

**Remarks by
H.E. Tenzin Lekphell
Secretary General of BIMSTEC**

**Nineteenth BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting
Bangkok, Thailand (Virtual), 09 March 2023**

Your Excellency Mr. Don Pramudwinai
Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand, and Chairman of the 19th BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting,

Your Excellencies - the Honourable Ministers and State Ministers of Foreign and External Affairs of BIMSTEC Member States,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A very good afternoon to all of you!

At the outset, I would like to thank the Chair, His Excellency Mr. Don Pramudwinai, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand; as well as the Government of Thailand; for the arrangements made for hosting this virtual Meeting today.

I would also like to extend my sincere gratitude, to all the Honourable Ministers and officials of the other BIMSTEC member states, for the kind cooperation and support extended to the host country Thailand, and to the Secretariat, in organising this Meeting.

Excellencies,

I am honoured to present to this Meeting, the Report on Progress of BIMSTEC activities since the Fifth BIMSTEC Summit. As the written Report along with my recommendations and observations has been circulated in advance, and is already before Your Excellencies, I will make my remarks brief.

The most important outcome of the Fifth Summit held virtually in Colombo last year, on the 30th of March, was the signature and adoption of the BIMSTEC Charter. I am happy to report that, following the adoption of the Charter, the BIMSTEC Permanent Working Committee, that comprises senior officials of the BIMSTEC national focal points, held five meetings two regular meetings and three special meetings during which the Committee finalised the **Rules of Procedure** for BIMSTEC mechanisms in conformity with the BIMSTEC Charter.

Accordingly, the Rules of Procedure for the Core BIMSTEC Mechanisms; Sectoral Mechanisms; and BIMSTEC's External Relations that were finalised in record time in less than a year were submitted to the 23rd Senior Officials' Meeting that was held yesterday for consideration; and are now before this Ministerial Meeting for approval.

I want to thank the current Chair of BIMSTEC, the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand, for their leadership in facilitating the convening of the meetings that were required to achieve this quick outcome. I wish to also place on record, my appreciation to the Government of India, for its most

generous support that enabled the Secretariat to host an important Special Meeting of the Permanent Working Committee that helped to expedite the conclusion of work on the Rules of Procedure as well as some other important items on the BIMSTEC Agenda that arose from the 5th Summit.

Excellencies,

I am pleased to report that, a matter which the BIMSTEC Leaders had agreed on, during the BIMSTEC Leaders Retreat held in Goa in 2016, is finally close to fruition. The Leaders, during their Retreat in Goa agreed that a **BIMSTEC Eminent Persons Group** would be set up, and an outcome oriented BIMSTEC 2030 Agenda would be developed. Subsequently, based on the directions provided by the 22nd Session of the Senior Officials Meeting, the BIMSTEC Permanent Working Committee, finalised the Terms of Reference for convening the BIMSTEC Eminent Persons Group to deliberate and make recommendations on the future directions of BIMSTEC. The Terms of Reference for the Eminent Persons Group which was considered by the Senior Officials during their Meeting yesterday is now before Your Excellencies at this Meeting, for your consideration and approval.

The recommendations of the Eminent Persons Group, combined with the “**Bangkok Vision 2030**” that is also before this Meeting for its approval, and subsequent adoption by the BIMSTEC Leaders during the 6th BIMSTEC Summit, will no doubt set BIMSTEC on firm ground, equipped with a common shared vision, to build a “Prosperous, Resilient, and Open BIMSTEC by 2030”.

Excellencies,

I am happy to Report that, the BIMSTEC Working Group tasked with drafting the **Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation** has successfully finalised the text of the Agreement. This was considered by the Senior Officials yesterday, and now awaits this Meeting’s approval.

I would also like to report that, the BIMSTEC Secretariat and the **International Food Policy Research Institute** (IFPRI) signed a Memorandum of Understanding earlier this week on the 5th of March. With its rich research expertise, IFPRI holds the potential of being a sound partner for BIMSTEC - in contributing towards achieving sustainable food, agricultural, and trade transformation in the region. I hope our Member States will make full use of this opportunity.

Excellencies, as you would recall, after a lengthy three-year period of preparation, the Fifth Summit adopted the **BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity** which identified 267 projects which if implemented, would be a game changer for connectivity in the region, contributing to enhanced business, trade, tourism, and the potential to uplift and transform the regional economic landscape as a whole. I urge the 19th Ministerial Meeting to consider this a priority for the region.

The Trade and Investment is a founding aspiration that BIMSTEC has been working on - since its inception twenty-five years ago in 1997. Although the Framework Agreement on the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area was signed 19 years ago on 08th of February 2004, there has been little to no progress on the constituent Agreements of the FTA.

In my written Report, I have suggested that, in order to resolve divergent views and to provide clear guidance to the Working Groups, it is critical for the BIMSTEC Secretaries of Trade and Commerce and the relevant Ministers to meet as early as possible.

Excellencies,

After twenty-five years of its creation, it might perhaps be useful and necessary to **consider how Member States wish to shape BIMSTEC.**

The BIMSTEC Ministers, Senior Officials and Permanent Working Committee members devote a considerable time to attend the formal meetings of BIMSTEC. However, in order to progress further, I would like to make few suggestions that may be worth considering:

One –

To ensure that all meetings of the core BIMSTEC mechanisms that is the Summit; the Ministerial Meeting; the Senior Officials Meeting; and the Permanent Working Committee are always held “in-person”; while reserving the virtual format only for emergency meetings and special meetings.

Two –

To consider reviving the practice of the Informal Retreat at the Summit level so that the Heads of State and Government have an opportunity to engage with each other in an informal setting and discuss issues frankly, and arrive at decisions; and even problem solve, if needed.

Three –

To consider introducing the practice of informal retreats at the level of Foreign Ministers and Senior Officials as well. This will enable the Ministers and Senior Officials to interact with their counterparts freely and seek solutions to issues. Strengthening personal networking in this manner - can build and enhance trust and confidence; and contribute to advancing regional cooperation.

Four –

As all Foreign Ministers attend the annual UN General Assembly session in New York, the Chair country may like to consider convening an informal meeting of the BIMSTEC Foreign Ministers on the sidelines of the UNGA every year.

Excellencies,

I also wish to inform this Meeting that, as recommended by the 17th Ministerial Meeting, the 6th BPWC meeting has earmarked in the Rules of Procedure that the **annual Ministerial Meeting** would be held during the 2nd week of November. This was endorsed by the Senior Officials yesterday. It is hoped that this will help prevent scheduling difficulties in the future; as there is prior agreement and knowledge when the diaries of the Honourable Ministers are being decided, that the annual BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting will always be held during the second week of November.

Excellencies,

In celebration of the 25th anniversary of BIMSTEC, the Secretariat undertook the unusual task of organising a BIMSTEC Silver Jubilee Quiz Contest in Bhutan, for students from all seven Member States. Our aim was to organise an activity involving the young people of the BIMSTEC countries.

Although organising the event proved to be quite challenging, watching the students and teachers from the seven Member States interact with each other during the time they spent in Thimphu; and the sense of camaraderie that developed among them within a very short time; was very rewarding.

We learned that most of them had heard about BIMSTEC only when they received information about the Quiz which indicates that Member States need to do more for BIMSTEC to make an impact on people's lives.

The students urged on national television, that BIMSTEC should consider organising events of this nature on a regular basis. As Your Excellencies will no doubt agree, **inspiring and mobilising youth is an essential component of advancing regional cooperation.**

The Secretariat hopes that Member States will seize the moment and consider organising at least one event every year involving the youth of all Member States.

Excellencies,

In conclusion, I would like to thank the current Chair, Thailand, for the remarkable leadership provided to BIMSTEC since assuming the Chairmanship in March last year.

I would also like to thank all Your Excellencies, for your valuable time, insight and cooperation.

I assure you that - my colleagues at the Secretariat and I stand ready at all times to work with all Member States to achieve the goals and objectives of BIMSTEC.

Thank you.