



BAY OF BENGAL INITIATIVE FOR MULTI-SECTORAL TECHNICAL AND ECONOMIC COOPERATION

Joint Statement of the Seventeenth BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting

01 April 2021

Colombo, Sri Lanka

01. The Seventeenth BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting was convened *virtually* in Colombo, Sri Lanka on 01 April 2021 to finalize preparations for the Fifth BIMSTEC Summit to be held virtually in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

02. The Seventeenth BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting was attended by His Excellency Dr. A. K. Abdul Momen, M.P., Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh; His Excellency Lyonpo (Dr.) Tandi Dorji, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Royal Government of Bhutan; His Excellency Dr. Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, External Affairs Minister of the Government of the Republic of India; His Excellency Mr. Ko Ko Hlaing, Union Minister for International Cooperation of the Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar; His Excellency Mr. Pradeep Kumar Gyawali, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Government of Nepal; His Excellency Mr. Tharaka Balasuriya, State Minister of Regional Co-operation of the Government of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka; and His Excellency Mr. Don Pramudwinai, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand and their respective delegations.

03. His Excellency Mr. Dinesh Gunawardena, Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka, in his address, reaffirmed the need to accelerate the pace of regional cooperation under the framework of BIMSTEC.

04. His Excellency Mr. Dinesh Gunawardena, Foreign Minister of Sri Lanka, chaired the Meeting.

05. The Ministers considered and approved the Reports of the Twentieth Session of the BIMSTEC Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM), Twenty-First Session of the BIMSTEC Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM) and Special Session of the BIMSTEC Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM) held in Colombo, Sri Lanka on 03 March 2020, 02 September 2020 and 31 March 2021 respectively.

POST-COVID 19 RECOVERY AND REHABILITATION

06. The Ministers noted with appreciation the extensive measures taken by the Governments of the BIMSTEC Member States in responding and supporting Member States to face the challenges posed by the COVID 19 pandemic at the national level, including providing COVID vaccines. They also encouraged the Member States to continue to support one another in the post-COVID 19 recovery and rehabilitation either through BIMSTEC framework or bilaterally, as appropriate, to foster the spirit of BIMSTEC solidarity.

07. They expressed their resolve to further mobilize all relevant Sectors and Sub-sectors of cooperation to strengthen economic and physical connectivity to enhance regional trade, investment, tourism, technology, energy and other forms of exchanges, including to offset the economic losses caused by the pandemic.

08. They resolved to mobilize all relevant Sectors and Sub-sectors of cooperation to strengthen the collective resilience to combat the challenges of poverty, natural disasters, climate change, pandemics and other public health emergencies, terrorism and transnational crimes, and food and energy security through partnership and joint actions, in harmony with the national implementation to achieve 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, keeping in mind that COVID 19 may not be the last calamity to befall our region.

09. The Ministers directed the Secretariat to monitor the progress of work in the different areas of cooperation under BIMSTEC in view of the COVID 19 pandemic and submit recommendations to the Senior Officials' Meeting as required.

INSTITUTION BUILDING

10. The Ministers reiterated their commitment to intensify efforts to implement and realise the directives given by the Leaders at the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit.

11. They agreed to expand the mandate of the BIMSTEC Permanent Working Committee (BPWC) enabling it to act as the Preparatory Meeting to the SOM dealing with all issues that would be placed before the SOM.

12. They expressed deep appreciation to the Member States who have completed the internal procedures of the draft text of the BIMSTEC Charter, which was agreed upon by the 21st SOM held in Colombo, Sri Lanka and recommended the remaining Member States to complete their internal procedures for adoption of the BIMSTEC Charter at the BIMSTEC Summit.

13. They recommended the following rationalization and reorganization of Sectors and Sub-sectors of BIMSTEC (Table 1) to the Fifth BIMSTEC Summit for adoption.

Table 1: Sectors and Sub-sectors of BIMSTEC Cooperation

#	Lead Member State	Areas of Cooperation as revised by the 20 th BIMSTEC SOM on 03 March 2020	
		Sectors	Sub-sectors
1.	Bangladesh	Trade, Investment and Development	-
2.	Bhutan	Environment & Climate Change	-
3.	India	Security	(i) Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) (ii) Disaster Management (iii) Energy
4.	Myanmar	Agriculture and Food Security	(i) Agriculture (ii) Fisheries & Livestock
5.	Nepal	People-to-People Contact	(i) Culture (ii) Tourism (iii) People-to-People Contact (forums of Think Tanks, Media etc.)
6.	Sri Lanka	Science, Technology & Innovation	(i) Technology (ii) Health (iii) Human Resource Development
7.	Thailand	Connectivity	-

14. They approved the Organogram of the BIMSTEC Secretariat in order to enhance the institutional capacity of the Secretariat, with a view to enable it to coordinate, monitor and facilitate implementation of BIMSTEC activities and programmes; and initiate project proposals as agreed by the Member States as well as fulfill any other responsibility entrusted to it by the Member States in an effective and efficient manner.

15. They approved the establishment of an *ad-hoc* Expert Group on the Establishment of the BIMSTEC Development Fund (BDF) comprising financial experts from the Member States with the mandate to finalize the modalities for the establishment of BDF, which will be utilized for research and planning of BIMSTEC and financing of projects, programmes and other activities of BIMSTEC centres and entities as agreed upon by the Member States. They also instructed the Secretariat to hold the First Meeting of the Expert Group at the date of convenience for the Member States.

16. They instructed the SOM to formulate the Rules of Procedure for BIMSTEC Mechanisms in conformity with the provisions of the BIMSTEC Charter once it is adopted by the BIMSTEC Leaders at the Fifth BIMSTEC Summit.

SECTORAL ACTIVITIES

General

17. The Ministers encouraged the Lead Countries of the reconstituted Sectors and Sub-sectors of cooperation to develop their respective Plan of Action/Work Programme either by updating the old ones or by establishing new ones as soon as possible.

18. They encouraged simple and effective institutional mechanisms for all reconstituted Sectors and Sub-sectors with provision to adapt to requirements of specific sector, typically consisting of Joint Working Group (JWG) at the Sectoral level and Expert Group at the Sub-sectoral level. They also reiterated the practice of constituting *ad-hoc* Expert Group to deal with a particular subject whose term will expire with the completion of its task.

19. The Ministers agreed to strengthen the concept of Lead Country by introducing the practice of Annual Report on Sectoral activities being presented at the SOM by the representative of the Lead Country concerned.

Sector-wise Review

I. AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SECURITY

20. The Ministers stressed the importance of stronger agricultural cooperation to contribute to rural employment, poverty alleviation, food security, sustainable consumption and increased profitability of farmers in the context of the post-COVID 19 recovery.

21. They noted with satisfaction the holding of the First BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting on Agriculture in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar on 12 July 2019 and endorsed its decision of convening the BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting on Agriculture once in two years.

22. They agreed to establish an Expert Group on Fisheries and Livestock to deal with issues pertaining to the Sub-Sector, including preparation of Plan of Action/Work Program and generation of concrete project-based activities for the promotion of fisheries and livestock.

23. They encouraged the Secretariat to establish meaningful partnership with appropriate regional and international organizations to strengthen project-based cooperation under Agriculture and Food Security Sector.

II. CONNECTIVITY

24. The Ministers stressed the need to develop a resilient regional transport connectivity system capable of withstanding future disruptions with an enhanced focus on the development of coastal shipping, waterways and railways, road connections, and air cargo operation.

25. They expressed deep appreciation to the Member States, especially India for hosting the Third Meeting of the BIMSTEC Transport Connectivity Working Group (BTCWG) on 08 December 2020, and the Asian Development Bank for submitting the finalized draft of the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity, and recommended it to the Fifth BIMSTEC Summit for adoption.

26. They resolved that the BIMSTEC Member States as well as relevant BIMSTEC Organs and Bodies shall implement the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity in a timely and effective manner in consonance with the respective national connectivity plans of the Member States.

27. They requested the relevant BIMSTEC Ministers and tasked the Secretary General of BIMSTEC, the BTCWG, and relevant BIMSTEC Organs and Bodies, as well as National Coordinators and Focal Points, to coordinate closely with relevant stakeholders and to mobilize adequate resources for the implementation of the agreed activities under the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity giving due attention to the circumstances of the Member States.

28. They also tasked the BIMSTEC Transport Connectivity Working Group to monitor, evaluate and report the progress and challenges of implementation of the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity to the BIMSTEC Summit on a regular basis.

29. They encouraged holding of the second round of negotiations by the Working Group on the BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement and initiate negotiation process of the proposed BIMSTEC Framework Agreement on Transit, Transshipment and Movement of Vehicular Traffic Between and Among BIMSTEC Member Countries under the auspices of the BTCWG and continue negotiation of the BIMSTEC Motor Vehicle Agreement by the Member States which was started by the Working Group at their 1st Meeting held in New Delhi in April 2018.

30. They appreciated the Asian Development Bank for drafting the Final version of the Study Report on “Transport Connectivity Infrastructure Financing” and instructed the Secretariat to closely coordinate with Member States and ADB for its early implementation.

III. ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE

31. The Ministers agreed to establish a Joint Working Group on Environment and Climate to develop a Plan of Action for collective response to climate change for the region.

IV. PEOPLE TO PEOPLE CONTACT

Sub-Sector: People-to-people Contact Forums

32. The Ministers reiterated the BIMSTEC Leaders’ resolve to build a deeper understanding and trust among Member States and promote people-to-people contact at various levels of societies by exploring the possibility to establish appropriate BIMSTEC forums for parliamentarians, youth, entrepreneurs, universities, academia, research institutes, cultural organizations and media community.

33. They noted with satisfaction the finalization of the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the BIMSTEC Network of Policy Think Tanks (BNPTT).

34. They thanked the Government of India for preparing the "Draft Charter of the Association of BIMSTEC Speakers and Parliamentarians" and urged the Member States to convey their comments and observations on the Draft Charter.

Sub-sector: Tourism

35. The Ministers noted with concern that the tourism and hospitality industry in the Bay of Bengal region has been severely hit by the COVID 19 pandemic. They called upon the Member States to implement the Plan of Action for Tourism Development and Promotion for the BIMSTEC Region to facilitate intra-regional tourism. They also encouraged the holding of the 2nd Meeting of the BIMSTEC Working Group on Tourism, the 3rd BIMSTEC Tourism Ministers’ Roundtable and the 4th Meeting of the BIMSTEC Expert Group on Visa Matters soon. They encouraged the tourism entrepreneurs including tour and trekking operators to hold interactions and Meeting with a view to enhancing cooperation and coordination among themselves.

36. They thanked Sri Lanka for organizing the 2nd Meeting of BIMSTEC Network of Tour Operators on 08-09 December 2020 and appreciated that India has set up a virtual BIMSTEC Tourism Information Centre.

37. They noted that the Asian Development Bank has submitted the Final Report on “Leveraging Thematic Circuits for a BIMSTEC Tourism Strategy” and instructed the Secretariat to coordinate with the Member States and the ADB for its early completion.

Sub-Sector: Culture

38. The Ministers recalled the BIMSTEC Leaders’ decision to hold Meetings of BIMSTEC Cultural Ministers and BIMSTEC Cultural Festival at regular intervals, and called upon the Lead Country to take initiatives in this regard.

39. They agreed to establish the BIMSTEC Expert Group on Cultural Cooperation to deliberate upon all issues to promote cultural values, heritages, diversity and exchange in the region, including updating of the earlier Plan of Cooperation and Action.

V. SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION

Sub-Sector: Technology

40. The Ministers recommended signing of the BIMSTEC Technology Transfer Facility (TTF) during the Fifth BIMSTEC Summit. The Ministers also encouraged to strengthen cooperation in the areas of Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) by using the platform of the BIMSTEC TTF to be established in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

41. They agreed to establish an Expert Group on Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) cooperation to prepare a Plan of Action/Work Programme to strengthen cooperation under this sector.

42. They encouraged the Member States and the Secretariat to take advantage of the advances in information technology in carrying out the work of BIMSTEC by holding BIMSTEC Meetings and events virtually as and when possible.

Sub-Sector: Health

43. The Ministers recalled the BIMSTEC Leaders’ decision at the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit to expand cooperation to address non-communicable diseases as well as trans-national public health issues that threaten the economic and social progress of the peoples of the BIMSTEC region and reiterated their commitment to strengthen cooperation among the Member States on public health issues in the Bay of Bengal Region.

44. They recognized the need to strengthen regional capacity on public health through training of health care personnel, development of regional value chain for pharmaceutical industries and collaborative research. They also underlined the need for coordination and cooperation with international organizations to address the challenges of the COVID 19 pandemic, emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases and other public health emergencies. They agreed to establish an Expert Group on Public Health to examine the scope of collaboration and to develop a Plan of Action/Work Programme in this regard.

45. They noted with appreciation the activities of the BIMSTEC Task Force on Traditional Medicine (BTFTM) including adoption of Plan of Action for Development of Traditional Medicine and Harmonization of Curricula for Mutual Recognition of Traditional Medicine Degrees.

46. The Ministers encouraged stronger collaboration among the traditional medicine experts in finding ways to combat COVID 19. They thanked India for hosting the 1st Webinar on Harmonization of Curricula for Mutual Recognition of Traditional Medicine Degrees on 03 November 2020.

Sub-Sector: Human Resource Development

47. The Ministers stressed the need for regional collaboration to develop the skills of the vast human resources in the region through education, training and re-training, and to enhance access to employment opportunities, with particular focus on millions of workers in the informal sector as well as returnee migrant workers who have lost their jobs due to the situation arising from COVID 19.

48. They agreed to establish an Expert Group on Human Resource Development to deal with the activities under this Sub-Sector including development of a Plan of Action/Work Programme in this regard.

VI. SECURITY

Sub-Sector: CTTC

49. The Ministers noted with satisfaction that the Annual Meeting of BIMSTEC National Security Chiefs and the Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (JWG-CTTC) together with its Sub-Groups are being held regularly. They encouraged early holding of the 1st BIMSTEC Home Ministers' Meeting, the 4th Meeting of BIMSTEC National Security Chiefs and the 9th Meeting of the Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (JWG-CTTC).

50. They welcomed the entry into force on 16 March 2021 of the BIMSTEC Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organized Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking. They welcomed the readiness of the Member States to sign the BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters during the Fifth BIMSTEC Summit.

51. They noted with appreciation that Myanmar has compiled and circulated the '*BIMSTEC Annual Drug Report-2019*'. They also appreciated India for hosting a Two-Day Conference on Combating Drug-Trafficking for BIMSTEC Countries on 13-14 February 2020.

Sub-Sector: Disaster Management

52. The Ministers recalled the directives of the BIMSTEC Leaders at the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit for a closer cooperation in disaster management through the sharing of information, including information from the early warning and monitoring system, the adoption of preventive measures, rehabilitation, and capacity building.

53. The Ministers took note of India's briefing at the Meeting of the operationalization of the BIMSTEC Centre for Weather and Climate (BCWC) being hosted by India with state of the art facilities and that it is fully equipped to provide Disaster Early Warnings.

54. They encouraged the BIMSTEC Expert Group on Disaster Management Cooperation as established by the BIMSTEC Leaders to begin its work to develop a Plan of Action to improve preparedness and coordination for responding to natural disasters in the Bay of Bengal Region. They also thanked India for convening the Second BIMSTEC Disaster Management Exercise held in Puri, India on 11-13 February 2020.

Sub-Sector: Energy

55. The Ministers noted with satisfaction that the draft ToR of the BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection Coordination Committee (BGICC) has been finalized by the First Meeting of the BIMSTEC Expert Group on Energy (1st EGME) held on 28-29 March 2019 in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar. They encouraged early holding of the First Meeting of the BGICC to initiate concrete steps to establish BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection to facilitate electricity trade in the region.

56. The Ministers instructed the Secretariat to establish partnership with appropriate regional and international organization for undertaking the long overdue BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection Master Plan Study.

VII. TRADE, INVESTMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

57. The Ministers stressed the importance of enhancing intra-regional trade and investment for economic recovery in the post-COVID 19 period. They emphasized that removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers, strengthening of trade facilitation measures and establishing and implementing seamless transport connectivity are urgently needed to unleash the full potential of intra-regional trade and investment cooperation among the BIMSTEC Member States.

58. They called upon the Member States to continue the work on the Agreement on Trade in Goods and the Agreement on Cooperation and Mutual Assistance in Customs Matters.

59. They encouraged the Member States to put in place trade facilitation measures including simplification of customs procedures, introduction of electronic tracking system for cross-border container movement, mutual recognition arrangements and acceptance of electronic copies of export-import related documents.

60. The Ministers appreciated the Asian Development Bank for drafting the Final Report on “BIMSTEC Trade Facilitation Strategic Framework 2030”, and instructed the Secretariat to closely coordinate with Member States and ADB for its early implementation.

61. They reiterated the decision of the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit to revitalize the activities of BIMSTEC Business Forum and BIMSTEC Economic Forum to further strengthen Government-Private sector cooperation for the promotion of trade and investment within the region. Additionally, they encouraged exploring the possibility of introducing Track 1.5 BIMSTEC Development Dialogue involving government officials, businessmen, academia and think tanks.

CROSS CUTTING ISSUES

Poverty Alleviation

62. They recalled the commitment of the BIMSTEC Leaders to eradicate poverty in the Bay of Bengal Region by 2030 in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and effective implementation of the BIMSTEC Poverty Plan of Action.

63. They encouraged the BIMSTEC Expert Group on Poverty Alleviation to review the BIMSTEC Poverty Plan of Action and come up with suggestions to involve various Sectors and Sub-sectors to contribute to the overarching goal of poverty alleviation.

Mountain Economy

64. They agreed to expedite the establishment of an Inter-Governmental Expert Group to develop an action plan to promote mountain economies as decided by our Leaders during the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit, and instructed the Secretariat to initiate the process.

Blue Economy

65. The Ministers recalled the decision of the BIMSTEC Leaders to establish an Inter-Governmental Expert Group to develop an action plan on Blue Economy, keeping in mind the special needs and circumstances of the landlocked Member States, and instructed the Secretariat to initiate the process.

66. They noted with appreciation the implementation of several initiatives by India to further intensify regional cooperation under the BIMSTEC framework, including the hosting of the BIMSTEC Startup Conclave on 15-16 January 2021; BIMSTEC Seminar on Climate Smart Farming Systems in New Delhi in December 2019; A Capacity Building Workshop on Risk Informed Urban Planning at Gujarat Institute for Disaster Management, Gandhinagar in December 2019; the BIMSTEC Military Exercise and Army Chief's Conclave 2018 in Pune in September 2018; BIMSTEC Ministerial Conclave at the India Mobile Congress 2018 in New Delhi in October 2018; training of Diplomats from BIMSTEC Countries at the Sushma Swaraj Institute for Foreign Service, New Delhi in February 2020; training of 24 researchers/professionals from BIMSTEC Countries in Space and Remote Sensing at the North East Space Application Centre, Shillong in January 2020; providing 30 Scholarships to students from BIMSTEC Countries in the Nalanda University in Rajgir, India, etc. and directed the BPWC/respective sectoral bodies to examine the Reports, where applicable, and recommend suitable measures.

NORM SETTING

67. The Ministers agreed to expedite conclusion of pending agreements, sign the agreements whose texts are ready, and ratify the agreements that have already been signed.

68. They agreed to recommend the signing of the following legal instruments during the Fifth BIMSTEC Summit:

- (i) BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters;
- (ii) Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Mutual Cooperation between Diplomatic Academies/Training Institutions of BIMSTEC Member States; and
- (iii) Memorandum of Association on the Establishment of BIMSTEC Technology Transfer Facility (TTF) in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

BIMSTEC MEETINGS AND EVENTS

69. The Ministers reiterated the BIMSTEC Leaders' commitment to timely holding of Meetings of all BIMSTEC mechanisms as per the Calendar of Events established by the BPWC. They noted with satisfaction that the Meetings of BIMSTEC's policy making bodies including Summit, Ministerial Meeting, Senior Officials' Meeting and BPWC have attained a high degree of regularity in recent years. The Ministers encouraged the Sectoral Ministerial and institutional mechanisms to hold regular Meeting at all levels.

BIMSTEC CENTRES AND ENTITIES

70. The Ministers approved the Template MoA on the Establishment of the BIMSTEC Centres/Entities with a view to harmonizing the rules and procedures governing the establishment, functioning and financing of all BIMSTEC Centres/Entities.

ADMINISTRATIVE AND BUDGETARY MATTERS

71. The Ministers approved the budgets of the Secretariat for FY 2018, FY 2019 and FY 2020 as recommended by the SOM.

72. They approved the BIMSTEC Procurement Procedure (BPP), which shall act as a guideline for procurement of goods, services including outsourcing and technologies for smooth functioning of the Secretariat.

73. They welcomed the decision of the Government of Bangladesh to expand the existing office space of the Secretariat by constructing a modern building with appropriate facilities at the same location.

COLLABORATION WITH EXTERNAL PARTNERS

74. The Ministers approved the proposed Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to be concluded between the BIMSTEC Secretariat and the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

FOLLOW UP

75. The Ministers instructed the SOM to closely monitor implementation of our decisions and report progress to the next Ministerial Meeting.

APPOINTMENT OF THE NEW SECRETARY GENERAL

76. The Ministers welcomed the appointment of Mr. Tenzin Lekphell of Bhutan as the third Secretary General of BIMSTEC with effect from 06 November 2020.

77. They expressed appreciation to Ambassador M Shahidul Islam, former Secretary General of BIMSTEC from Bangladesh for his valuable contribution.

JOINT STATEMENT OF THE SEVENTEENTH BIMSTEC MINISTERIAL MEETING

78. The Ministers adopted the Joint Statement of the Seventeenth BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting for submission to the Fifth BIMSTEC Summit for consideration of the Leaders.

RECOMMENDATION OF DRAFT OF THE FIFTH BIMSTEC SUMMIT DECLARATION

79. The Ministers recommended the draft text of the Fifth BIMSTEC Summit Declaration.

The Ministers expressed their profound appreciation to the Government of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka for the excellent arrangements made for the Meeting.
