

## **Central American Integration System (SICA)**

The Central American Integration System (SICA) is the institutional framework of Regional Integration in Central America, created by the States of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama. Subsequently, Belize and Dominican Republic joined as full members. SICA's Secretariat is located in the Republic of El Salvador.

SICA was established on December 13, 1991, by the signing of the Protocol to the Charter of the Organization of Central American States (ODECA) or Tegucigalpa Protocol, which amended the Charter of ODECA, signed in Panama on December 12, 1962, and formally came into operation on February 1, 1993.

The SICA initiative was widely supported by the United Nations General Assembly (Resolution A/48 L of December 10, 1993), with the Tegucigalpa Protocol being duly registered with the UN. This allows that it be invoked internationally as it also allows SICA's regional bodies and institutions to interact with the United Nations System.

SICA also includes a group of Regional and Extra regional Observers. The Regional Observers are: México, Chile, Brazil, Argentina, Peru, the United States of America, Ecuador, Uruguay and Colombia. The Extra regional Observers are: Taiwan, Spain, Germany, Italy, Japan, Australia, South Korea, France, The Holy See, the United Kingdom, the European Union, New Zealand, Morocco, Qatar, Turkey, Order of Malta and Serbia.

The fundamental objective of SICA is to realize regional Peace, Liberty, Democracy and Development, based firmly on the respect and promotion of human rights. The other objectives of the Group include integration of the region, formation of a Free Trade Area and later a Customs Union, integration of infrastructure, common position on regional and global issues and common passport and visa policy.

The Presidency of SICA rotates every six months. Dominican Republic is the current President while Belize will take over the Presidency on 1 January 2023 for the first half of the year 2023. SICA Summits are held twice a year. Foreign Ministers and other ministers meet regularly.

One of the successes of the group is the Customs Union established with Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador as full members and Dominican Republic as observer. This Union is expected to cover all the members of the SICA.

### **India – SICA Cooperation:**

As part of an intensification of relationships with Latin American region, India hosted the visit of an 18-member SICA delegation in February 2004, led by the then Foreign Minister of El Salvador and including Secretary General of SICA Oscar Santamaria. A declaration for the Establishment of a Mechanism for Political Cooperation and Dialogue between SICA and India was signed by the then EAM Yashwant Sinha on behalf of India. With that India joined Austria, Canada, EU, Japan, Korea, Russia, Taiwan, and in establishing linkages with this regional Block in Central America.

The visit was a landmark in that all these countries for the first time had sent Ministerial and high-level representations to India- an indication of their interest in promoting linkages with India which to date had been hampered by the geographical distance and linguistic barriers.

In addition to a substantive and fruitful meeting with the EAM, priority areas of mutual interest to the two sides including, inter alia, Information Technology, Science and Technology, Drugs and Pharmaceuticals, HRD, SMMEs, infrastructure and tourism were identified.

It was also agreed to promote people to people contacts through holding of Festival of India in Central America and Festival of Central America in India. Yoga and Indian food is popular in all SICA countries.

On 10 June 2008, the 2<sup>nd</sup> India SICA Foreign Ministers Meeting was held in New Delhi. It was attended by the first Vice President and Foreign minister of Panama, Foreign Ministers of Nicaragua, Guatemala, Costa Rica and Vice Ministers of El Salvador, Honduras and Dominican Republic as well as the Director of the SICA Secretariat. It was agreed at this meeting that the two sides would meet every two years either in India or a SICA country and a meeting should be held every year on the margins of the UNGA. It was also agreed to establish an India-SICA Business Forum and India SICA Joint Technical Committee to facilitate exchanges in trade and other sectors of cooperation.

Gen. V.K. Singh, MOS (VKS) visited Guatemala in May, 2015 to attend the 3<sup>rd</sup> India-SICA Ministerial Meeting during the pro tempore presidency of Guatemala. During the meeting, the Member States of SICA appreciated the importance of financial cooperation received from India through Lines of Credit (LOC) that have been granted to the region and welcomed India's offer to increase it further to US\$ 240 million. They also invited India to become a member of the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI) as extra regional partner since it will bring further development to the region and it will serve to consolidate India's presence in the region.

In the same meeting, India increased the number of ITEC scholarships from 100 to 200, to the SICA Member countries, and also extended 5 exclusive ITEC scholarships to the Secretariat General of SICA. India also offered to establish a Regional Barefoot Vocational Training Centre (RBVTC) for SICA countries in Guatemala, which will train women from remote villages in the rural area as Solar Engineers.

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