Remarks by BIMSTEC Secretary General at the (Virtual) Fourth South Asia Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals: “Fostering Sustainable and Resilient Recovery from Covid-19 in South Asia”
(14:00 - 17:00 hrs, Indian Standard Time) on 02 December 2020

Your Excellency Ms. Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations & Executive Secretary of UN-ESCAP;
His Excellency Mr. Mohamed Aslam, Minister of National Planning, Housing & Infrastructure of Maldives;
Her Excellency Ms. Catherine Haswell, UN Resident Coordinator in Maldives;
His Excellency Mr. Esala Ruwan Weerakoon, Secretary-General of SAARC;
Dr. Nagesh Kumar, Director, UN-ESCAP South and South-West Asia Office,
Senior Officials from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka;

Distinguished Panelists, Ladies and Gentlemen. Good afternoon.

01. It is indeed a great privilege for me to join today's Fourth South Asia Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals: “Fostering Sustainable and Resilient Recovery from Covid-19 in South Asia”. This is the first virtual occasion which I join in the context of our cooperation with the United Nations particularly with UN-ESCAP since assuming my charges at the BIMSTEC Secretariat a month ago.
02. Taking this opportunity, I wish to express my sincere appreciation to UN-ESCAP and the Government of Maldives for jointly organizing this event and bringing together so many dignitaries and scholars to speak at this Forum. This timely and important forum has accorded us to share challenges, opportunities and good practices for achieving SDGs in BIMSTEC and South Asian region as well as identify areas of regional cooperation for promoting SDGs during the challenges of Covid-19 pandemic.

03. The Sustainable Development Goals adopted in 2015, ensures that “No One is Left Behind” and the 2030 Agenda has now reached in its 5th year of implementation. The 17 SDGs aim to end poverty, hunger, inequality, climate change, access to health and education; care for people and planet; and build strong institutions and partnership.

**Excellencies, Ladies & Gentlemen**

04. BIMSTEC, the organization I represent, brings together a large part of South Asia (namely, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka) and a significant portion of Southeast Asia (Myanmar and Thailand). BIMSTEC has designated (14) broad areas of cooperation among its seven Member States.

05. The BIMSTEC Member States also feel the need to align its sectoral cooperation with the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. Therefore, the BIMSTEC Leaders, at the 4th BIMSTEC Summit held in Kathmandu in 2018, have recognized that eradication of poverty is the greatest regional challenge in realization of development objectives and expressed their firm commitment to working together for the implementation of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
06. Though considerable developments have been made in some SDGs, it is of the view that countries in our region will have to make concerted efforts. To deliver the SDGs, strong partnership and cooperation among all stakeholders i.e. governments, civil society, private sectors, academia and others are of utmost importance. There is no doubt that the UN systems and development partners also play an important role in advancing the 2030 Agenda. With that, I wish to take this opportunity to thank UN-ESCAP for preparing the policy paper on “Covid-19 and South Asia: National Strategies and Subregional Cooperation for Accelerating Inclusive, Sustainable and Resilient Recovery” in July this year which highlights the socio-economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic in South Asian countries.

07. The Covid-19 has brought a lot of changes and unprecedented challenges to BIMSTEC and South Asian countries. As the pandemic is still ongoing, it is early to calculate its impacts on socio-economic activities, and people’s lives and livelihoods. However, the impact of Covid on the global economies is without doubt huge. Therefore, it is crucial for the governments and all stakeholders to formulate appropriate policies and deploy all available tools including regional cooperation mechanisms to tackle emerging challenges caused by Covid-19.

08. The BIMSTEC Member States and countries in the South Asia region may continue to identify priorities in achieving the SDGs while engaging in forward looking dialogue like this forum. It is also pertinent to consider sharing best practices in combating the pandemic as in the case of ASEAN. For instance, ASEAN has taken whole-of-ASEAN Community approach and laid down measures to exchange information regularly and share the best practices among ASEAN Member States.
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

10. From the perspective of BIMSTEC, I wish to share some initiatives being taken which would help in the implementation of 2030 Agenda and in tackling the ongoing challenges of Covid-19:

   a. In the midst of COVID-19, the uses of technology in daily activities have become indispensable, which should be promoted regionally in the post-COVID period. In this context, the Memorandum of Association on the Establishment of BIMSTEC Technology Transfer Facility is ready to be signed at the upcoming Fifth BIMSTEC Summit.

   b. In the similar vein, the BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters is also ready for signature.

   c. In the post COVID-19 period, public health is expected to get renewed attention. The BIMSTEC Experts on Traditional Medicine are meeting at regular intervals to promote collaboration in Traditional Medicine.

   d. Agriculture & Food Security should be further emphasized in the post-Covid cooperation. Therefore, we are exploring possibilities with development partners to support BIMSTEC Agriculture cooperation.
e. Tourism and hospitality industry have also become casualties of the Covid-19 pandemic. The **BIMSTEC2030 Tourism Strategy** is being developed with ADB to boost the Tourism sector in the BIMSTEC region.

f. The **BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity** also in partnership with ADB will soon be discussed for its finalization.

g. For energy security, we are exploring possibilities with our development partners to draft the **BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection Master Plan Study** to promote the energy trade in future.

11. And to foster sustainable and resilient recovery from Covid-19, the BIMSTEC Member States and South Asian countries may consider the following *among others*:

   a. Create economic activities through more intra-regional trade.
   b. Remain committed to keeping regional markets open for trade and investment and enhance cooperation in the region and beyond.
   c. Ensure food security and strengthen the resiliency and sustainability of regional supply chains especially for food, commodities, medicines and essential supplies.
   d. Consider formulating SOPs for public health emergencies and assist people and businesses especially micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) suffering from the impact of Covid-19.
12. In conclusion, I would like to state that assistance from the UN system, ADB, IMF, World Bank and other development partners for the South Asian region at such a time is only becoming more pertinent and more critical. From BIMSTEC, we are privileged to have this long-standing collaboration with UNESCAP and we look forward to continuing such interactions and further our relationship in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

Thank you.