

## **Secretary General's speech at the opening ceremony of the Conference titled "BIMSTEC at its 20: Towards a Bay of Bengal Community" Tuesday, 20 March 2018, BIMSTEC Secretariat, Dhaka**

His Excellency Mr. Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali MP, Hon'ble Foreign Minister, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, and the Chief Guest of today's event,

His Excellency Professor Dr. Chop Lal Bhusal, Ambassador of Nepal, the current Chair country of BIMSTEC

Ambassadors and High Commissioners of BIMSTEC Member States

Ambassadors, High Commissioners and Representatives of International Organizations,

Senior Officials of the Government of Bangladesh

Diplomats, scholar, representatives of think tanks, media and civil society, ladies and gentlemen,  
*Good Morning*

01. It is a great honor for me to welcome all of you to today's Conference, which has been organized to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the establishment of BIMSTEC- The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation.

02. In spite of its 20 Years of existence, BIMSTEC's visibility has remained low. Two recent developments have generated renewed hope that BIMSTEC is poised to take off as a viable regional organization. *First*, the permanent Secretariat BIMSTEC was established in Dhaka in 2014. *Second*, during the BRICS-BIMSTEC Retreat held in Goa, India in October 2016, the BIMSTEC Leaders reaffirmed their commitment to make BIMSTEC stronger, more effective, and result oriented.

03. This renewed political commitment to BIMSTEC cooperation is receiving enthusiastic support from the civil society, business community and think tanks of the Member States. The Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) has recently brought out a knowledge paper titled "Reinvigorating BIMSTEC: An Industry Vision for the Next Decade." South Asia Regional Initiative for Energy Integration (SARI/EI) has brought out a research paper titled "BIMSTEC Energy Outlook 2030". Carnegie India has published a policy paper titled "Bridging the Bay of Bengal: Towards a Stronger BIMSTEC." The Secretariat, with the support of RIS, has also brought out a publication titled "Twenty Years of BIMSTEC: Promoting

Regional Cooperation and Integration in the Bay of Bengal Region”. Other than the last one, all the policy papers and knowledge papers have been initiated by the publishers on their own volition, which would go to indicate that BIMSTEC cooperation is receiving increased attention as a credible platform for regional cooperation, poised to play a much bigger role in shaping the future architecture of this region.

04. Today’s conference has been organized to facilitate free interaction with scholars, think-tanks, government officials, diplomats, business leaders and other stakeholders, in order to help chart the future course of the organization. This is an attempt to take on board all the stakeholders of BIMSTEC, in line with the old African proverb: *If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.*

05. Although BIMSTEC has identified 14 sectors of cooperation, today’s conference will focus on four overarching areas of BIMSTEC cooperation. The first session will examine various aspects of connectivity, taking into consideration that historically the Bay of Bengal region was extensively connected but that the post colonial independent States knowingly or unknowingly chose to transform it into one of the least connected regions in the world. The second session will examine the role of People-to-People contact in BIMSTEC integration, and suggest how think tanks, parliaments, universities and media can be engaged in promoting people- to-people contact. The third session will discuss the urgency of combating the twin menaces of violent extremism and drug-trafficking, and also examine ways and means to share information and intelligence for regional action. The fourth session will examine the most important area of BIMSTEC cooperation, *i.e.*, economic cooperation and suggest how intra-regional trade and investment can be enhanced, and regional value chains and production base can be developed. Finally, the concluding session will wrap up the discussions in a way that we go back with some ideas and suggestions about the future direction of the BIMSTEC- how BIMSTEC will emerge as a distinct Bay of Bengal Community without compromising its unique role as the bridge between South Asia and South East Asia. I am very happy to report that we have been able to bring together some of the leading scholars from home and abroad to address these priority issues.

06. I would like to express my profound gratitude to His Excellency Mr. Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali, MP, Hon’ble Foreign Minister of Bangladesh for joining us today in spite of his extremely busy schedule. BIMSTEC is indebted to him for his generous support in making the BIMSTEC Secretariat fully operational within a short span of time. I am also grateful to all the speakers who have come from other Member States of BIMSTEC. I thank Mr. Sergey Kapinos, UNODC Representative for South Asia for joining us all the way from New Delhi. I also recognize the presence of Joint Secretary Mr. Piyush Srivastava, representative of Her Excellency Smt. Sushma Swaraj, Hon’ble External Affairs Minister of India.

07. Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen: I hope that this conference will contribute towards improved understanding about the potential of the BIMSETC initiative, and give more visibility to the work of the organization. Like all of you, I look forward to the scholarly deliberations during the rest of the day. Thank you.