

Statement by
His Excellency Mr. Md. Shahriar Alam, Hon'ble State Minister for Foreign Affairs,
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh at the 14th BIMSTEC Ministerial
Meeting in Nay Pyi Taw, 3 March 2014

Mr. Chairman,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Assalamu Alaikum and a very good morning to you all. **Mingalaba (Good Morning).**

It is indeed a great pleasure for me to be in Nay Pyi Taw for the 14th BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting. I congratulate you on your assumption as the Chair of this Meeting. I also convey our deep appreciation to the government of Myanmar for the warm reception and generous hospitality extended to me and members of my delegation.

Mr. Chairman,

BIMSTEC is the natural link between South Asia and Southeast Asia. The geographical contiguity, the historical and cultural commonality and economic complementarity bind the region in a strong thread of cohesive and collaborative engagement.

It is heartening to note that since our last meeting in 2011, progress in BIMSTEC has been quite significant. The BIMSTEC Permanent Secretariat will start functioning in Dhaka in May 2014, framework instruments for setting up some important BIMSTEC Centres have been finalized and will be signed tomorrow, the Poverty Action Plan has been adopted and the process for updating BIMSTEC Transport Infrastructure and Logistic Study is underway. These developments have brought renewed enthusiasm and optimism for further widening and deepening collective engagement in BIMSTEC.

Excellencies,

We are aware of the profound changes in the economic landscape of Asia. In South Asia, through SAFTA, regional trade in goods and services is expected to rise robustly over the next few years. In South-East Asia, by next year, ASEAN would emerge as a seamless economic space. Another regional initiative BCIM, involving three BIMSTEC Member States and China is shaping up with the promise to unlock production-distribution-transportation opportunities. The renewed effort for regional economic integration under UNESCAP promises to knit the Asia-Pacific region as an economic whole. Clearly, regional cooperation has become the order of the day.

BIMSTEC encompasses two fastest growing regions of the world. Moving towards formation of the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area (BFTA) for promoting trade and investment in

our region is imperative for meaningful economic integration of the region. Bangladesh will convene the Trade and Economic Ministerial Meeting in Dhaka for the signing of the 4 important agreements related to BIMSTEC FTA as soon as the 20th TNC Meeting finalizes the Tariff Schedule of Commitment. I am happy to note that our Senior Officials have agreed to set end of 2014 as the target time line for the completion of this process.

Likewise, to exploit the full potential of regional integration, we must also explore ways to encourage intra-regional foreign direct investment. It is important that negotiations on an agreement on Investment and Services be fast-tracked to run parallel to the ongoing negotiations on Trade in Goods.

Mr. Chairman,

Importance of energy in our development agenda can hardly be overemphasized. Securing energy security in the region should remain a core priority for BIMSTEC. We need to exploit all the energy resource endowment that our region has including natural gas and hydro-power potentials. The MoU on BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection, once put into action, should contribute to ensuring energy security in the region.

A natural advantage of the region is its geographical contiguity. Enhancing physical and communication connectivity in the region would facilitate trade, investment, tourism and people-to-people contact. The Asian Development Bank is in the process of updating the **BIMSTEC Transport Infrastructure and Logistics Study**. It is important to follow-up on the recommendations of the Study with a view to deciding on concrete action in creating a well connected transport network in BIMSTEC.

Mr. Chairman,

Climate change is one of the most pressing issues in our times. The increased frequency and intensity of natural disasters having cross-border impact calls for greater collective action. I believe the region has the experience, understanding and the means to address these disasters collectively and effectively. In this regard, Bangladesh would host a Workshop this year to discuss the issue with a view to drawing up an Action Plan for cooperation in this area.

Poverty alleviation remains high on the agenda of national governments. To complement that, a region-wide focus on poverty alleviation would be required. Bangladesh recognizes that the BIMSTEC '*Poverty Plan of Action*' contains some useful measures to draw up regional initiatives.

In this regard, we believe, the BIMSTEC Poverty Alleviation Centre that we are going to set up in Bangladesh would play a key role in carrying out quality research, studies and provide useful guidance and policy inputs to decision-makers and practitioners for the benefit of our countries.

Our region is endowed with cultural wealth and tourism potentials. We believe interactions among our peoples at various levels would not only strengthen formal processes of our cooperation but also instill a greater sense of community among our peoples.

Cooperation in combating cross border terrorism and organized crime has been significant. The BIMSTEC Convention on Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organized Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking is an important milestone in our cooperation efforts in this area. We urge for its early ratification by all members states. I am happy that we have also finalized the draft text of the Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters. Now we need to move fast for early signing of the Convention.

Mr. Chairman,

In our previous meeting, Dhaka was chosen to host the BIMSTEC Secretariat. While conveying our deep gratitude to BIMSTEC members for giving this honour, I would like to inform that my government has made available a plot in the diplomatic zone of the capital for the BIMSTEC Secretariat. The work for setting up the office is going on in full swing. We expect to inaugurate the office in May this year. I look forward to welcoming Secretary General Sumith Nakandala to Dhaka soon. I assure him of our fullest support in discharging of his responsibilities.

I am happy that our Senior Officials have agreed on a provisional budget for the Secretariat. This would indeed contribute to immediate operationalisation of the Secretariat. In this context, I would like to place on record our appreciation to the Joint Working Group for their work on the organizational and financing mechanism for the Secretariat. I hope JWG would now complete its mandated work relating to BIMSTEC Centres.

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since its founding in 1997, BIMSTEC has come a long way. We feel that an in-depth review of our activities in BIMSTEC would help us identify and exploit the true potentials of each area, optimize the use of human and financial resources and chart a realistic road-map for future cooperation.

A cooperation manifested by a spirit of friendship and goodwill can indeed help us achieve our cherished goals of progress and prosperity for the peoples of our region. BIMSTEC surely provides us this scope. We must seize upon this opportunity for the greater wellbeing of our countries and our peoples.

I thank you.
