

**ADDRESS BY
HER EXCELLENCY BEGUM KHALEDA ZIA
HON'BLE PRIME MINISTER, PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF BANGLADESH
AT FIRST BIMST-EC SUMMIT**

BANGKOK, 31 JULY 2004

Mr. Chairman,
Excellencies,
Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

I am deeply honoured and privileged to be able to participate at this historic event marking our first ever Summit meeting. Seven years ago, the BIMST-EC, then BIST-EC, was launched with some cautious optimism. Today, I am happy to note that the forum has indeed matured into an effective regional grouping. Our presence here at the Summit level signifies the importance that we all attach to it.

Mr. Chairman,
I remain serenely confident that under your wise and dynamic stewardship our deliberations.

Excellencies

Our region is a tapestry of diversity. Our collective strength lies in this diversity: in complementing each other's strength and where need be, assisting in overcoming the weaknesses. The beauty of our strength lies in weaving this diversity into a multihued collage of peace, harmony and prosperity for our peoples.

Our grouping has been further strengthened with the joining of two new members. Let me extend a very warm welcome to the Kingdom of Bhutan and the Kingdom of Nepal in our midst, today. Our gathering is a happy mix between South Asia and south East Asia, two regions, traditionally enjoying very close cultural and commercial ties. Coincidentally, this year, we have also seen two important developments in the two distinct regional fora in which we have overlapping membership. I speak of the conclusion of the Agreement on South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) and the Framework Agreement for a BIMST-EC Free Trade Area

Mr. Chairman and Excellencies

There exists a significant potential for mutually beneficial cooperation among our countries particularly, in the economic and commercial fields. Experience has shown that progress and prosperity of our 1.3 billion people who represent nearly one-fifth of humanity, can be better achieved by sharing our experiences, pooling our resources and coordinating our efforts. This common aspiration had brought our nations together in 1997 in first launching the BIMST-EC.

This summit provides us an important opportunity to take stock of the progress achieved since then, and to chart a future course of action for our grouping.

All signs evident indicate that Asia would be the growth center of the world in future. Our region richly endowed with natural and human resources can and must no doubt; make an impressive dent in this emerging scenario.

An early conclusion of the free trade negotiations is a matter of importance for us. Such negotiations should be conducted keeping in mind the interest of the least developed countries and should be within the framework of global trade regimes.

As we are poised to enter into regional free trade, I believe that BIMST-EC should aim at equitable growth of our economies. Our strategies should be supportive of the growing sectors, particularly those facing the challenges of globalization.

Our efforts should remain focused on specific areas of cooperation and on projects with well-defined targets. These could include pharmaceuticals and drugs, textiles, leather, jute, small and cottage industries, agriculture, health care and Information Technology and tourism.

Meaningful cooperation under BIMST-EC would require our special focus on the development of key infrastructures in particular, transportation and communication linkages to enhance flow of trade, tourism, investment and people to people contacts.

The "Visit BIMST-EC year 2004" has provided fresh impetus to greater cooperation in the tourism sector. Bangladesh hosted the Seventh BIMST-EC Tourism Expert Group Meeting in Dhaka in May, this year. A number of important ideas have been developed through this exercise. Efforts should now be made for developing a comprehensive strategy for promotion of tourism within our region through greater coordination among national tourist organizations and national airlines.

We should put special emphasis on sustainable energy development programmes. Energy security, as has been underlined in the recently held ACD meeting, is a major concern not only for us but also for the whole of Asia.

Sustainable use of marine resources in the Bay of Bengal is vital for littoral countries. I call for making this a special area of BIMST-EC attention.

The private sector should play a lead role in BIMST-EC projects, wherever possible. I would encourage investors, entrepreneurs and the Chambers of Commerce to explore further areas of joint venture and cooperation.

BIMST-EC should also foster people to people contact to establish a greater sense of community among our nations. Interactions among our peoples at various levels would also give strength to BIMST-EC's formal processes of cooperation. Bangladesh has already circulated a comprehensive paper on people to people contact earlier this year. I believe, the paper would form the basis of future deliberations on this important subject.

Mr. Chairman,

Human resources development and poverty alleviation remain priority concerns for the developing South. In Bangladesh, we have invested heavily in education, health, family planning and poverty alleviation, empowerment of women and in strengthening our social, physical and administrative infrastructures. My government is firmly resolved to build a truly democratic order in the country, which evolves around the concept of human resources development, advancement of human rights and social welfare.

I am happy to inform that Bangladesh has launched a High-Tech Park at Gazipur near Dhaka that would house, among others, an ICT village and a Human Resources Development Institute. This undertaking, I hope, will also receive our collective support.

Mr. Chairman,

The issue of gender mainstreaming is a common concern for all of us in the region. Despite some perceptible progress, equality continues to elude the vast majority of our women. I therefore, strongly feel that empowerment of women should be an area of our collective focus.

Mr. Chairman,

Another area, which would require our collective attention, is the issue of terrorism and transnational crime. Bangladesh has consistently taken a firm and unequivocal stand against all forms of terrorism and transnational crimes. I believe our nations should coordinate their efforts in joining the global fight against terrorism. We must at the same time, sincerely address the root causes of terrorism in banishing the scourge totally.

Mr. Chairman,

I have shared here some of our thoughts in taking the agenda of our grouping forward. May i however, emphasize here the without a well structured follow-up mechanism for monitoring progress much of our vision and plans would remain mere rhetoric. It should therefore, be our collective resolve to try and bridge all gaps that may remain between promises and reality.

I am confident that the outcome of our meeting here will reflect our shared perceptions and firm commitment for closer cooperation

May I also add that our nations having overlapping membership of two distinct regional fora can indeed cooperate at various levels. As Bangladesh takes over the Chairmanship of SAARC next year, i personally look forward to mutually fruitful cooperation between SAARC and ASEAN and between SAARC and BIMST-EC for the betterment of the People of this whole region.

Mr. Chairman,

It would be a gross remiss on my part, if I were to conclude without conveying our deep appreciation for the excellent arrangements so meticulously made to make our visit to this "land of the smiles" truly memorable. On behalf of my delegation and on my own behalf, i would like to thank you and through you the friendly people of Thailand for your characteristic generous Royal Thai hospitality

I thank you, Mr. Chairman