

**Statement by Hon. Prof. G.L. Peiris, Minister of External Affairs of Sri Lanka at
the Fourteenth Ministerial Meeting of BIMSTEC (03.03.2014)**

His Excellency U Wunna Maung, Union Minister of Foreign Affairs of Myanmar and
Chair of the Fourteenth BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting,
Their Excellencies the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the BIMSTEC Member States,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I consider it a great privilege to be here in this beautiful city of Nay Pyi Taw to attend the Fourteenth BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting on the eve of the historic Third BIMSTEC Summit. I wish to take this opportunity to thank our host for the excellent arrangements made to make the Ministerial Meeting and the Summit in this enchanting and visionary city a success and for the warm and gracious hospitality that has been offered to the Sri Lanka delegation.

Please permit me to congratulate you Mr. Chairman for guiding BIMSTEC since assuming the Chair. I am confident that under your able guidance we will have a fruitful meeting today. I would also take this opportunity to acknowledge the vigorous contribution made by the Government of Thailand towards facilitating the functioning of our Group.

BIMSTEC has come a long way since its inception in June 1997 in Bangkok. We have been able to broad base our regional reach with a view to harnessing its diverse potential for the greater benefit of all. BIMSTEC envisioned the creation of an environment for rapid economic development and accelerated social progress in the Bay of Bengal sub-region. The Heads of Government of our member countries during the First and Second Summits also agreed to promote active collaboration and mutual assistance on matters of common interest and to provide assistance to each other in the form of training and research facilities, cooperate more effectively in joint efforts that are supportive of and complementary to national development plans of member states.

BIMSTEC also wishes to maintain close and beneficial cooperation with existing international and regional organizations especially SAARC and ASEAN, and cooperate in projects that can be dealt with more positively on a sub-regional basis.

Mr. Chairman,

As we prepare for the Third BIMSTEC Summit, the time is opportune to take stock of our achievements as well as our shortcomings and to make concrete decisions regarding our future trajectory.

BIMSTEC provides us with a unique link between South Asia and Southeast Asia bringing together 1.3 billion people approximately or 21 percent of the world population and these are clear considerable complementarities in our economies and numerous opportunities for cooperation. What makes BIMSTEC different from other organizations is that it represents one of the most diverse regions of the world, in terms of ways of life, religions, languages, and ethnic groups. As is well known, our region is home to an astonishingly diverse and ancient cultural heritage.

Sri Lanka is committed to regional integration through BIMSTEC and we believe that ours is a unique organisation linking two geographically different regions with many shared similarities. BIMSTEC can therefore be viewed with every justification as a bridge between South and South East Asia.

Mr. Chairman,

The core content of our work is focused on economic cooperation to reap the benefits of natural regional linkages for making the lives of the people we represent more prosperous. Each Member State of BIMSTEC has taken responsibilities commensurate with its own capacities for this purpose. I think it is appropriate to highlight some of the initiatives taken by Sri Lanka in pursuit of this goal.

As the lead country for BIMSTEC Co-operation in Technology, Sri Lanka continues to actively seek ways and means of promoting co-operation in this increasingly vibrant area. The path towards uplifting the livelihoods of our people will be strengthened

by harnessing the advantages of technology that has been developed by our member states. It is in this spirit that Sri Lanka has offered to host the BIMSTEC Centre for Technology Transfer Facility. I am happy to reiterate the commitment of my country to establish the BIMSTEC Centre in Sri Lanka at the earliest opportunity. Towards this end Sri Lanka has convened two Expert Group Meetings to discuss modalities of the proposed Centre. We are looking forward to having relevant officials from BIMSTEC members for further deliberation on the proposed Memorandum of Association and the legal framework relating to the establishment of the Centre.

Mr. Chairman,

Although we are yet to finalise the BIMSTEC Free Trade Agreement, I note with satisfaction the substantial work already done by the member states in negotiating it. Sri Lanka, as the Permanent Chair, remains steadfast committed to the work of the Trade Negotiating Committee, and desires a speedy conclusion to the negotiation process.

There are several key areas where we in BIMSTEC can do more to alleviate poverty and promote economic development in our region. For instance, as has been pointed out, energy security which has come to the forefront of global affairs merits our thorough attention. The rising cost of energy is posing a threat to most developing economies affecting the livelihoods, in particular, of the most vulnerable segments of our societies. We must collectively embark upon sharing our knowledge, experience and expertise in this field.

Sri Lanka has taken a significant leap in the direction of establishing sea connectivity with the operationalization of the Hambantota Port, which is on the vital shipping lanes that connect the countries of the southern part of the BIMSTEC grouping with those of the group located in Southeast Asia. The Hambantota port, together with the port of Colombo, will help enhance the shipping linkages of the region.

The Tourism sector makes a remarkable contribution to the economies of our member states and is therefore of paramount importance to us. This industry

provides vast direct as well as indirect employment opportunities for our people in a way that few other industries do. Sri Lanka is making drastic strides in developing the Tourism sector, particularly since the end of the conflict in 2009. It is undoubtedly in our collective interest to pursue initiatives to promote inter and intra-regional tourism. Sri Lanka will be able to contribute towards BIMSTEC human resource development in the tourism sector, and in this regard, the Sri Lanka Hotel School is happy to extend opportunities for BIMSTEC countries to follow its internationally recognized hotel school training programmes.

Poverty no doubt confronts not just our Grouping but a significant part of the world population. In this context, cooperation to alleviate poverty is an imperative. In Sri Lanka, poverty alleviation strategies are conducted successfully in line with the UN Millennium Development Goals under the 'Mahinda Chinthana-Vision for the Future,' formulated by His Excellency President Mahinda Rajapaksa.

Mr. Chairman,

As a country that has emerged after a terrorist conflict, Sri Lanka is acutely aware of the regional and international dimensions of terrorism. Today, more than ever, we believe fighting terrorism is not an issue for a single country, but rather, a regional and global challenge. As an island nation, Sri Lanka confronted a terrorist organisation which was funded internationally and engaged in trans-national arms smuggling. These issues are naturally exacerbated for countries with land borders. Many of our nations gathered here face or have faced at some point in their contemporary histories extremely painful encounters with terrorism.

Because of the numerous links that are forged by these terrorist organization, they easily transcend international borders and destabilise regions, even though their political objectives may be local. In addition, these terrorists are also directly involved in people, weapons and drug trafficking and many other transnational crimes. Even though Sri Lanka militarily defeated the organisation that was terrorising our country for 3 long decades in May 2009, remnants of it are still active abroad. I call on our BIMSTEC partners to focus on issues of this nature, as

terrorism in any of our countries is a threat to all of us and therefore, we need to address this issue with commonality of resolve and determination.

It is in this context that I call for the early ratification and entry into force of the BIMSTEC Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organised Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking. We can further collaborate through intelligence sharing mechanisms and also by signing the BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters. Suffice it to say, both these instruments will intensify in ample measures our cooperative efforts in combating terrorism.

Mr. Chairman,

Sri Lanka also welcomes the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding of BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Commission and BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Observatory, and Memorandum of Association for the Establishment of the BIMSTEC Weather and Climate Centre, which I believe would be a great step forward in our endeavours for greater cooperation among member states of our group.

Mr. Chairman,

It is extremely encouraging to note that the BIMSTEC Permanent Secretariat would be established soon. As we are poised to sign the agreement pertaining to the establishment of the Secretariat, I wish to take this opportunity to thank my Bangladeshi counterpart for the commendable efforts taken by his government to ensure the establishment of the Permanent Secretariat in Dhaka. Sri Lanka is proud to nominate one of our senior diplomats as the first BIMSTEC Secretary General. I am certain that the Secretary General-designate, Ambassador Sumith Nakandala, will be ably assisted by the Member States as the Permanent Secretariat takes important steps in further strengthening the institutional framework of our organization.

Mr. Chairman,

Please allow me to record my appreciation to my colleague from Nepal for having accepted to be the next Chair of BIMSTEC. I am certain that our Group will remain focused in pursuing its objectives assiduously under the stewardship of the incoming Chair.

In conclusion, I would like to once again reiterate Sri Lanka's firm commitment to the BIMSTEC process and the group's future activities. I wish every success for the deliberations at this Ministerial Meeting.

Thank you.