

**Secretary General's ORAL PRESENTATION at the Special SOM**  
**31 March 2021, Colombo, Sri Lanka (Virtual)**

***Agenda Item 04: Report by the Secretary General on progress of BIMSTEC activities and decisions taken by the 21st Session of the BIMSTEC Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM) held virtually in Colombo, Sri Lanka on 02 September 2020***

- His Excellency Admiral Prof. Jayanath Colombage, Foreign Secretary of Sri Lanka, Chair of today's Special Session of BIMSTEC Senior Officials' Meeting (S-SOM);
- Their Excellencies Leaders of Delegations to the Special Session of BIMSTEC Senior Officials Meeting:
- Distinguished delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen:

01. Once again, it is a great honor for me to welcome and present the Report of the Secretary General on the progress of BIMSTEC activities before the Special Session of the BIMSTEC Senior Officials' Meeting. The Report of the Secretary General, which also contains progress of the decisions of the 21st Session of the BIMSTEC Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM), has been circulated amongst the members States, and therefore I will be brief in my oral presentation.

02. Before I proceed, I would like to express my immense gratitude to all Member States for their support and cooperation in finalizing the long cherished BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity by the Third Meeting of the BIMSTEC Transport Connectivity Working Group (BTCWG) held virtually on 08 December 2020. The plan awaits the endorsement of your collective wisdom in today's meeting. I would also like to mention that with the ratification by all Member States, the BIMSTEC Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organized Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking was effectuated since 16 March 2021. Once again, I would like to thank all the member states for making it possible to achieve this mile stone.
03. Honorable Delegates, I wish to also convey my sincere gratitude to the Member States for resuming holding of the regular core as well as sectoral Meetings through the virtual platform to take the BIMSTEC agenda forward. This is the second time the Senior Officials are meeting virtually due to the Covid-19 pandemic. While virtual meetings continue to take place, meetings requiring in-person discussions and negotiations have been deferred, an impediment actually, slowing down the progress of our activities. The impact of Covid-19 on the lives and livelihoods of people has been unprecedented. BIMSTEC Leaders in their messages on the occasion of the 23<sup>rd</sup> BIMSTEC Day stressed the need for leveraging regional cooperation through the BIMSTEC process to combat the adverse effects of the COVID 19 pandemic. As the pandemic continues to inflict socioeconomic crisis and misery across the BIMSTEC region, attempts on the part of the Member States to intensify their joint efforts in the post COVID-19 recovery and rehabilitation process through short, medium and long-term strategic plans, was emboldening.

**Excellencies, I wish to now move on to present an update on the BIMSTEC activities and the decisions taken by the 21st Session of the Senior Officials' Meeting.**

04. To begin with, the Secretariat would like to extend our deepest appreciation to all Member States for your timely contributions to the Secretariat in the previous years. We also look forward to receiving the same for the Financial year 2021, as all the Member States have already conveyed their concurrence through correspondence to this year's proposed budget.
05. Following the decision of the Government of Bangladesh to have a modern and iconic Secretariat building with appropriate facilities at the same location, it may be a matter of interest to us all, of the progressive trajectory it is on. The architectural design of the proposed building has already been finalized. The finalization of the structural design and the Development Project Proposal (DPP) of the building are under process and the physical construction of the building is likely to commence by the end of this year. In addition, the host Government has been extending full support to the Secretariat in all aspects of administration and logistics for which we would like to formally submit our gratitude and appreciation.
06. We would also like to report that by the end of May this year, all Member States will be represented at the Secretariat through the seven Directors. The Director from Sri Lanka will join in mid April, the replacement Director from India is also likely to join any time next month; and the Director from Thailand is expected to join this May.

07. The new Organogram that will be adopted by the 17<sup>th</sup> Ministerial meeting will enhance the human resource capacity of the Secretariat. The rationalization of sectors from 14 to 7, to be each lead by a Member State with an annual reporting procedure by the Lead Member State is expected to expedite the progress of BIMSTEC activities.
08. The Fourth BIMSTEC Summit held in 2018 in Nepal agreed to take up; on priority basis the legal documents and instruments that are pending for internal approval process for finalization or ratification. I am happy to report that BIMSTEC has made progress in finalizing some critical documents that are necessary towards fulfillment of the envisioned objectives of the organization. The BIMSTEC Charter has now been finalized and we hope to have this approved by the 17<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Meeting tomorrow and adopted by the leaders of the 5<sup>th</sup> BIMSTEC Summit. Besides other important MOUs, MOAs and Master plans that are ready for adoption, the BIMSTEC Convention of Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters is ready to be adopted and signed.
09. I am also happy to report that Member states have made progress on some other key agreements. In particular, I would like to mention that the Trade Negotiating Committee has met 21 times and the Agreement on Trade in Goods is now at its advanced stage. I am very optimistic that with a little more focus and a few more meetings, this agreement can be finalized, thereby ensuring a lasting impact of the BIMSTEC Organization.
10. Excellencies and Hon'ble Delegates, May I, therefore, request all Member States and the Secretariat to give this agreement top priority. The other important agreement that has come a long way is the BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement and its draft Standard Operating Procedures (SOP). I also hope that this will be given due urgency and hopefully have it finalized and adopted during my tenure.

11. Excellencies, the importance of coordinating energy in the seven member states has been reemphasized during the 4<sup>th</sup> Summit. A Memorandum of Association to establish a BIMSTEC Energy Center was signed in 2011. A BIMSTEC Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Grid Interconnection for Trade in Electricity was also signed on 31 August 2018 at the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit and entered into force on 07 April 2019. However, we were unable to set up the center, nor make progress in the Grid Interconnection of Trade in Electricity. In this regard, I would like to draw the attention of the Meeting to this important Energy sector in the coming few years.
12. Additionally, the Secretariat would like to request our esteemed members of the State and distinguished delegates to consider maintaining a timeline that schedules the next Ministerial Meeting and Senior Officials. That way, it can be ear-marked in the annual calendar of the ministers a year ahead. This would ensure the regularity of the Ministerial Meeting as its decisions largely impact the progress and implementation of BIMSTEC programs. The Secretariat also feels that planning ahead in this manner would encourage the required meetings to be held regularly and on time.
13. To conclude, I would like to invoke the vision on which BIMSTEC was founded – to enhance regional integration through economic and technical cooperation. After the Secretariat was established in 2014, BIMSTEC has accelerated its progress. Establishing legally binding frameworks and instruments, setting up institutions and drawing agreements based on seven-nation consensus is definitely not an easy task but BIMSTEC has made progress in laying a strong foundation. That firm foundation laid, it is now time to focus on development of sectoral activities and implementation of these institutions and legal frameworks for tangible outcomes that benefit the people of this region.

14. Finally, I would like to once again thank your Excellencies and the delegates for giving me an opportunity to serve in the BIMSTEC Secretariat. Please rest assured of our commitment to do our best in serving the organization and accomplishing beyond the set goals. We look forward to your guidance and a successful meeting today.

**Thank you!!**

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