

South Asian academies to boost science cooperation

Regional network will collaborate on common concerns.

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[NEW DELHI] The first summit of South Asian science academies agreed to set up a regional network to foster science collaboration on common challenges related to infectious diseases, the environment and science education last week (8 September).

India's minister for science and technology, Vayalar Ravi, told the summit (in a speech read out in absentia) that the science sector has "entered a central stage in the development processes in the region" and that "regional cooperation through the tool of science could be seeded by the science academies".



The three-day summit was attended by presidents and senior scientists from the science academies of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka; as well as from Iran, Mauritius, and the 32-nation African Academy of Science.

A declaration issued at the end of the summit recommended creating a network of South Asian academies, which would meet yearly and work on areas of common concern.

These include energy, including nuclear and renewables; control of infectious diseases and development of multi-disciplinary expertise and sharing of data; science education through use of information communication technologies (ICTs) as well as by providing scholarships and internships; climate change; and inclusive innovation.

Delegates accepted a proposal, by Pakistan Academy of Sciences (PAS) president Atta-ur-Rahman, that the summit should kick-start at least one inter-academy activity: long-distance learning. Rahman offered to extend Pakistan's successful long-distance interactive lectures through video-conferencing, to other South Asian countries, and invited the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore and Indian Institute of Technology to show lectures.

Other bilateral collaborations on science were formed on the sidelines of the summit.

The Academy of Sciences of Afghanistan and host Indian National Science Academy (INSA) initiated steps towards closer collaboration. In addition, Rahman announced that PAS and the Nepal Academy of Sciences would work on introducing 40 PhD scholarships for masters and PhD students from Nepal.

And ahead of the summit, INSA forged new formal ties with the pan-African science academy and Iran's science academy.

The conclusion of the academy summit in New Delhi coincided with a meeting of India and Pakistan's foreign ministers in Islamabad, which resulted in a proposed collaboration in eight sectors: science and technology; agriculture, including biotechnology and irrigation; health, including vaccination and drug regulation; the environment, including climate change, biodiversity and renewable energy; education; and information technology.

India's external affairs minister S M Krishna and Pakistan's foreign minister Hina Rabbani Khar also agreed to loosen the visa requirements between the two countries that have fought three wars over the disputed territory of Kashmir since becoming independent in 1947, and came close to a fourth one in 1999.



The new visa agreement does not yet specify ease of visa curbs for scientists — but it raised hopes of an easier visa regime eventually for scientists from the two countries that still do not have a formal bilateral science agreement.

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"It is very important to ease out visa restrictions and institute a mechanism to increase mobility of younger people [in science]," Muhammad Iqbal Choudhary, member of the Pakistan Academy of Sciences, who was

in New Delhi to attend the academy summit, told SciDev.Net. "When visas are issued to artists and film stars [from the two countries], why can't visas be issued more easily to scientists?"

[Link to India's science minister's speech](#)

[Link to ministers' meeting outcomes](#)

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