

Remarks by Secretary General at India Mobile Congress (IMC)-2018, October 25-27, 2018, New Delhi

The Future of Connectivity and its role in regional development

Hon'ble State Minister for Communications
Senior officials of the Government of India
Business leaders, distinguished guest
Ladies and gentlemen, Good afternoon.

1. I am truly honoured to be present at the India Mobile Congress 2018. I would like to congratulate the Government of India and the Cellular Operators Association for organizing India Mobile Congress 2018 and dedicating a segment of the event to hold special forum for the Ministers from ASEAN and BIMSTEC countries. The event is very timely from the vantage point of BIMSTEC, as it is taking place soon after the 4th BIMSTEC Summit held in Kathmandu from 30-31 August 2018 wherein our Leaders directed us to work towards promoting digital connectivity and welcomed the offer of the Government of India to host a BIMSTEC Ministerial Conclave at the India Mobile Congress 2018. I am happy to note that many BIMSTEC Member States are being represented at the Ministerial level to this important event.
2. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) is a regional organization comprising seven Member States lying in the littoral and adjacent areas of the Bay of Bengal constituting a contiguous regional unity. BIMSTEC brings together five countries from South Asia, namely, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka, and two countries from South East Asia namely Myanmar and Thailand. Thus, the group constitutes a bridge between South and South East Asia and represents a reinforcement of relations among these countries.

3. Until in the recent past, the Bay of Bengal used to be a centre for global maritime trade, and a hub of commercial and cultural exchange. But unfortunately today this region has become one of the least connected regions in the world, both in terms of physical connectivity and digital connectivity. The good news is that our leaders during the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit reiterated their resolve to establish seamless multi-modal transportation linkages and smooth, synchronized and simplified transit facilities through the development, expansion and modernization of highways, railways, waterways, sea routes and airways in the region. It would be pertinent to recall what the Prime Minister of India, Hon'ble Narendra Modi said in his speech at the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit, and I quote: "I believe that the biggest opportunity is connectivity - trade connectivity, economic connectivity, transport connectivity, digital connectivity, people-to-people connective." Unquote.

Trade and economic Connectivity

4. Therefore, BIMSTEC looks at connectivity in a comprehensive way that takes into account all aspects of connectivity. One important component is the trade and economic connectivity to allow smooth movement of goods and services. BIMSTEC Member States signed the Framework Agreement for BIMSTEC Free Trade Area in 2004. So far, 20 rounds of negotiations have taken place to finalize the various agreements related to BIMSET FTA. The next round of trade negotiation is going to take place from 18 to 19 Nov, and we are hopeful that this meeting will make decisive progress on the Agreement on Trade in Goods and Customs Cooperation Agreement.

Transport Connectivity

5. The second important component is the transport connectivity. A well-established transport network is a prerequisite for reaping the benefits of a free trade area, including the promotion of trade and

investment, as well as progress in other areas of cooperation such as tourism, people-to-people contact, and cultural exchange. For this reason, transport and communications was included as one of the important areas of cooperation of BIMSTEC. BIMSTEC Member States are now negotiating a BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement and a BIMSTEC Motor Vehicle Agreement. Member States are also finalizing the BIMSTEC Transport Connectivity Master Plan which would serve as a strategic document that would guide actions and promote synergy among various connectivity frameworks. It is hoped that time-bound implementation of projects identified in the Master Plan with institutional framework provided by the BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement and BIMSTEC Motor vehicle Agreement will spearhead the regional integration that BIMSTEC envisages.

Digital Connectivity

6. Now that BIMSTEC has made reasonable progress in transportation part of connectivity, BIMSTEC is poised to take up broadband and internet connectivity. The Fourth BIMSTEC Summit decided to establish a Working Group to deal with information technology and communications related matters with a view to provide greater access, more affordable and high-speed internet and mobile communications to the peoples of the region. According to a study of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the Asia-Pacific region has the highest rate of digital disparity when it comes to the use of internet technology. Only 8 per cent of the region's population has access to speedy broadband internet use, resulting in a large section of the population being deprived of using digital technology for education, health and financial transactions.
7. As India Mobile Congress 2018 makes it evident, there is a big push by the Governments and the private sectors towards bringing everyone to be part of the digital world. We are already talking about Asia-Pacific Information Superhighway (APIS). Bangladesh is taking a lead in this regard. With digital connectivity there is also a need to improve telecom connectivity. The call rates within

BIMSTEC region can at times be higher than call rates for here to Europe or North America. High speed and cost effective digital and telecom connectivity is a prerequisite if we have to reap the benefits of BIMSTEC FTA which we are expecting to finalise soon. This will also be true for implementation of the Agenda 2030 for sustainable development to which our Leaders have expressed firm commitment in the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit. It is unthinkable to achieve the 17 Sustainable Development Goals without leveraging the Information Technology tools. BIMSTEC Telemedicine Network, for promotion of healthcare in the BIMSTEC region, which has been inaugurated in 2017 at Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research (JIPMER) can be a good example of how Information Technology along with other technologies can be used towards developing BIMSTEC specific products and services. We hope similar IT enabled products and services will be developed and implemented for other socio-economic sectors of cooperation of BIMSTEC as well.

People to people Connectivity

8. Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen: Connectivity remains incomplete without people-to-people connectivity. For this reason, the BIMSTEC Leaders during the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit tasked the Expert Group on BIMSTEC Visa Matters to continue negotiation for finalization of the modalities for the BIMSTEC Visa Facilitation. This is an acknowledgement by the Leaders that the seamless movement of the industry and business leaders is vital for promoting trade and investment in the region. And the same is true for IT Experts. Considering that most of the trade and transport related products and services in the coming years in the BIMSTEC region will have IT as the backbone, a system of liberalized visa will be a must for seamless movement of IT experts across the region. We need to have IT enabled systems which are up 24X7. Economic cost of failure of a system could be significant.

9. Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen: Before I conclude, permit me to say that growth and prosperity in the BIMSTEC region require

tangible progress in trade integration, particularly early progress in the reduction of non-tariff barriers; streamlining regulatory frameworks and harmonization of standards. Trade and transit facilitations must be given top priority along with energy and ICT connectivity. We need to work together closely to promote sustainable transport networks, sustainable energy and power grid interconnections, and information highways. While Governments of the Member States can create the environment for growth in the region, huge investment has to come from the private sectors. I hope the business leaders will take note of the huge investment potential that is expected to come up in the BIMSTEC region in near future and will become partners in BIMSTEC's growth. Thank you.