Remarks by the BIMSTEC Secretary General at the panel discussion titled "Building Resilience in an Era of Constant Crisis" at the Bay of Bengal Conversation 2026

Before I speak on the theme for this Session, "Building Resilience In An Era Of Constant Crisis" I would like to thank the Centre for Governance Studies for inviting me to participate at the 5th edition of Bay of Bengal Conversation. It's for the 1st time the BIMSTEC Secretariat, which is located in Dhaka, has been invited to participate in the Bay of Bengal Conversation hosted by CGS. I believe that conversations about Bay of Bengal should invariably factor in the growing salience and role of BIMSTEC. As many of you are aware, BIMSTEC is the only Regional Organisation that is focused on Bay of Bengal, as its name suggests. BIMSTEC is dedicated to forging regional cooperation to address the developmental and transnational security challenges faced by the countries located adjacent /close to Bay of Bengal, including Bangladesh. I request the distinguished audience to pay particular attention to the vision, goals, agenda and significant accomplishments of BIMSTEC.

There is a tendency to look at BIMSTEC through the prism of SAARC. I urge you all to remember that BIMSTEC was established in 1997, more than 29 years ago, at a time when SAARC was fully functional and had made significant progress in forging regional cooperation in South Asia. It is, therefore, a grave injustice to look at BIMSTEC through the prism of SAARC. BIMSTEC was conceived, by Bangladesh and India together with Sri Lanka and Thailand, and was initiated in Bangkok in June 1997 through adoption of Bangkok Declaration. It was joined by Myanmar within a few months. Nepal and Bhutan joined in 2004.

In June 1997, BIMSTEC was created as a platform for building tangible cooperation among the countries of South Asia and Southeast Asia in order to enable them to benefit from one another's developmental experiences and to address their shared security challenges. Bay of Bengal joins South Asia and Southeast Asia so does BIMSTEC. All the 7 member States - have attached a high priority to BIMSTEC and support it.

I would like to underline that BIMSTEC works on the basis of consensus. It serves equally the interests of all its member States; its agenda has evolved based on the agreed priorities of all its member States; it has developed sectoral action plans, which reflect the practical ways in which all its member States want to work together in specific Sectors. 5 BIMSTEC Centres have been set up and 10 more are being set up based on the proposals made by the member States and endorsed by all other member States. I would also like the distinguished audience to remember that

BIMSTEC has been conceived as a non-political regional organization. It has, accordingly, remained focused on tangible cooperation to address the shared developmental and security challenges of its member States and has stayed away from divisive political issues. It's a bad idea to politicize BIMSTEC.

I would like to underline that the key challenge being faced by BIMSTEC is not the lack of political will on part of its member States or their inability to build consensus; it is the slow progress in implementation of the decisions taken at the BIMSTEC Summits and Ministerial Meetings. The Report of Eminent Persons Group, on reforming and revitalizing BIMSTEC, which met in 2024, is being implemented in order to address the institutional shortcomings. The BIMSTEC Secretariat has been working very closely with the Government of Bangladesh, the current Chair of BIMSTEC and I would like to assure you that BIMSTEC is poised to play a crucial role in security and sustainable development of Bay of Bengal region.

As regards, the theme of this Session, a lot of has already been said about the contemporary geopolitical and geo-economic situation. As we know, the world has always faced one crisis or other. I cannot think of any period in history when the world was entirely peaceful, free of any conflicts and crises. Having said that, I agree that the world is witnessing today a number of crises and the present era has rightly been described as an era of constant and inter-related multiple crises.

While the rules-based international order is in a flux and under stress, it is not right to say the existing international order has completely collapsed. A vast number of countries, from both Global South and North, continue to abide by it and support it. Even if we accept for the sake of discussion that the rules-based international order has collapsed, there is no clarity on when and what kind of new international order would emerge out of the chaotic world today.

We also need to remember that since the dawn of 21st century there has been a gradual shift in global power equations and a multipolar world, including a multipolar Asia, has taken shape.

Further, in spite of the grove challenges to the rules-based international order, the support for multilateralism and multilateral institutions, including the UN and International Organisations, has not diminished if we consider how frequently multilateralism and multilateral organizations were mentioned by the world leaders at the UN in their statements during the recently concluded High-Level Segment of the 81st UNGA Session.

It has been reported that, besides the mention of UN Security Council and Human Rights, the world leaders most frequently mentioned Sustainable Development, Artificial Intelligence and Climate Change, precisely the 3 key global challenges that the countries worldwide face today.

Ever since the SDG Agenda 2030 was agreed in 2015, developing countries have been facing enormous challenges in realizing their Sustainable Development Goals due to lack of adequate financing, their worsening debt situation, lack of access to technologies and growing trade protectionism. The outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 caused a huge setback to the efforts of developing countries to realise their Sustainable Development Goals. The worsening global political, economic and trade environment during past 4-5 years has only aggravated the challenges to realization of SDGs.

The developing countries, particularly those in South and Southeast Asia, have been adversely impacted by the conflicts in Europe and Middle East, causing disruptions in global trade, energy supplies and commodity supply chains, resulting in energy and food crisis. These crises have aggravated political instability and worsened economic situation in many countries. These challenges have been further compounded by the adverse impact of climate change, due to global warming, and the new and emerging transformative technologies, particularly AI.

What choices do the countries impacted by global crises have. We must remember that there are a number of factors which are beyond their control. The primary challenge faced by the affected countries is to take steps to ameliorate the domestic impacts of the global crises, while continuing to strive to make progress towards realization of their SDGs.

As regards the external environment, in this rapidly evolving global political environment, what are the foreign policy choices that the countries should make: keep all their options open; hedge against uncertainties; follow a non-political, pragmatic and interest-based foreign policy; and explore expand all possible avenues for bilateral and multilateral cooperation, within the neighbourhood and beyond, aimed at expanding their access to resources, markets, investments technologies and finances.

Since the key external challenges that countries are facing today are essentially global in nature, no country can deal with them acting alone. The global crises need global and regional solutions.

The global multilateral institutions have been facing their own challenges and have not been effective in addressing the multiple challenges being faced by the developing countries. Both, the UN Bodies and International Organisations have been financially stressed and compelled to cut their size and reduce the footprints of their programmes.
In this scenario, the salience of regional multilateralism has grown and it is believed that regional cooperation can contribute to the initiatives being taken by the countries domestically to deal with their developmental and security challenges. It is widely believed and historically proven that regional organizations are better suited to engage in tangible cooperation, because of their small membership and their ability to find solutions through consensus.

In Bay of Bengal region, as I said earlier, BIMSTEC is poised to emerge as a dynamic and effective regional organization, committed to assist its member States to deal with various challenges they face in realisation of their SDGs and in addressing their security threats of transnational nature. The comprehensive agenda of BIMSTEC includes: Agriculture and Food Security; Blue Economy; Connectivity; Culture; Disaster Management; Energy; Environment and Climate Change; Fiscal and Monetary Policy; Fisheries and Livestock; Health; Human Resource Development; Mountain Economy; People to People Contact Forums; Poverty Alleviation; Science, Technology and Innovation; Security; Trade & Investment; Tourism; Women Development. BIMSTEC has all the institutional structures and mechanisms in place to translate the sectoral Action Plans into tangible cooperation.