

- **His Excellency Dr. A. K. Abdul Momen, Honourable Foreign Minister of Bangladesh.**
- **H.E. Mr. Ito Naoki, Ambassador of Japan to Bangladesh;**
- **H.E. Vikram Doraiswami, High Commissioner of India to Bangladesh;**
- **Ms. Mercy Tembon, Country Director, Bangladesh & Bhutan, World Bank;**
- **Mr. Manmohan Parkash, Country Director, Asian Development Bank, Bangladesh Resident Mission**
- **Professor Tanweer Hasan, Vice Chancellor, Independent University, Bangladesh;**
- **Professor Milan Pagon, Pro-Vice Chancellor, Independent University, Bangladesh;**
- **Former Ambassador Tariq Karim, Director, Centre for Bay of Bengal Studies,**

**A Very Good Morning!**

I am deeply honoured to have this opportunity to participate in the **Regional Conference on the Bay of Bengal as connectivity Hub in Indo Pacific Oceans**. I greatly appreciate the Centre for Bay of Bengal Studies of the Independent University and in particular former Ambassador and now Director of the Centre, Mr. Tariq A Karim for initiating this very important Conference.

While I am happy to share the BIMSTEC perspective on enhancing connectivity in the Bay of Bengal region I also look forward to the opportunity of learning about the various connectivity initiatives in the South and Southeast Asian regions and beyond.

## **Distinguished Participants,**

The importance of the Bay of Bengal and the role that it plays in the lives and livelihood of the people connected with it cannot be denied. The Bay of Bengal has been the central node of travel and communication not just within this region but also in connecting the other wider areas of the Indo Pacific Region. History tells us that scholars, traders and travellers passed seamlessly through the Bay of Bengal to connect and communicate with other parts of the world.

With this background and the strategic location of its role as the bridge between the Indian and Pacific Oceans the leaders of our Member States founded the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation. Bay of Bengal region is a topic of discussion amongst various organizations, think tanks and media in our region and today's event is no exception. Scholars and writers alike have published numerous articles on the issues and potential of developing this region. BIMSTEC, as a regional organization, we feel supported and encouraged by such initiatives to discuss pertinent issues as well as share concerns and ideas on moving forward in our goal to realize the vision of a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable Bay of Bengal region.

## **Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

As I said earlier, in the past, the Bay of Bengal used to be a Centre for global maritime trade, and a hub of commercial and cultural exchange. However, today, this region is one of the least integrated regions in the world, both in terms of physical connectivity as well as trade and economic connectivity. Therefore, one of the objectives of BIMSTEC is to revive that historical connectivity in the present context. As such, the Member States decided to include Connectivity as one of the priority areas of BIMSTEC cooperation with the objective to promote trade and investment, tourism, people-to-people contact and cultural exchanges to contribute to the sustainable development of this region.

In the effort towards enhancing regional connectivity, the BIMSTEC Member States are currently negotiating on some of the vital instruments, namely, the BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement, the BIMSTEC Motor Vehicle Agreement, and the BIMSTEC Framework Agreement on Transit, Transshipment and Movement of Vehicular Traffic.

I am happy to share that negotiations on the **BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement** and its constituent SOP have reached at an advanced level. The successful completion of the Agreement and its subsequent implementation would be of immense benefit for the BIMSTEC region as these would facilitate cooperation and assistance for the development of trade and transportation of cargo between and among the Member States. A BIMSTEC Conclave of Ports was also held in 2019 to develop a platform to strengthen port-led maritime connectivity in the Bay of Bengal region. Member States are now exploring the possibility of holding this BIMSTEC Conclave of Ports annually.

In addition, BIMSTEC Member States have finalized a **Master Plan for Transport Connectivity** with a vision to promote seamless connectivity between and across BIMSTEC countries through the use of different transport modes, to achieve enhanced transport and trade linkages. The Master Plan is expected to be approved by the Seventeenth BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting due to be held in Colombo on 01 April 2021 and subsequently adopted by the 5<sup>th</sup> BIMSTEC Summit.

The BIMSTEC Transport Connectivity Master Plan was prepared as a strategic document to guide actions and promote synergies among various connectivity frameworks and has **identified 267 projects** of construction, expansion and modernization of transport infrastructure. Among these, 137 “flagship” projects have been identified to enhance connectivity in the Bay of Bengal region. These projects will involve huge investment. Therefore, the implementation of the Master Plan will require sincere commitment from the Member States and international development partners alike. It is my belief that the successful implementation of this Master Plan will bring us much closer to achieving our goal of a seamlessly connected Bay of Bengal region.

**Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

In conclusion, I would like to once more extend my deep appreciation to the Centre for Bay of Bengal Studies for organizing this Conference to reiterate the role that the Bay of Bengal can play in not only integrating the region but also play a central role in the movement of peoples, goods and services, and access from the Indian ocean to the Pacific ocean. The Centre for Bay of Bengal Studies has brought together many experts with diverse backgrounds that will surely enrich the discussions and make the Conference a success.

With this, may I wish all participants a productive deliberation.

Thank you!