

**Speech by H.E. M. Shahidul Islam, Secretary General, BIMSTEC  
at Young Scholar's Forum (YSF), 2019**

Organiser: Asian Confluence

Theme: Engaging Youth from the Region to Re-envision the regional discourse and action on Water and Rivers.

Shillong, Meghalaya, India

18 March 2019

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Mr. P Shrivastav, Chairman, Governing Council, Asian Confluence

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Amb. TCA Raghavan , Director General of Indian Council of World Affairs

Mr. Sabyasachi Dutta, Executive Director, Asian Confluence

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

Good morning.

It is a great privilege and honour for me to join the **Young Scholar's Forum (YSF), 2019** organized by the Asian Confluence. I am thankful to Asian Confluence for inviting me to speak on the occasion. This is my second association with a program of Asian Confluence after the NADI 2 Festival organized to celebrate the **Common Riverine Heritage of the Bay of Bengal region** in Dhaka during October 2017. This is my first visit to the North Eastern Region of India, and I would like to express my thanks and gratitude to the host for the warm hospitality extended to me.

The theme of the conference - **Engaging Youth from the Region to Re-envision the regional discourse and action on Water and Rivers** is very relevant to BIMSTEC as the root of BIMSTEC lies in its geographical contiguity, abundant natural and human resources, rich historical linkages and shared cultural heritage. My presence here today is to register BIMSTEC's strong support to this well thought out and well organized event aimed at enhancing people-to-people contact among BIMSTEC Member States and to associate the region's youth in the process.

The history of the Bay of Bengal region has been one of mending walls and breaking walls. While the kings and emperors have drawn and redrawn political boundaries, the people of this region have continued to interact beyond those boundaries by way of trade, travel, settlement, cultural exchange and sharing of values and ideas. The numerous rivers that have flown from the Himalayas into the Bay of Bengal have also acted as a strong natural connect in terms of creating a common ecology, a distinct cultural space and a trading area.

The establishment of BIMSTEC in 1997 as a regional organization comprising Seven States of the Bay of Bengal region can be seen as an effort to reclaim the old historical linkages and shared cultural heritage, in order to promote peace, stability and prosperity in this region. During the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit held at Kathmandu, Nepal on 30-31 August 2018, the BIMSTEC Leaders reiterated that geographical contiguity, abundant natural and human resources, rich historical linkages and cultural heritage present great potentials for promoting deeper cooperation in identified core areas in the region. The Leaders acknowledged that enhanced inter-linkages and inter-dependence within the economies and societies in the BIMSTEC Member States provide greater opportunity to advance regional cooperation.

The Leaders during the Summit agreed to explore possibility of establishing appropriate BIMSTEC forums for parliamentarians, universities, academia, research institutes, cultural organizations and media community to expand the scope of people-to-people contacts. Special emphasis was laid by Hon'ble Prime Minister of India in his Speech at the Summit where he has proposed various initiatives to promote youth to youth contact in the BIMSTEC region.

Themes that will be addressed in this Forum, namely River and coastal connectivity in Eastern South Asia, Rivers as a means of livelihood, Regional Cooperation on Water, Climate Change and rivers, River Tourism are very much in sync with BIMSTEC Sectors of Cooperation like Transport and Communication, Poverty alleviation, Climate change and Tourism.

Role played by rivers in transportation, livelihood and tourism in the world in general and in the South and South East Asia in particular can never be underestimated. With the fresh emphasis being placed on use of river for transportation and tourism particularly between India and Bangladesh as well as by Nepal and Bhutan, we are very much hopeful that rivers will again occupy its rightful place in the BIMSTEC regional integration process.

Inland Water Transport or riverine transport, historically, is an important mode of transport in the BIMSTEC region, which offers potential for sustainable, economically viable cross-border transport, and multimodal/intermodal connectivity. However, the BIMSTEC Transport Infrastructure & Logistics Study which was completed in 2007 and further enhanced in 2014 did not include specific policies and strategies related to the development of inland waterway transport as it was felt at that time that this mode was principally used for domestic rather than international transport. However, an emerging view is that the inland water transport sector has a role to play in a comprehensive BIMSTEC regional transport system. It is now acknowledged that the development of a sustainable and economically viable inland waterways sector in the sub-region can contribute to the achievement of sustainable development goals through poverty reduction and job creation and that the landlocked BIMSTEC

Member States i.e. Bhutan and Nepal – might benefit from the inland waterways in India and Bangladesh through multimodal/intermodal connectivity since it provides access to the sea.

Recent developments like signing of Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Bangladesh and Bhutan (2017) on the use of inland waterways for bilateral trade and transit cargo, as well as on passenger and cruise services on the coastal and inland (protocol) routes between India and Bangladesh shows that greater emphasis is being assigned to inland transport now. Recently, the Prime Ministers of India and Nepal agreed to develop the inland waterways for the movement of cargo, within the framework of trade and transit arrangements, providing additional access to sea for Nepal.

However, to fully assess the emerging view on the potential importance of the inland waterway transport sector in the BIMSTEC region, it will be important to undertake economic and financial analyses comparing the alternative modes, considering lifecycle infrastructure costs, operating costs and travel time, and environmental and social impacts. There is however no denying that container cargo transport through inland waterways comes with several inherent advantages including reduction in the handling cost, easier modal shift, reduction of pilferages and damage. Also, it allows cargo owners to minimize their carbon footprints. Recent initiatives undertaken by India for Inland water transport through the Ganges very much collaborate these aspects.

BIMSTEC Member States are also negotiating a BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement for coastal cargo movement. We have already had the first round of negotiation. Member States are presently considering the draft agreement, the Standard Operating Procedures and the coastal regulations.

Tourism is one of the 14 Sectors of cooperation since the inception of BIMSTEC in 1997. While tourism has contributed significantly to the GDP of some BIMSTEC Member States like Thailand, the same is not true for some other Member States inspite of huge potential that exist in the BIMSTEC region. Here too the rivers in the region can play major role. Bangladesh and India has recently finalised the Standard Operating Procedure (SoP) for movement of passenger and cruise vessels on the coastal and designated inland routes between the two neighbours. This move will revive the pre-partition mode of transportation when people from the East and West Bengal as well as Northeastern India could travel by steamers. BIMSTEC leaders during the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit emphasised on eco-tourism amongst other measures to promote tourism in the region.

Third BIMSTEC Summit held at Nay Pyi Taw on 4 March 2014 encouraged the Member States realize the enormous tourism potential of the region by enhancing cooperation in this field, particularly through facilitating engagements among the private sector in the Member States. First BIMSTEC Network of Tour Operators Meeting was held in July 2017 at Delhi

which was the first such platform to discuss tourism promotion by the officials and tour operators of the Member States. We are expecting that the Third BIMSTEC Tourism Ministers' Roundtable and Workshop to be held in Dhaka, Bangladesh this year will consider the recommendations of the Meeting of the BIMSTEC Network of Tour Operators and will finalise measures for promotion of tourism in the region including BIMSTEC Brand of Tourism.

Before I conclude let me say that North East India is at the heart of BIMSTEC region. With a large number of ongoing connectivity projects connecting North East India with other BIMSTEC countries as well as with ASEAN countries, this region can very well emerge as the hub of connectivity, trade and investment, industries including agri industries, and serve as the gateway to the east. With international boundaries with four BIMSTEC Member States, the region has great potential to become a tourism hotspot. Early realisation of its pivotal role in the overall sphere of South and South East Asia and active participation of think tanks, academia, students and the general population besides the local Governments will lead to an enabling environment for greater investment opportunities in the region. I am glad that Asian Confluence is taking initiative to develop more awareness in this regard. We also expect to see more such conferences, seminars as well as interactions with the region's people particularly with the students from the universities and colleges. I assure you that BIMSTEC Secretariat will be always forthcoming in sharing information and participating in these forums. END