

**Special Remarks by H.E. Mr. Tenzin Lekphell
Secretary General of BIMSTEC
at the First Meeting of the BIMSTEC Expert Group on Public Health
in Colombo, Sri Lanka**

- Mr. S. Janaka Sri Chandraguptha, Hon'ble Secretary of the Ministry of Health of Sri Lanka
- Dr. Asela Gunawardena, Director General of Health Services of the Ministry of Health
- Heads of Delegation & Distinguished Delegates from the BIMSTEC Member States who are here with us in-person, and those joining us virtually
- Officials of the Government of Sri Lanka
- Ladies and Gentlemen

A very good morning to all of you!

As I was saying day before during the inaugural function of PPR Conference, it is always a pleasure for me to be here in this beautiful city of Colombo and I am personally very happy that I am able to attend the First Meeting of the BIMSTEC Expert Group on Public Health, in person. I thank the Government of Sri Lanka, and in particular the Ministry of Health, for inviting me to be a part of this important Meeting.

Distinguished Delegates,

This Meeting takes place, based on a decision made by the BIMSTEC Ministers of Foreign Affairs, in 2017, to establish a new sub-sector of BIMSTEC Cooperation in Health. This was following a process of rationalisation and reorganisation of the BIMSTEC Sectors of Cooperation. The Ministers also decided that there would be a BIMSTEC Expert Group on Public Health that will be established - to examine the scope of collaboration in Public Health, and develop a BIMSTEC Plan of Action on Health.

Sri Lanka, at the same time, was designated as the Lead Member State for BIMSTEC Cooperation in Health. And soon after the 5th Summit, under the leadership of Sri Lanka, a BIMSTEC Expert Group on Public Health was established. A Draft BIMSTEC Plan of Action on Public Health has also been prepared for the period 2023-2025. And finalising this Plan of Action - during these two days meeting - is one of the most important items on the Agenda.

The Expert Group also has before it, for consideration, - its "Terms of Reference". This is an important document that the Meeting has to finalise, which sets out, among other matters, the calendar for the regular annual meetings of the Expert Group.

Distinguished Delegates,

As all of you who are experts in Public Health are very well aware, Health and Development are interdependent. It is in recognition and acknowledgement of this fact - that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development - incorporated "Promoting Health and Well-being" as one of the 17 Global Goals that make up the SDGs. And as Members of the United Nations, all the BIMSTEC Member States have pledged to work towards achieving the SDGs.

“Promoting Health & Well-being” - and “Achieving the SDGs” is not a task that can be achieved alone. It is extremely important that BIMSTEC partners with international organisations to enhance Public Health capacity in the region. Therefore, as directed by the 17th and 19th Ministerial Meetings, Sri Lanka, again took the lead to explore possible BIMSTEC cooperation with international organisations and seek international support for strengthening BIMSTEC Public Health.

In this regard, all of us – the Secretariat and other Member States would like to extend our appreciation & congratulate the Ministry of Health of Sri Lanka, for bringing The World Bank on board - as a partner in BIMTEC Public Health. With this partnership and team work, I am very confident that we are on the right track - in preparing for future pandemic.

Distinguished Delegates,

In this context, the meeting today has on its Agenda, two important issues to consider –

- One – The proposed Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation between the BIMSTEC Secretariat and the World Bank - on Proposed Collaboration on Strengthening Pandemic Prevention, Preparedness and Response, and Health Systems Resilience Among BIMSTEC Member States; and
- Two – The proposed Institutional Arrangement for Financial Support from the World Bank for Implementation of the BIMSTEC Plan of Action on Public Health from 2023-2025.

I hope that this Meeting will finalise these two important documents.

Along with finalising these documents, I also hope that this Meeting will decide, as encouraged by the 19th Ministerial Meeting, to convene a Meeting of the BIMSTEC Ministers of Health, at an early date. Such a meeting will be a useful platform to demonstrate the commitment of the Health Ministers of the region, - on issues of Public Health that impact the lives of the peoples of this region. It will also certainly - draw the attention of the international community, to consider further assistance to Public Health in the region.

Distinguished Delegates,

The success of this Meeting is important in the context of the next BIMSTEC Summit - that is scheduled to take place just four months from now, in Bangkok, at the end of November this year. The achievements of this Meeting will be reported to the Heads of State and Government during the Summit. I am sure that it would be extremely satisfying for our Leaders - to note that the decisions they took during the last Summit on Public Health, have been fulfilled through the hard work of this Expert Group.

Therefore, as you begin to consider and deliberate on the issues that are on the Agenda of this two-day Meeting, I wish you all success.

In conclusion, I assure you of the Secretariat’s fullest support at all times.

Thank you.
