

Ambassador Sumith Nakandala, First Secretary General of BIMSTEC Secretariat, Speaks at The Inauguration Ceremony of The BIMSTEC Secretariat in Dhaka

Her Excellency Sheikh Hasina

Hon. Prime Minister of the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

His Excellency Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali

Hon. Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh

His Excellency Abul Maal Abdul Muhith

Hon. Minister of Finance of Bangladesh

His Excellency Shahidul Haque

Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

Friends of BIMSTEC

It is indeed a great pleasure to extend very warm welcome, as the Secretary General, to all of you to the ceremonial inauguration of the BIMSTEC Secretariat.

The inauguration of the BIMSTEC Secretariat by Her Excellency Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh makes a very important milestone in the evolution of our regional group. It is also a vivid testimony of the importance attached to by the Government of Bangladesh to the regional cooperation and regional integration process in our region.

More so, I am deeply touched by the presence of Her Excellency Sheikh Hasina today amidst her busy schedule and Excellency, your being with us today is a stunning example of your personal conviction and commitment for regional cooperation. In fact, Bangladesh has in the recent past, pioneered in enlightening our minds on the benefits of regional cooperation. I therefore, on behalf of the BIMSTEC fraternity wish to extend very warm welcome.

I must also record my deep appreciation to the Hon. Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh for undertaking and directing his staff to make the Secretariat a reality. Equally, I must mention the important role played by the Hon. Minister of Finance of Bangladesh in shouldering the responsibilities connected with the establishment of the Secretariat. To both of you, I extend our sincere appreciation and warm welcome.

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The decision to establish the Secretariat for our regional grouping was unanimous, timely and conscious judgment made by our Leaders. The absence of the Secretariat has in fact impeded our progress for a long period. Now the Secretariat is in existence, I shall look forward to work with the Member States in realizing the goals as enshrined in the Bangkok Declaration of 1997.

BIMSTEC creates a natural bridge between South and South East Asia. It represents the aspiration of around 1.5 billion people across the Bay of Bengal littoral land adjacent areas, which accounts for 21% of global population. According to various studies conducted, the BIMSTEC region has a combined Gross Domestic Product of around US\$2.5 trillion and it has the potential of creating trade worth of US\$43 to 59 billion under the proposed BIMSTEC Free Trade Agreement.

Apart from the enormous scope for enhanced inter-regional trade, our region is blessed with unique wealth of human resources. This abundance of human creativity is supplemented by the diversity of cultures. The diversities in the region are complemented by the existence of natural resources as well as rich bio-diversity which has been the bed-rock for our civilizations. These are by any measure constitutes indisputable assets.

One of the major challenges the humankind faces in the 21st century is the poverty. Persistence poverty coupled with malnutrition, access to sanitation and affordable healthcare are the adversaries of human progression. Nonetheless, we have been able to reduce the poverty remarkable within our region. In terms of Millennium Development Goals, our region has achieved remarkable progress. Use of Latest technology, including information and communication technology provides a very promising future for us. The judicious application of nano-technology would be a sine qua non in addressing most of the problems confronted by us in this century.

In terms of achievements of BIMSTEC so far, analysts tend to offer differing views. Irrespective of such controversies, we have certain landmarks to be contented with. One is the conclusion of BIMSTEC Convention on Suppression of terrorism. The other is the finalization of BIMSTEC Transport, Infrastructure and Logistics Study [BTILS] conducted by the Asian Development Bank. The ADB has offered its technical assistance in strengthening the Secretariat. I wish to record my deep appreciation to the ADB for its generous assistance. We will continue to work with the ADB.

We have rightly identified the priorities on infrastructure and connectivity in our region. Without proper infrastructure and connectivity, any discussion on regional cooperation and integration will be futile.

In terms of energy security, the BIMSTEC was able to finalize the Trans Grid Connectivity which will pave the way for sharing power in the region. The BIMSTEC Energy Centre in

Bangaluru is in operation. As for BIMSTEC Free Trade Area, we are making progress very consciously.

The BIMSTEC has 14 specific and area-based cooperation and the organization is now more matured and is poised to pave the solid foundation for pragmatic and sustainable cooperation among the Member States. Nonetheless, it is logical for us to move forward with a pace which is realistic and taking all the Member States as a collective entity. Such an approach invariably will take time and we need to be optimistic.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In terms of integration process, South Asia is the least integrated region. In the age of globalization, the economic integration process is an indisputable tool in conducting inter-state relations. While the globalization process is a fact, we are witnessing emergence of new regional entities. There are successful stories such as European Union and ASEAN, which need our close attention.

Another aspect of concern would be historically placing of BIMSTEC Member States. The historical narratives indicate that both South Asia and South East Asia were inter-connected from pre-historic times. It was a remarkable integration process through human migration and use of maritime trade.

There was intensification of sea-borne commerce in the Early centuries of Common Era. Along with traders, missionaries, priests, literati, adventurers and fortune seekers frequented to Southeast Asia. The ancient port of Tamralipti at the mouth of Ganga was one of the earliest places of embarkation. From there, ships proceeded to the Malay Peninsula either along the coasts of Bengal and Myanmar or through the Bay of Bengal Chinese text of the third century attest to this fact.

The materials excavated at Arikamedu, Puduchery indicate that there was vibrant trade across the bay of Bengal and the delta of Irrawaddy.

As for Sri Lanka, our engagement with South East Asia goes back to 11th and 12th centuries. This too was based on maritime trade. Through human migration the cultures and religions got spread between South Asia and South East Asia.

These interactions were largely due to the initiatives by the people. There had been adequate space for the peoples in the region to engage with one another without any hindrance from the State machineries.

In the 21st century we do not wish to reinvent such processes. Our desire and focus should be rediscover our common heritage across the Bay of Bengal. In this exercise BIMSTEC would be an extremely valuable tool.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentleman,

The success of our organization largely depends on the political commitments of the Member States. Their domestic vision and foreign policies must be complementary to one another. Fortunately, we have such coherence in our group and that would be the most important strength. We also need non-parochial thinking in our deliberations and the desire

to transcend the historical negativity will also be an essential prerequisite in harnessing our ultimate goals.

I am confident that we in BIMSTEC could take up that challenge. I am also convinced that our collective efforts will bring benefits to the peoples of our region for a better future. That would be the promise of BIMSTEC.

Myself, as the First Secretary General will be committed for such a vision and I do believe in our collective journey, I and the Secretariat would be guided and supported by the Member States.

Thank you.