Statement by MoS (RRS) at the 19th BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting, March 09, 2023 (virtual)

Excellency Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai and our esteemed Chair

Excellency Tenzing Lekphell, Secretary General BIMSTEC

Distinguished Colleagues,

At the outset allow me to thank our Chair for the careful preparations and arrangements that have been made for this virtual meeting.

The fact that we are approving several documents at the end of the meeting, is further testimony to the skillful leadership that has been provided to us by Thailand under its Chairmanship.

Excellencies,

India attaches a high priority to the further development of BIMSTEC as a regional organization of the Bay of Bengal. We see the BIMSTEC region as a key element in our “neighborhood first” and “Act East” policies.

As Prime Minister Modi noted in his interventions during the Sri Lanka Summit last year - our region continues to face multiple challenges. These range from grappling with the post-Covid economic setbacks that include inflation, unemployment and growing national indebtedness, to coping with new international security challenges arising from events in Europe.

More than ever before there is a pressing need for all of us to step-up our cooperation at the regional level.
BIMSTEC is now a full fledged regional organization, with a focus on the geography in, and around, the Bay of Bengal. This regional organization provides us a handy platform to achieve the goal of greater regional economic and development cooperation.

I am happy that under your leadership Mr Chairman, BIMSTEC has been able to finalize so many documents. Many of the documents we approve today represent key institution building tasks that will help strengthen BIMSTEC as an organization.

In this context Mr Chairman, I wish to specially commend Secretary General Lekhnhell and Secretariat officials who have played a critical role in ensuring the finalization of so many important documents, particularly through this new practice of ‘anchoring’ Special Meetings of the BPWC (BIMSTEC Permanent Working Committee) at the Secretariat in Dhaka. I also commend the valuable work that the BPWC has been doing since the Sri Lanka Summit, under the Thai Chairmanship, to negotiate and finalize these documents.

Mr. Chairman we must instruct our Senior Officials and National Focal Points to continue this new push at BIMSTEC institution building. This is the need of the hour for the organization.

Excellencies,

We will be approving the Terms of Reference of the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) that was to study the current functioning of BIMSTEC, and suggest practical steps to further strengthen the organization and take our cooperation to the next level.

Yesterday the Senior Officials discussed the idea of launching the EPG as soon as possible. I wholly endorse this idea and would seek your support in this matter. The faster we have an approved set of recommendations from the EPG, the faster we will be able to expand the scope of BIMSTEC cooperation in keeping with the Vision of a Prosperous, Resilient and Open BIMSTEC.

Excellencies,
Under the Charter, Transport Connectivity has been identified as one of the priority areas of BIMSTEC Cooperation. Today we will be approving the “Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation”. I would urge that we give directions to our transport officials to similarly work to rapidly finalize their negotiations on the “BIMSTEC Motor Vehicle Agreement” on a priority basis. Enhanced road transport connectivity will provide a good complement to enhanced Maritime Transportation activity that will be made possible by the new agreement.

Excellencies,

For a region that collectively represents US$ 3.6 Trillion in GDP, we need to take serious note of the fact that intra-BIMSTEC trade is only US$ 77 billion or 5.5% of the total collective international trade of all BIMSTEC member states put together!

It is India's view that we should try and focus on 'Trade Facilitation' in the short and medium term, even while our negotiators continue their efforts to negotiate an FTA. If we can achieve international standards of ‘Trade Facilitation’, I am confident that intra BIMSTEC Trade can be significantly enhanced. At the last Summit Prime Minister Modi announced our decision to commission the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER) to run a capacity development program in collaboration with ADB for BIMSTEC Trade Officials, with the goal of enhancing compliance with the WTO Convention on Trade Facilitation. I am happy to announce that the annual program will begin in May this year. We hope that there will be active participation by other member states.

Excellencies,

India leads the Security pillar of cooperation on this platform. Security and Safety is a necessary condition for economic and development cooperation in the BIMSTEC region. We are all aware that the BIMSTEC region continues to face the ever present threat of terrorism, and also a whole range of non traditional security threats. It is only through closer collaboration and cooperation amongst our law enforcement agencies that we will be able to meet these security challenges.

As lead country for the Security sector, we would urge rapid progress in – the ratification of the MLAT on Criminal Matters, the early conclusion of the negotiations on the Convention Against Trafficking of Persons, and more vigorous implementation of the
BIMSTEC Convention on Cooperation in Combating International Terrorism, Transnational Organized Crime and Illicit Drug Trafficking. This will not be possible without special attention of member states, and I urge you to instruct the relevant officials in this regard.

Excellencies,

Our efforts to generate funds from within the grouping for BIMSTEC wide projects has not quite worked out the way we had envisaged.

However, if we are serious about accelerating cooperation activities on this platform, like other regional organizations we must have the ability to tap into the significant financial and technical resources that are available in the international donor community. I recommend that we task our officials to work out a systematic policy for BIMSTEC so that this becomes possible.

Excellencies,

After 25 years of its existence BIMSTEC has made the full transition from a grouping of member states into a full fledged regional organization of the Bay of Bengal.

India is committed to making BIMSTEC a dynamic, effective and result-oriented regional organization for promoting a prosperous, resilient and open Bay of Bengal Region. To achieve this goal I would like to reiterate Prime Minister Modi’s call to transform the Bay of Bengal into a Bridge of Connectivity, a bridge of Prosperity and a bridge of Security.

Thank You. I look forward to a fruitful and productive meeting this afternoon.

Thank you Chair!