*Annex III*

**Special Remarks by H.E. Indra Mani Pandey, BIMSTEC Secretary General at the First Meeting of BIMSTEC Senior Health Officials**
**10 November 2026, Colombo, Sri Lanka**

**Dr. Anil Jayasinghe, Secretary, Ministry of Health and Mass Media,**
**Excellencies, Distinguished Heads of Delegation, Delegates from the BIMSTEC Member States,**
**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Namaskar, A very Good Morning to you all!

It's a great pleasure to welcome you to the First Meeting of BIMSTEC Senior Health Officials'. I would like to express my gratitude to the Government of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, the Lead member State for Health Sector, for hosting this first Meeting of BIMSTEC Senior Health Officials, preceding the 1st Meeting of BIMSTEC Health Ministers, to be held tomorrow.

I commend you for holding online consultations to finalize Draft Provisional Agenda of today's Meeting and tomorrow's Meeting of Health Ministers as well as Draft Joint Ministerial Statement.

**Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,**

As you are aware, the threats to the health of human beings, animals and plants transcend national borders, as illustrated by Covid Pandemics, and no country can deal with them alone. Global and regional cooperation is considered a prerequisite for responding to the existing and emerging challenges to Health. The BIMSTEC member States have long recognised the importance of regional cooperation in health. 'Public Health' was identified as a priority sector at the 8th BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting, held in Dhaka in December 2005, with Thailand as the Lead member State.

Before I proceed to speak about the progress made in regional cooperation in Health Sector under BIMSTEC, I would like to take this opportunity to speak briefly about BIMSTEC.

BIMSTEC is an inter-governmental organisation with 7 member States, contiguous or located in close proximity to Bay of Bengal. Out of our 7 member States, 5 - Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka- are from South Asia and 2 - Myanmar and Thailand - are from South East Asia. BIMSTEC, thus, serves as a vital bridge between the two sub-regions of Asia: Southeast Asia and South Asia.

BIMSTEC was established in June 1997 to create a platform for forging cooperation between South and South East Asia. We have since been able to create mechanisms and build institutional structures which are considered essential for forging cooperation. BIMSTEC has its own Charter, which entered into force in May 2024, and its vision for regional cooperation is enshrined in BIMSTEC Bangkok Vision 2030, which was adopted at the 6th BIMSTEC Summit held in Bangkok in April 2025. BIMSTEC has well-established core and sectoral mechanisms, including Summits, Ministerial Meetings, SOM, Sectoral Ministerial Meetings and Sectoral SOM.

BIMSTEC has a comprehensive agenda, comprising 18 diverse areas of cooperation, with one or more sectors grouped in 7 Groups, with each member State leading cooperation in one Group. For your information, Bangladesh leads cooperation in Trade & Investment, Fiscal and Monetary Policy, Women Development and Blue Economy. Bhutan leads Environment and Climate Change as well as Mountain Economy sectors. India leads Security, Energy and Disaster Management sectors. Myanmar leads Agriculture and Food Security as well as Livestock and Fisheries sectors. Nepal leads Poverty Alleviation, People-to-People Forums, Tourism and Culture sectors. Sri Lanka leads Science, Technology and Innovation, Health and Human Resource Development and Thailand leads Connectivity Sector.

There are numerous sectoral Expert Groups and Working Groups and their sub-groups. There are sectoral Action Plans to pursue cooperation in various sectors, which are being implemented. It has a Permanent Secretariat in Dhaka, since 2014, for anchoring its activities.

BIMSTEC member States have set up 5 BIMSTEC Centers, including 2 in India, 1 in Bhutan, 1 in Sri Lanka and 1 in Thailand. There are proposals to set up 10 more BIMSTEC Centres - 4 in India; 2 in Bangladesh; 2 in Sri Lanka; 1 in Thailand; and 1 in Nepal. BIMSTEC has negotiated numerous Conventions, Agreements as well as MoUs and MoAs.

BIMSTEC, thus, has a vast and clearly defined agenda for regional cooperation and it has in place institutional mechanisms to pursue the same. Since BIMSTEC member States face similar developmental and security challenges, which they cannot address alone, they consider BIMSTEC a vital instrument for realization of their security and sustainable development goals. The geographical contiguity, historical linkages and shared cultural heritage of the BIMSTEC member States, provide a solid foundation for forging regional cooperation. BIMSTEC takes its decisions by consensus, it enjoys the requisite political support of its members, it has been focused on forging tangible cooperation and has stayed away from political issues.

BIMSTEC Charter, adopted in March 2022, empowers BIMSTEC to engage in external relations to foster mutually beneficial cooperation with its developmental partners. BIMSTEC already has MoUs with ADB, IFPRI, UNODC, IORA and MoUs with a few other organizations like UNESCAP and UNOPS are under consideration. We are open to explore opportunities for working together with the interested countries as well as other UN, international and regional organizations. I am pleased to inform you that the Charter of BIMSTEC also allows us to welcome Observers and new members in accordance with the established procedures.

Since a presentation will be made later by the Secretariat, I will refrain from presenting a detailed outline of the progress made in regional cooperation in Health sector. I will only highlight a few key developments. As you are aware, cooperation in health sector during initial years had remained focused on traditional medicine. The Plan of Action for Development of Traditional Medicine was finalised in 2020. Progress has been made in implementation of the key strands of the Action Plan.

India has developed the BIMSTEC Traditional Medicine Portal. The possible approaches to developing a BIMSTEC pharmacopoeia are under consideration. India has proposed to set up a BIMSTEC Centre in Traditional Medicine, an initiative announced by Hon'ble Prime Minister of India at the 6th Summit. The Member States have reported on progress in collaborative research into traditional medicine used for COVID-19 and diabetes. The Lead member State will compile the findings and evidence into a comprehensive regional document, for publication as an official BIMSTEC document. Since the Action Plan also covers matters related to Traditional Medicine knowledge (TMK), Genetic Resources (GR) and Intellectual Property Rights (IPR), in September this year, India hosted the 3rd BIMSTEC Conference on TMK, GR and IPR in Goa.

**Excellencies, distinguished delegates,**

Let me briefly talk about the progress made in forging cooperation in Public Health domain. Although there was a lot of emphasis on cooperation in Public Health domain, it was not until the 17th BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting in 2021 that it was proposed to set up a mechanism under BIMSTEC to deal with public health. At the Fifth BIMSTEC Summit in 2022, our Leaders agreed to establish an Expert Group on Public Health and encouraged development of a Plan of Action, alongside exploration of opportunities for international support.

Sri Lanka was designated as the Lead Member State for cooperation in Health sector. The 1st Meeting of the Expert Group on Public Health, held in July 2023, finalized the Plan of Action on Public Health for 2023-2025, which was further revised for 2027-2030 by the 2nd Meeting of the Expert Group held in May 2026. The revised Plan of Action identifies four Areas of Priority: (i) regional governance and coordination structures for health security; (ii) coordinated disease surveillance, early warning and laboratory networks; (iii) regional One Health workforce capacity and surge response; and (iv) collaborative research, resource mobilization and communication.

Apart from the progress in implementation of the Action Plan, Thailand has set up a BIMSTEC Centre on Tropical Medicine and has organized a few capacity building programs. A BIMSTEC Centre of Excellence on Public Health has been proposed by Sri Lanka. A Regional Zoonotic Disease Observatory and Early Warning System has been proposed by Bangladesh. Collectively, these Centers aim to enhance disease surveillance, pandemic preparedness, rapid response, research, technical training and cross-border collaboration, strengthening the regional resilience against public health threats and promoting sustainable cooperation in healthcare.

**Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,**

BIMSTEC has also been engaged in external partnerships in health sector. The BIMSTEC Secretariat in collaboration with the World Intellectual Property Organization, has organized a Virtual Information Session titled "Intellectual Property Rights (IP), Traditional Knowledge & Traditional Cultural Expressions" on 30 June-1 July 2025, to enhance the understanding of IP. Further, the Secretariat is engaged in consultation with the SEARO of WHO to forge partnerships through signing a Memorandum of Understanding.

Moreover, the BIMSTEC Secretariat has been involved in implementation of the SAR PPR Project of the World Bank. As you are aware, in April 2023, the World Bank had expressed its willingness to support implementation of the 'BIMSTEC Plan of Action on Public Health 2023-2025', particularly in area of pandemic prevention, preparedness, and response (PPR). It has signed a Letter of Agreement with FAO (designated by the Bank) for establishing a Project Management Unit at the Secretariat. Since July 2026, the PMU has been working towards implementation of the WB Project and other initiatives under the BIMSTEC Plan of Action with the funding support of the World Bank.

**Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,**

I would like to draw your kind attention to the Secretariat's proposal for establishment of a BIMSTEC Centre for Disease Control (CDC). The proposals made by Sri Lanka for establishing a BIMSTEC Centre on Public Health and by Bangladesh for developing a Regional Zoonotic Disease Observatory and Early Warning System, address only specific aspects of regional public health cooperation. A regional CDC would provide a broader institutional mechanism for coordinating regional efforts on disease surveillance, prevention, preparedness, response and control, including cross-border health threats and emerging infectious diseases. I would, therefore, urge you to give due consideration to this proposal and mandate the BIMSTEC Secretariat to develop a Concept Paper on BIMSTEC CDC for consideration of the Expert Group through circulation.

**Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,**

Your Meeting today and the Meeting tomorrow of Health Ministers marks a milestone in health cooperation under BIMSTEC. You have the responsibility to not only review the progress so far but also identify priorities and measures for future cooperation. As we consider proposals from Member States and review ongoing initiatives, let us draw on one another's experience to identify practical next steps.

The outcomes of this Meeting will inform tomorrow's Ministerial Meeting and help shape the future direction of BIMSTEC cooperation in health. I look forward to constructive and result-oriented deliberations as we work towards outcomes that reflect our shared aspirations and advance our common health objectives.

The BIMSTEC Secretariat stands ready to work closely with the Member States to implement the decisions taken by you today, including exploring the opportunities for collaboration with external partners, including WHO and WB.

I Thank you for your kind attention and wish you success in your deliberations.

Namaskar!