

SPEECH BY SECRETARY GENERAL OF BIMSTEC AT THE INAUGURATION OF NADI 2 FESTIVAL, NATIONAL THEATRE OF SHILPAKALA ACADEMY, DHAKA, 5PM, 08 OCT 2017

=====
His Excellency Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali, MP, Hon'ble Foreign Minister of the People's Republic of Bangladesh;

His Excellency Suresh Prabhu, Hon'ble Union Minister of India;

His Excellency ShriKeshavMahanta, Water Resources Minister, Government of Assam;

TheirExcellencies the Ambassadors and High Commissioners of BIMSTEC Member States;senior officials of the Government of Bangladesh; Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

Good afternoon.

01. It is a great privilege and honour for me to join the NADI 2 Festival organized to celebrate the **Common Riverine Heritage of the Bay of Bengal region**. I congratulate Asian Confluence and Friends of Bangladesh for inviting me to speak on the occasion.

02. Although primarily a civil society-led event, the NADI Festival enjoys active support and patronization of the Governments of Bangladesh and India, which is evident from the presence of the Hon'ble Foreign Minister of Bangladesh and the Hon'ble Union Minister of India this afternoon. And 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.

03. 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 interactbeyond those boundariesby way of trade, travel, settlement, cultural exchange and sharingof 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.

04. 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. BIMSTEC Leaders during the Goa retreat in October 2016 expressed their resolve to create a deeper understanding and trust across the region, and reiterated their commitment to promote people-to-people contact at various levels among Member States.

05. In the overall BIMSTEC perspective, therefore, people-to-people contact is a key component of promoting regional cooperation. In other words, our approach to regional cooperation is not just based on Government institutions, but it also encourages multi-layer collaboration with active association of socio-cultural community, economic community, think tanks, media, academia and NGOs. The focus of NADI 2 festival goes very well with the vision of BIMSTEC leaders, because the festival wants to promote the civilizational connect and amplify people-to-people contact for inclusive economic development within the region through creative use of riverine connectivity between North East region of India and Bangladesh. Indeed, the geographical contiguity, cultural affinity and economic complementarity existing between the North East Indian states and Bangladesh are all in favour of such connectivity and would in turn contribute to the overall integration process of BIMSTEC.

06. For a successful integration of BIMSTEC region, concerted efforts by governments and the peoples of this region are essential. The Governments of BIMSTEC Member States are currently engaged in developing norms and rules to govern trade, technology transfer, counter-terrorism cooperation etc. Because Governments generally agree with Robert Frost when he says, "Good fences make good neighbours." Nevertheless, that should not prevent the protagonists of people-to-people contact from asking, in the words of Robert Frost:

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.

07. BIMSTEC holds that people-to-people contact is vitally important in order to create a deeper understanding and trust across the region. From this conviction, BIMSTEC will continue to support initiatives to amplify people-to-people contact in the Bay of Bengal region. Thank you.