

**PRIME MINISTER'S SPEECH AT THE INAUGURAL
BIMST-EC SUMMIT
Bangkok
July 31, 2004**

Mr. Chairman,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

May I join the speakers who have preceded me in conveying to you our congratulations for assuming the Chairmanship of the first BIMST-EC Summit. I also wish to thank the Government of Thailand for its warm and gracious hospitality. This is my first overseas visit as the Prime Minister of India and I am gratified to be here in Thailand. Mr. Chairman, yours is a country with which we have enduring and historical bonds and this occasion represents a new phase in a partnership which has been mutually enriching.

Excellencies, we in India view our quest for closer and mutually beneficial ties with all our neighbours as a logical response to the challenges with which contend. These challenges that we must address and overcome are varied and disparate. The world continues to be riven by poverty, inequity, disease and highly skewed access to resources at a time when science and technology have placed solutions within our reach. The global political environment fosters insecurity, making our task even more complex, and our endeavors more urgent. The intolerance bred by religious extremism can divide societies and people and we neglect it at our peril. The scourge of terrorism is unfortunately one with which we all must grapple – as a global phenomenon and as an everyday reality. The areas of conflict are coming closer to us.

But we cannot stay our efforts. We have to work – we have to work for peace and for security, and to create a new climate in which we can concentrate on our primary responsibility – a better life for all our peoples. The solutions to some of these problems lie with Governments. Equally, we have to reach out beyond, to find imaginative answers to intractable issues. This is the way we have chosen in India. It is this perspective – that the many dimensions of the challenges we face can only be solved by working together that brings us here today. A global order, which is better representative and more responsive to the needs of our times, must include the reform of the United Nations and a restructuring of the Security Council.

Excellencies, in that spirit, I deem it a privilege to be present on this occasion along with our close neighbours and friends representing the BIMST-EC countries. We belong to a region with many natural complementarities. Our bonds run deep in time, strengthened by strong economic, cultural and civilizational links. The colonial intervention over the last century may have weakened these links somewhat, but has not in any way diminished the yearning of our people to revive them. We see BIMST-EC as a collective forum for giving full expression to the widely felt need to rediscover the coherence of our region based on the commonality of linkages around the Bay of Bengal.

Regional integration is not antithetical to globalisation, but can be a useful building block. Our collective endeavors can be more than the sum of our individual efforts. BIMST-EC offers us the hope and the opportunity to fulfill this imperative of our times.

We consider our participation in BIMST-EC as a key element in our 'Look East Policy' and long standing approach of good neighbourliness to towards all our neighbours – by land and sea.

The challenge before us is to transform the richness of our human and natural resources into cooperative regional activities promoting development, enhancing prosperity and the well-being of our people, and ensuring our collective security in all its multifarious dimensions.

We need to translate our inherent strengths of geographical contiguity into a community of prosperity and goodwill. Interconnectivity – physical, economic or technological – is of prime importance in building bridges of understanding. We can achieve this long-term vision of shared prosperity and growth through cooperative action based on dialogue and fostering mutual confidence, focusing on aspects that unite us.

Considerable progress has already been achieved in terms of a Framework Agreement on Free Trade and valuable expert-level studies under the six listed areas of cooperation. For instance, we consider that trilateral India-Myanmar-Thailand Highway proposal and the proposed Optical Fibre Telecommunication Link alongside the Highway as projects, which would have considerable importance in the BIMST-EC context.

For a region that is so richly endowed with energy resources, it is imperative that we address the need for their optimal utilization to meet our growing energy demands. India proposes to host a Ministerial Conference on Energy Cooperation in the year 2005 to provide an impetus to our joint efforts in this area.

The vagaries of climate and weather in our region concern us all. To enable all BIMST-EC countries to pool their scientific resources and to benefit from weather forecasting India proposes to set up a BIMST-EC Centre on Weather and Climate in New Delhi . India would also be willing to share its expertise in remote sensing for agriculture, environment and disaster management.

To further explore the vast potential that exists for increasing tourism within our region, India would host a Round Table and Workshop of Tourism Ministers, with the participation of tour operators, hotel representatives and others associated with the tourism industry with the objective of doubling tourism within BIMST-EC region in the next five years.

We are happy to announce 150 scholarships for next year under the ITEC Programme for BIMST-EC countries, in addition to the 150 scholarships offered by India at the Ministerial Meeting in Phuket in February this year. All our countries are richly endowed in traditional systems of medicine. India offers 30 scholarships in this field to enable a productive partnership amongst BIMST-EC countries.

The statement to be issued on the conclusion of this Summit should reflect the collective will of our Governments to carry forward the BIMST-EC vision of mutually beneficial regional cooperation through specific projects. Our mutual confidence would of course be greatly enhanced if we were able to forge a common front against terrorism, gunrunning, narcotics trafficking, which in varying degrees affect us all.

Mr. Chairman , Thailand has played a pioneering role in bringing the BIMST-EC idea to fruition and we thank you for staying the course. It is now our collective responsibility to carry it forward towards purposeful cooperation. In achieving the objectives of BIMST-EC, I would like to reaffirm India 's firm political commitment to regional partnership for mutual benefit and wholehearted support and cooperation with our BIMST-EC partners so that we succeed in our efforts to translate ideals into meaningful cooperation on the ground.

Thank you.

