

## Speech I: Secretary General's remarks at the 19<sup>th</sup> SOM, 28 Aug 2018

---

- His Excellency Mr. Shanker Das Bairagi, Foreign Secretary, Government of Nepal & the Chair of 19<sup>th</sup> session of Senior Officials' Meeting;
- Their Excellencies Leaders of Delegations to the 19<sup>th</sup> SOM;
- Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen:

*Good morning.*

01. It is my honour to address the 19<sup>th</sup> session of the BIMSTEC Senior Officials' Meeting, a body that recommended my appointment as the Secretary General of BIMSTEC one year ago. At the outset, I would like to express my deep gratitude to the Government of Nepal for hosting this meeting and providing excellent logistical support and warm hospitality.

02. We are meeting at a time when BIMSTEC has gained considerable maturity as a regional organization. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) was established through the adoption of Bangkok Declaration in 1997 with the "desire to establish a firm foundation for common action to promote sub-regional cooperation in the areas of trade, investment, technological exchange and other interrelated areas in a spirit of equality and partnership and thereby contribute towards peace, progress and prosperity in their common region". Over the years, BIMSTEC has developed into a promising regional forum with seven Member States that cooperate closely through 14 identified sectors of cooperation.<sup>1</sup> BIMSTEC has registered significant success in setting up institutions, laying down legal framework, initiating project-based cooperation, facilitating capacity building and knowledge sharing and enhancing contacts and exchanges at various levels to promote regional cooperation in the Bay of Bengal region. The Report of the Secretary General, which has been circulated among the Member States, provides a brief account of BIMSTEC's accomplishments in these areas since the holding of the Third BIMSTEC Summit on 4 March 2014 in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, and the BIMSTEC Leaders' Retreat on 16 October 2016 in Goa, India.

---

<sup>1</sup>Trade & Investment, Technology, Transportation and Communication, Energy, Tourism, Fisheries, Poverty Alleviation, Agriculture, Cultural Cooperation, Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crimes, Environment and Disaster Management, Public Health, People-to-People and Climate Change

03. The Third BIMSTEC Summit was an important milestone in developing BIMSTEC's institutional structure. The Summit witnessed the signing of three important legal instruments for the establishment of (a) BIMSTEC Permanent Secretariat in Bangladesh; (b) BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Observatory (BCIO) in Bhutan; and (c) BIMSTEC Centre for Weather and Climate (BCWC) in India. The permanent Secretariat of BIMSTEC became operational in Dhaka, Bangladesh following its formal inauguration on 13 September 2014 by Her Excellency Sheikh Hasina, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. The BIMSTEC Centre for Weather and Climate (BCWC), located in Noida, India has been providing some of its services to BIMSTEC Member States through a web-portal. The Member States are now engaged in harmonizing the structure, governance, financing and reporting line of the existing and proposed BIMSTEC Centers. Once the harmonization process is completed, it is expected that the other specialized centers namely, BIMSTEC Cultural Industries Observatory (BCIO) in Bhutan and BIMSTEC Energy Centre (BEC) in India will become operational. It is heartening to note that another specialized center the BIMSTEC Technology Transfer Facility (TTF) is in the process of being established in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

04. If the Third BIMSTEC Summit can be credited with its contribution to the institution building process of BIMSTEC, the BIMSTEC Leaders Retreat held in Goa, India on 16 October 2016 will be remembered for infusing fresh blood into the BIMSTEC process by way of reiterating our Leaders' political commitment to make the organization stronger, more effective and result-oriented. In addition to the Outcome Document, the Leaders of the BIMSTEC during their informal consultation at the Retreat agreed on a 16-point Agenda of Action, which set a result-oriented work plan aiming at completing the pending agreements and moving ahead with new initiatives. The 17<sup>th</sup> SOM held in Kathmandu, Nepal on 07 February 2017, the 18<sup>th</sup> SOM held in Kathmandu, Nepal on 10 August 2017 and the 15<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Meeting held in Kathmandu, Nepal on 11 August 2017 devoted considerable attention to review the progress made on the Agenda of Action in addition to the directives contained in the Goa Outcome Document. The status of progress made on the Agenda of Action is attached as Annex A to the Report of the Secretary General.

05. Some notable progress on the Agenda of Action includes progress made towards developing consensus on the drafts of three agreements, namely, Agreement on Cooperation and

Mutual Assistance in Customs Matters, BIMSTEC Motor Vehicle Agreement and BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement. As regards the fast-tracking of BIMSTEC FTA negotiations as contained in the Agenda of Action, the new input provided recently by India on Product Specific Rules (PSR) has paved the way for resuming FTA negotiations, and Bangladesh, the Lead Country for Trade and Investment sector, is consulting Member States on an agreed date for holding the 21<sup>st</sup> meeting of the Trade Negotiating Committee (TNC).

06. Since the early days of BIMSTEC's existence, our Leaders have repeatedly emphasized the importance of connectivity as the prime mover of regional integration process. The ADB-assisted BIMSTEC Transport Infrastructure and Logistics Study (BTILS) completed in 2014 is the first major initiative taken by the Member States to enhance transport connectivity. Most of the Member States have taken initiatives towards implementation of projects identified by BIMSTEC Transport Infrastructure and Logistics Study (BTILS). In pursuance of the directives of the Agenda of Action, the BIMSTEC Member States are currently developing the BIMSTEC Transport Connectivity Master Plan with the target to complete it by the end of September 2018.

07. Another positive contribution of BIMSTEC is that it is serving as a forum for regular exchanges among policy makers and senior officials of the Governments of Member States, thereby narrowing down differences and creating common grounds for cooperation. Holding of 16 Ministerial Meetings and 19 Senior Officials' Meetings since the establishment of BIMSTEC demonstrate that the core meetings have attained a high degree of regularity. It is also heartening to see that since the Goa Retreat, BIMSTEC National Security Chiefs have met in March 2017 in New Delhi, in March 2018 in Dhaka and is scheduled to meet again in Bangkok in March 2019. However, the same cannot be said in case of all sectors if we consider that Trade and Economic Ministerial Meeting did not take place since 2004 and the Trade Negotiating Committee did not meet since 2015.

08. Mr. Chairman, until recently, BIMSTEC process was marked by a high degree of informality where past practices and norms were relied on in conducting business of institutional mechanisms, and meetings were held as per convenience and availability of host rather than exigencies of issues. It is heartening to see that the Fourth BIMSETC Summit is going to take a number of decisions to bring clarity and predictability in the BIMSTEC process by directing to

develop BIMSTEC Charter, formulate the Rules of Procedure (RoP) for the BIMSTEC Mechanisms, establish BIMSTEC Permanent Working Committee to deal with administrative and financial matters, and by directing to explore the possibilities of establishing a Development Fund to finance projects and studies.

09. The BIMSTEC Secretariat is fully functional with four Directors and required support staff working in a dedicated premise provided by the Government of Bangladesh. I would like to record our deep appreciation to the Government of Bangladesh, in particular the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for providing full support to the Secretariat in its functioning. I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Mr. SumithNakandala, the First Secretary General of BIMSTEC who contributed in laying down the basic norms and structures of the Secretariat. It is also encouraging to note that the Member States are considering to strengthen the institutional capacity of the Secretariat through providing required financial and human resources.

10. Mr. Chairman: Before I conclude, let me say that Nepal did a great job by holding the Special SOM on 11 August 2018 which took care of a number of issues that would otherwise have burdened the agenda of the 19th SOM. As a result, the number of items on the Agenda of the 19th SOM has considerably come down, which would allow this august meeting to concentrate more on the preparation for the Fourth Summit. The Secretariat remains at the disposal of the Chair for a successful meeting. Thank you.