the third session, speakers sounded the alarm: Climate change can no longer be viewed as an environmental issue within one South Asian country, but as a challenge for the entire region. They underlined how governments' failure to act decisively has intensified the crisis, and that only through stronger regional solidarity can South Asia confront the present climate emergency.



The speakers included Md Shamsuddoha, chief executive of the Centre for Participatory Research and Development in Bangladesh; Sagar Dhara, an environmental rights activist and author from India; Dr Ibrahim Mohamed, an environmental social science and climate change adaptation expert from the Maldives; and Dr Bimala Rai Paudyal, a public policy specialist and former foreign affairs minister in Nepal. The discussion was moderated by Ahmad Rafay Alam, an environmental lawyer and SAHR bureau member.

If we speak alone, our voice is weak — Dr Bimala Rai Paudyal

The participants opened the discussion by outlining the core climate crisis challenges facing their respective countries: Dr Paudyal highlighted rain variability, drought, and glacial lake outburst floods as Nepal's main climate vulnerabilities. Mr Shamsuddoha described Bangladesh's growing exposure to cyclones and floods, adding that their increasing intensity is driving widespread human displacement—to the extent that rural communities are losing their livelihoods and being forced to migrate to urban centres such as Dhaka, where they confront unemployment, overcrowding, and deepening poverty.

Mr Dhara said that India is subject to multiple hazards, with serious effects on public health. Heat stress is already killing around 1,000 people each year, he pointed out, and contributing to 20,000 cases of chronic kidney disease. 'India does not yet have a solution for its climate problems, just as its neighbouring countries do not,' he observed.

The next major people's movement will rise against the climate crisis — Sagar Dhara

Dr Mohamed said whatever happens in the Himalayas impacts the Arabian Sea or the Bay of Bengal, which subsequently has a devastating effect on the Maldives. For example, particulate emissions from the Indian subcontinent drive air quality

beyond safe limits and undermine the Maldives' fisheries exports by elevating mercury concentrations.

When asked by Mr Alam who the proverbial 'bad guys' were in this scenario, Mr Shamsuddoha named the northern hemisphere as the 'first bad guy' followed by the 'nominated actors' such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and Asian Development Bank, which continue to support activities that do not protect the environment, and the unaddressed 'hydrometeorological transboundary issues'.

Mr Dhara condemned industrial polluters for worsening health conditions and degrading ecosystems; Dr Mohamed criticised large hydropower projects for displacing communities and damaging the environment and capitalist actors that are seizing resources under different guises.

Nepal, though responsible for just 0.04 percent of global emissions, bears disproportionate losses, pointed out Dr Paudyal. The 2021 glacial lake outburst flood in Tibet that destroyed 20 bridges and left 70 people missing had exposed the region's fragility. 'We do not have regional or transboundary hazard systems in place or early warning systems,' she said, identifying the problematic actors as 'Nepal itself as well as its neighbouring countries.'

In searching for solutions to the climate crisis, the speakers were unanimous: a regional approach must be adopted. They called for financial restructuring and investment that goes beyond unreliable hydropower. Dr Mohamed urged countries to pool regional funds to build collective climate resilience, while Mr Dhara emphasized the urgent need to hold industrial polluters accountable for worsening health conditions and degrading ecosystems.

The discussion also challenged prevailing assumptions about solutions. Mr Dhara argued that the climate crisis cannot be resolved by a single country acting alone. Rather, it urgently requires a collective global effort. 'People must come together to address the problem,' he said. He predicted that the next major people's movement will be against climate change, but cautioned that 'organizing such a movement on a global scale is an enormous task, given the divisions created by national boundaries.'

He also questioned whether renewables are a permanent fix, warning that 'solar and wind are interim,' and instead called for deeper systemic

Corporations are coming in under different guises, seizing our resources
— Dr Ibrahim Mohamed



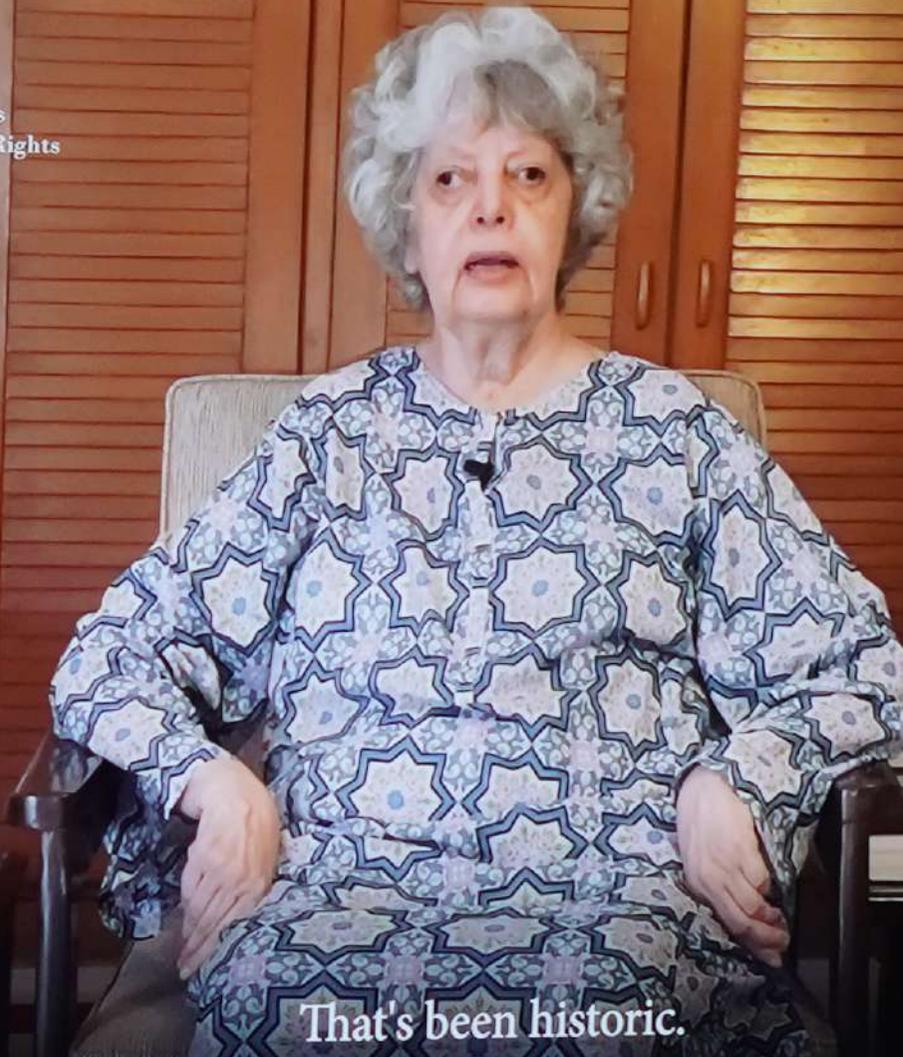
25 Ahmad Rafay Alam (Pakistan), Dr Bimala Rai Paudyal (Nepal) and Md Shamsuddoha (Bangladesh)

change through reducing excessive energy consumption and investing in ecological restoration. 'We need to power down our energy resources by at least 50 percent. We need equity in the use of resources across the globe,' and this, he noted, is not being discussed at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change conferences (COPs).

Mr Dhara added that those responsible for pollution must be held accountable, and that the risks associated with fossil fuels must be shared equitably. 'That, to me, is climate justice,' he remarked.

The participants also discussed Sri Lanka's Pearl vessel disaster, the country's worst marine pollution incident in 2021. In a landmark ruling on 24 July 2025, the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka ordered the ship's owners to pay USD 1 billion in compensation, though concerns remain over whether the funds will reach affected fishing communities or remain with the state.

The panel noted that China has declared a phased emissions reduction plan, pledging to peak emissions by 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060, but expressed concern that South Asia will continue to feel the impact of Chinese industrial emissions because of deep-rooted nationalism and the lack of effective regional dialogue platforms.



That's been historic.

Zohra Yusuf (Pakistan)

SILENCE IS NOT AN OPTION

Plenary session and recommendations

The joint regional conference concluded on a hopeful note, with participants pledging to remain steadfast in the struggle for human rights. They agreed that if civil society did not speak out, no one else would. Former HRCP chairperson Zohra Yusuf's reminder, 'Silence is not an option, especially for marginalised communities,' was powerful and timely.



They called on their region to take the lead in Global South efforts to reset the human rights agenda, after the failure of the Global North to uphold international human rights law in Palestine and to prevent gender apartheid in Afghanistan. They also stressed on the need to revive regional platforms such as SAARC and to leverage existing networks to amplify common concerns.

The plenary session featured Hina Jilani, Dr Roshmi Goswami, Dr Bipin Adhikari, Usama Khilji (digital rights activist and director of Bolo Bhi in Pakistan), Mary Akrami (executive director of the Afghan Women's Network International), Khushi Kabir (director of Nijera Kori and founding member of the Southasia Peace Action Network in Bangladesh), and Ruki Fernando (a human rights defender and trainer from Sri Lanka). The following recommendations were put forward, aimed at building an inclusive South Asia:

- Draft a joint South Asian civil society memorandum to all regional governments to ask for clear positions on Gaza and express regional solidarity with Palestinian people (Dr Goswami).
- Endorse the outcomes of the Global South summit held in Bogotá, particularly the statement issued by the Hague group (Dr Goswami).



Hina Jilani (Pakistan) and Ruki Fernando (Sri Lanka)

- Send a regional message of solidarity to Francesca Albanese, the UN Special Rapporteur on Palestine, who has been sanctioned by the US for her advocacy (Dr Goswami).
- Launch online India-Pakistan study institutes, potentially led by academics and artists, and organise virtual cultural exchanges, such as music festivals (Dr Goswami).
- Protect human rights defenders from state as well as non-state attacks on an urgent basis (Ms Jilani).
- Press international allies to support women-led organisations that have lost funding and help document the realities unfolding in Afghanistan (Ms Akrami).
- Form regional groups to challenge digital repression and shift the narrative from development to rights by encouraging donor engagement in sustaining these efforts (Mr Khilji).



Asad Iqbal Butt (Pakistan)

- Call for the removal of structural barriers created by restrictive visa regimes in South Asia to expand exchange opportunities (Ms Kabir).
- Create small working groups on issues such as labour, gender, digital rights, and peacebuilding, where people across countries can collaborate directly, and cross-country advocacy campaigns and joint research initiatives (Mr Fernando).

Dr Goswami announced that a commemorative event would be held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on 18–21 December 2025 to reimagine and reset the human rights agenda from a Global South perspective.

Finally, in his closing remarks, HRC chairperson Asad Iqbal Butt thanked participants for their presence and contributions. He reminded everyone that the conference was not merely an exchange of ideas but a reaffirmation of solidarity, hope and the unshakable belief that collective action is far more powerful than isolated efforts.



Human Rights Commission of Pakistan

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