Editorial

We are witnessing unprecedented times with the COVID-19 pandemic. Countries around the world are doing their best to contain the spread of the virus and many have gone into lockdowns as an extreme measure. The BIMSTEC Member States are no exception. So many people are suffering and our frontline people are working round the clock to combat this virus. All focus is now on trying to stop the spread of the virus, treating the patients and working on strategies to keep the economy going.

In the midst of such difficult times it is also heartening to see countries helping each other by allowing special evacuation flights and sending medical equipment and facilities to other affected countries. We are encouraged to see the SAARC countries come together through the initiative of Prime Minister Modi of India in organizing a virtual meeting of the leaders and establishing a COVID-19 Emergency Fund.

For us at the BIMSTEC Secretariat, we are trying to keep the office going by working from home. Many of the activities, especially meetings will not take place as planned since we do not know when this pandemic would end. The Secretariat is in the process of procuring the necessary equipment to enable us to have some meetings conducted virtually as soon as the situation improves a little. Our thoughts and prayers are with the people of BIMSTEC region and we hope that collectively we will be able to win this fight against COVID 19 pandemic.

The Twentieth Senior Officials’ (SOM) Meeting was held on 3 March 2020 in Colombo, Sri Lanka and was attended by all the Member States. As the first SOM to be held after the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit, it reviewed the progress of activities since the Summit. The Meeting finalized the draft text of the BIMSTEC Charter and the rationalization of sectors and sub-sectors of BIMSTEC to be submitted to the Seventeenth BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting with the expectation of these being adopted by the Fifth BIMSTEC Summit. The Meeting also considered various MoAs and MoUs, and recommended three i) BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters; ii) Memorandum of Association (MoA) on the Establishment of BIMSTEC Technology Transfer Facility (TTF) in Colombo, Sri Lanka; and iii) Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Mutual Cooperation between Diplomatic Academies/Training Institutions of BIMSTEC Member States. The Meeting also decided that the First Meeting of the Expert Group of Financial Experts will be held to discuss the establishment of the BIMSTEC Development Fund.
Mr. Hitoshi Hirata, Chief Representative, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Bangladesh Office met Ambassador M. Shahidul Islam, Secretary General of BIMSTEC at his Office on 05 January 2020. They discussed the possibility of future collaboration between the two organizations.

The Secretary General of BIMSTEC, H.E. M Shahidul Islam paid tribute at the Mujibnagar Mausoleum, Mujibnagar, Meherpur on 12 January 2020
H.E. M. Shahidul Islam, Secretary General of BIMSTEC met Mr. A B M Ghulam Mostafa, President of Bangladesh Ayurved Foundation on 20 January 2020 at the BIMSTEC Secretariat.

Mr. A F M Fakhrul Islam Munshi, President, Bangladesh Agro-processors Association (BAPA) met Ambassador M. Shahidul Islam, Secretary General of BIMSTEC on 20 January 2020 at the BIMSTEC Secretariat.
Ambassador M. Shahidul Islam, Secretary General of BIMSTEC called on H.E. Mr. Masud Bin Momen, Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh on 22 January 2020 at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh.

Mr. Faruque Hassan, President of Dutch-Bangla Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Honorary Consul General, Greek Consulate in Dhaka met with Ambassador M Shahidul Islam, Secretary General of BIMSTEC at his office on 23 January 2020.
H.E. M. Shahidul Islam, Secretary General of BIMSTEC met Lieutenant General Md Mahfuzur Rahman OSP, rcds, ndc, afwc, psc, PhD, Principal Staff Officer (PSO), Armed Forces Division on 26 January 2020 at his office in Dhaka Cantonment.

H.E. M. Shahidul Islam, Secretary General of BIMSTEC met H.E. Mr. Benoit Préfontaine, the High Commissioner of Canada to Bangladesh and Ms. Gillian Frost, Executive Director, Asia Bureau, Global Affairs Canada on 28 January 2020 at the BIMSTEC Secretariat, Dhaka.

H. E. M. Shahidul Islam, Secretary General of BIMTEC visited Chattogram Port on 06 February 2020 and had a discussion meeting with Mr. Md. Kamrul Ameen, Acting Chairman of Chittagong Port Authority and other Senior Officials.
A press briefing on the BIMSTEC Traditional Healthcare Expo 2020 was organized at the BIMSTEC Secretariat on 10 February 2020. The organizers of the Expo, the Indian Chamber of Commerce and the Bangladesh Ayurved Foundation briefed the media on the objectives and plans of the two-day event. The Secretary General of BIMSTEC commended for organizers for the private sector led initiative of cooperation and collaboration in the region and wished the event much success.

The Secretary General of BIMSTEC, His Excellency Ambassador M. Shahidul Islam visited the BIMSTEC Centre for Weather and Climate (BCWC) located at the National Centre for Medium Range Weather Forecasting (NCMRWF) in Noida, New Delhi, India on 13 February 2020. He was accompanied by BIMSTEC Director (Connectivity and Security), Mr. Pankaj Hazarika. His Excellency, the Secretary General observed the various facilities in the Centre and also interacted with the participants of the First Special Course for Diplomats from the BIMSTEC Member States.

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www.youtube.com/channel/UCMQDUzdRfUbE9ZgCQ3D6ByA
Ambassador M Shahidul Islam, Secretary General of BIMSTEC attended the BIMSTEC National Conference on Combating Drug Trafficking in New Delhi, India on 13 February 2020.

Ambassador M. Shahidul Islam, Secretary General of BIMSTEC called on His Excellency Mr. Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Hon’ble President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka on 04 March 2020 at the Presidential Secretariat in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Ambassador M. Shahidul Islam, Secretary General of BIMSTEC delivered a Lecture on “Sub-Regionalism and BIMSTEC: Bangladesh perspective” at the Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka on 14 March 2020.

BIMSTEC Secretary General Ambassador M Shahidul Islam with his departmental alumni Professor Ehsanul Haque, Professor Dr. Delwar Hossain, Chairman of the Department of IR, Professor Dr. Ruhul Amin and Mujtoba Ahmed Murshed.
Ambassador M. Shahidul Islam, Secretary General of BIMSTEC met with H.E. Peter Thomas Fahrenholtz, Ambassador, Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany to Bangladesh at the German Embassy, Dhaka on 07 January 2020.

Ambassador M. Shahidul Islam, Secretary General of BIMSTEC met with Dr. Ahmad Kaikaus, Principal Secretary to the Hon’ble Prime Minister of Bangladesh at the Prime Minister’s Office, Dhaka on 30 January 2020.

Ambassador M. Shahidul Islam, Secretary General of BIMSTEC attended the conference on "Talk on Bangladesh-Nepal Relations: Prospects for Sub-Regional Cooperation" at the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS), Dhaka on 18 February 2020.

Ambassador M. Shahidul Islam, Secretary General of BIMSTEC called on His Excellency Mr. Mahinda Rajapaksa, MP; Hon’ble Prime Minister of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka on 04 March 2020 at the Temple Trees, in Colombo, Sri Lanka.
The Secretary General of BIMSTEC graced the inaugural of the 1st BIMSTEC Film, Media and Journalism Studies Conference organized by Dhaka University and the American International University of Dhaka on 19 January 2020 as the Chief Guest. Ambassador M. Shahidul Islam commended the organizers for their initiative in organizing such a forum that brought together scholars and practitioners to share their experiences and exchange ideas. While updating on some of the main activities of BIMSTEC, he emphasized the need for more platforms for people-to-people contact to promote trust and confidence in creating an enabling environment for deeper regional integration.

The Third Meeting of the BIMSTEC Task Force in Traditional Medicine was held in Kathmandu, Nepal from 4-5 February 2020. The inaugural of the meeting was graced by His Excellency Banu BaktaDakal, the Hon’ble Minister of Health and Population of the Government of Nepal. All Member States participated in the meeting and discussed progress and further actions needed in the development of Traditional Medicine. The Meeting finalized and adopted a Plan of Action for implementation.
BIMSTEC Traditional Health Expo organized by ICC and Bangladesh Ayurved Foundation on 12 February 2020

Ambassador M. Shahidul Islam graced the opening of the BIMSTEC Traditional Healthcare Expo 2020 organized by the Indian Chamber of Commerce and Bangladesh Ayurved Foundation as a Guest of Honor on 12 February 2020 at the International Convention City Bashundhara, Dhaka. In his address, the Secretary General underlined the increasing significance that traditional healthcare plays in the region as well as beyond in improving the well-being of people. He highlighted the activities of BIMSTEC in the development of Traditional Medicine at the government to government level and appreciated such private sector led initiatives in promoting traditional healthcare.

First Special Course for Diplomats from the BIMSTEC Member States

As announced by the Hon’ble Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi at the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit held in Kathmandu, Nepal, the Sushma Swaraj Institute of Foreign Services of the Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India conducted the First Special Course for Diplomats from the Member States from 3-15 February 2020 in New Delhi. A total of 19 diplomats from Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, India and 2 diplomats from the BIMSTEC Secretariat participated in the course. The two-week long course included modules on India’s foreign policy,
A Conference on Enhancing Energy Cooperation in the BIMSTEC Region was jointly organized by the BIMSTEC Secretariat and SARI/EI at the BIMSTEC Secretariat from 25-26 February 2020 with the objective to create awareness among stakeholders for accelerated regional energy cooperation and improved cross border energy trade in the region. The Conference also hoped to help in taking forward the implementation of various articles of the MOU for establishment of the BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection and in forging a partnership among various stakeholders. Government officials, diplomats, energy experts and think tanks from the BIMSTEC Member States attended the conference. The speakers emphasized the need to harmonize the operational, legal and regulatory frameworks of the BIMSTEC countries for implementing an interconnected regional electricity grid.

The Conference was inaugurated by H.E. Dr. Tawfic-e-Elahi Chowdhury, BB, Power, Energy and Mineral Resources Advisor to the Hon’ble Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Ambassador M. Shahidul Islam, Secretary General of BIMSTEC, and Mr. Derrick S. Brown, Mission Director of USAID/Bangladesh. The Chief Guest shared his vision on the evolvement of energy and the need for more sophisticated systems to deal with the shifting scenario and creation of an enabling environment for power trade. He called upon development partners to mobilize investments. Representatives of the interested partner agencies of USAID, JICA, ADB and the World Bank assured their commitment to support the BIMSTEC region.
The BIMSTEC Expo 2020 was held at the World Trade Centre in Mumbai, India from 26-28 February 2020. Around fifty companies from the BIMSTEC Member States participated in the Expo to showcase and sell products including handicrafts, jewelry, textiles, paintings, Ayurvedic medicine and many more. The Chief Guest, the Hon’ble Minister of the Ministry of Commerce of the Government of Bangladesh, Mr. Tipu Munshi and Bollywood actress Poonam Dhillon jointly inaugurated the Expo. A conference with the theme "Re-positioning BIMSTEC as A Sustainable Business Hub" was also held alongside the Expo. On behalf of the Secretary General of BIMSTEC, Dr. DamaruBallabhaPaudel, Director of Social Affairs delivered the keynote address. In his speech, Dr. Paudel highlighted the priority focus needed in improving business environment and connectivity for both BIMSTEC and the business enterprises of this region. He also underlined the importance of government-private sector partnership to improve the business climate.

Third BIMSTEC Permanent Working Committee (BPWC) Meeting, 1-2 March 2020, Colombo, Sri Lanka

The Third BIMSTEC Permanent Working Committee (BPWC) Meeting was held from 1-2 March 2020 in Colombo, Sri Lanka ahead of the Twentieth Senior Officials’ (SOM)Meeting. The Meeting discussed and deliberated a number of important issues like the BIMSTEC Charter, rationalization of sectors and sub-sectors of BIMSTEC, modalities for establishment of the BIMSTEC Development Fund, status of BIMSTEC Agreements, MoUs and other Legal Instruments envisaged to be signed at the Fifth BIMSTEC Summit among others.
The BIMSTEC Secretariat expressed its solidarity with the Government and the people of Bangladesh on the occasion of the birth centenary celebration of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Father of the Nation of Bangladesh. A banner paying tribute to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was unveiled at the BIMSTEC Secretariat at Gulshan. This banner will be on display during the entire Mujib Borsho, beginning on 17 March 2020 and running through 26 March 2021. The banner was unveiled by Ambassador M Shahidul Islam, Secretary General of BIMSTEC in the presence of Directors representing Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar and Nepal and other officials of the Secretariat.

Speaking on the occasion, the Secretary General recalled that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was a visionary statesman, who envisioned regional cooperation in this part of the world for greater peace, progress and prosperity. He added that BIMSTEC, which brings together seven nations surrounding the Bay of Bengal, epitomized the vision of Bangabandhu.

COVID-19

With the outbreak of Corona Virus 2019 being declared pandemic, most countries around the world are seeing increasing number of positive cases of infection daily and the Member States of BIMSTEC are no exception. As a result, and in support of control measures that are being adopted by the Member States, the activities planned for the near future are being postponed. It is hoped that the situation will improve soon and that regular activities can resume. At the same time the Secretariat is also exploring possibilities of organizing some meetings via video conferencing facilities.