

**THE 5th BIMST-EC MINISTERIAL MEETING
COLOMBO, 20 DECEMBER 2002**

JOINT STATEMENT OF THE BIMST-EC MINISTERIAL MEETING

The 5th BIMST-EC Ministerial meeting was held in Colombo, Sri Lanka on 20th December 2002, this being the first at the level of Ministers.

The delegations to the meeting were led by H.E. Morshed Khan, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, H.E. Arun Shourie, Minister of Commerce & Industry and Disinvestment, of the Republic of India, H.E. U Win Aung, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Union of Myanmar, H.E. Tyronne Fernando, Minister of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and H.E. Dr. Surakiart Sathirathai, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand. (List of participants Annex A).

Nepal attended as an observer and was represented by H.E. Narendra Bikram Shah, Minister of Foreign Affairs.

The 5th BIMST-EC Ministerial meeting was inaugurated by the Hon. Ranil Wickramasinghe, Prime Minister of Sri Lanka. (Text of the Statement is at Annex B)

H.E. Dr. Surakiart Sathirathai, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, representing the country designated to be the next Chair of BIMST-EC, proposed the Vote of Thanks.

Hon. Tyronne Fernando Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sri Lanka, was elected Chairman of the Meeting, by acclamation on the proposal of H.E. U Win Aung, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Union of Myanmar, outgoing Chairman of BIMST-EC.

The Ministers endorsed the Report of the Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM) held on 18 and 19 December 2002. The SOM recommendations on the outcome of the Economic Forum and the Working Group contained in the Report were noted.

At the conclusion of the Ministerial Meeting, the Leaders of the Delegation issued the following Statement :

1. We recognize the significance of this first meeting of the BIMST-EC at the level of Foreign Ministers. It underlines the political commitment of Member States to the BIMST-EC process as a means of promoting more intensified sub-regional cooperation. The meeting imparts fresh policy momentum to the BIMST-EC Agenda and enhances realistic opportunities for co-operation in the economic, commercial, technical and other objectives of the organization.
2. We fully support the proposal by the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka that BIMST-EC meet at the level of Heads of Government in the first quarter of 2004 in Thailand.
3. We recognize that the regular meetings of Trade and Economic Ministers are an integral part of the formal institutional mechanism of BIMST-EC, with the responsibility for promoting co-operation in the sector of Trade and Investment.
4. We welcome the offer of Sri Lanka to host the meeting of the BIMST-EC Trade and Economic Ministers during the first quarter of 2003 and urge that they take early practical steps towards the establishment of a BIMST-EC Free Trade Area.
5. We agree that the meetings of Foreign Ministers should be held annually and continue to co-ordinate and provide overall policy guidance on all BIMST-EC matters.

6. We meet at a time of global economic slowdown, bearing negative impact on our region. It is imperative, therefore, to inter alia, strengthen economic co-operation among member States to overcome adverse consequences.
7. We are conscious that the twin processes of globalization and liberalization offer both challenges and opportunities. We agree to intensify consultations on the current and evolving developments with a view to coordinating our positions at multilateral fora such as WTO to protect, project and promote our common interests in a cogent and credible manner, as well as to maximize benefits from the current situation. We instruct our Heads of Delegations to meet and co-ordinate positions at Multilateral fora of common concern to Member States.
8. We recognize the value of examining ways and means of establishing collaborative links with other regional organizations, especially SAARC and ASEAN.
9. We appreciate the contribution made by ESCAP to BIMST-EC programmes of co-operation. We recognize the importance of establishing a dialogue with potential partners and international organizations to better promote the organisation's current programme of activities. In this regard, we mandate the Working Group to explore ways and means of furthering such cooperation in approved projects and to report to the intersessional SOM.
10. We are encouraged by the private sector's dedication to the BIMST-EC process and support its initiatives to utilize the networking capability of the grouping to increase trade, investment and other economic co-operation. In the connection, we welcome initiatives to establish a BIMST-EC Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of BIMST-EC Processed Food Industries . We also welcome their initiative on the business convention and a trade fair to be held in Sri Lanka in 2003 and support their action plans on the series of events of BIMST-EC food festivals in each member country to coincide with the Visit BIMST-EC Year.
11. We welcome the practice of the Business Forum and Economic Forum meeting back-to-back as facilitating practical interaction between the private and public sectors. We agree that the Business Forum in the future should convene in conjunction with the Economic Forum, SOM and the Foreign Ministers meetings as well as the Economic Forum to meet biennially with the intersessional SOM.
12. We note the progress made in the six sectors identified for co-operation under BIMST-EC, and call on the designated lead and chair countries of the various sectors and sub-sectors to monitor more closely and critically the implementation of agreed activities.
13. We note that Expert Group meetings have been convened since the last Ministerial Meeting only in respect of the Energy and Technology sectors and the sub sectors of Gems & Jewellery and Processed Foods. We urge the convening of the remaining Expert Group meetings as early as possible in 2003, in order to report to the intersessional SOM.
14. We urge the Member States to demonstrate their commitment to the grouping through more active engagement in the activities of the Expert Group meetings. We agree on the need to streamline sectoral and sub-sectoral co-operation where a particular Expert Group meeting has not been held for two consecutive years. The presence of three Member States will constitute the required quorum for an Expert Group to be convened.
15. We discussed the need for special emphasis to be given for certain areas of co-operation such as transport & communication, tourism, trade & investment, and technical co-operation as these would create much needed enhanced people-to-people contacts in the region. We further urge the respective lead and chair countries also to identify priority projects in these and other areas as well, up to a maximum of two for each sector and sub sector.

16. We agree that sectoral Ministerial meetings, particularly on Transport & Communication, Energy, Tourism and Technology be convened as and when required.
17. We strongly urge that required financial resources for identified projects be ensured by Member States, prior to the commencement of the projects. We note that the Working Group has taken steps to identify priority projects and hope that external funding could be secured.
18. We request the Chair of BIMST-EC to convene the intersessional SOM by September 2003 and to propose dates within the next 6 weeks. The intersessional SOM would facilitate preparations for the next Ministerial Meeting as well as review progress of BIMST-EC activities.
19. We appreciate the Concept Paper prepared by Thailand on the establishment of a BIMST-EC Secretariat. We considered a number of viable interim alternatives including the possibility of a Technical Support Facility (TSF) or similar back-up unit to assist the Working Group in Bangkok and to help strengthen its relationship with the SOM. We request the Working Group to prepare a feasibility report on such a mechanism, to be discussed at the next intersessional SOM.
20. We further agree that the Working Group should be strengthened and that the Ambassadors of the current and next Chair country accredited to Bangkok attend all SOM meetings in the future.
21. We endorse and call for the full implementation of the remaining recommendations of the SOM on the future direction of BIMST-EC, in order to make the functioning of the organization more effective.
22. We declare 2004 as Visit BIMST-EC Year and request the Expert Group on Tourism meeting in February 2003 to formulate action plans to be carried out within specific timeframes, for its implementation.
23. We call upon BIMST-EC members to also intensify their co-operation on the bilateral and trilateral levels to supplement BIMST-EC's efforts towards greater regional co-operation. In this context, we welcome recent initiatives by Member Governments such as transport.
24. We welcome the offers of Thailand and India to provide technical co-operation and assistance to the BIMST-EC member countries.
25. We note that the moratorium on the expansion of membership ends in 2002. We request the Working Group to formulate criteria for membership in BIMST-EC and report to member States by the end of February 2003. We also direct that the criteria for membership be considered by the intersessional SOM and recommendations be submitted to Ministers of Foreign Affairs for a decision on the application of Nepal.
26. We express grave concern that the continuing threat of international terrorism has adversely affected the economic and social progress of the peoples of the BIMST-EC region. We recognize that the solidarity and friendship existing among member States could be utilized as the basis to counter this threat. We agree, as an urgent priority, to co-ordinate our efforts to combat this menace, including through the exchange of information among concerned agencies, and other concrete programmes of co-operation. We also resolve to continue active co-operation in ongoing efforts of the international community in combating terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, by whosoever it is perpetrated irrespective of its cause or stated rationale.
27. We welcome the offer by Thailand to convene the next BIMST-EC Ministerial Meeting in February 2004 in Chiang Rai.