

**Remarks by H.E. Tenzin Lekphell,
Secretary-General of BIMSTEC**

**Side Event on “Enhancing Cross Border Connectivity Towards SDGs and Shared Prosperity in BBIN
– Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal”**

79th Session of ESCAP, Bangkok, 17 May 2023

Her Excellency Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana

Excellencies,

Friends,

Ladies & Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to sincerely extend my appreciation and thank UNESCAP for organizing this event - (BBIN Connectivity) on the sidelines of 79th Session of the Commission and for including BIMSTEC in this discussion as well.

I am pleased to join your Excellency Madam Armida, the BBIN Ambassadors and other senior dignitaries - and be part of this event on **“Enhancing Cross Border Connectivity towards Sustainable Development Goals and Shared Prosperity in BBIN.**

This is a very appropriate platform for me, personally, and for BIMSTEC as an institution - to listen and hear from Excellencies and distinguished participants on the progress and challenges of cross border connectivity in the BBIN region which is very critical - and also has a direct bearing on the overall progress of BIMSTEC.

Excellencies,

We all know that connectivity is a prerequisite for regional development; and the region’s development is dependent, on how well developed its connectivity and infrastructure facilities are. Excellencies may also agree that despite having the geographical advantage and huge potential for integration, our region has not been able to have a desired level of connectivity; and therefore the region is still considered as one of the least integrated regions with minimal trade, connectivity & cooperation.

Having said that, we must also acknowledge that our leaders and member states are making constant efforts - despite complexities - in their national priorities and preferences.

For instance, the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Connectivity has been adopted in March last year during the 5th Summit and it is now ready for implementation.

Very recently, the BIMSTEC Maritime Cooperation Agreement has also been endorsed by the 19th Ministerial Meeting and will be signed in the upcoming Summit in November this year. We are very hopeful that this Agreement will bring improvement and facilitate seamless trade between our member states.

Further, the BIMSTEC Motor Vehicle Agreement which was drafted in 2017 has not been very progressive in the past, but off late the Agreement has gained some momentum. The next Motor Vehicle Working Group will be meeting in June this year to finalize the draft Agreement and submit to Senior Officials for approval.

On the Energy front, a Memorandum of Understanding has been signed amongst the member states in 2018 - to have an inter-grid connection. Accordingly, a Working Group had been set up and currently they are

trying to finalize two important policy documents that are essential for cross border electricity trade and connectivity. They are:

1. The BIMSTEC Policy for Transmission of Electricity, and
2. The BIMSTEC Policy for Trade, Exchange of Electricity and Tariff Mechanism.

In addition, the Asian Development Bank is developing a BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection Master Plan. We expect the policies and master plan to be finalized in the next meeting of the Working Group which is scheduled in July this year.

And for your information, the BIMSTEC Energy Centre with a board of Directors representing all BIMSTEC member states has also been established and the inaugural function is scheduled in July this year.

Excellencies, these are, in brief, some of the developments that are happening in BIMSTEC in the domain of connectivity and energy.

Now, coming to BBIN - (which is a sub-group in the BIMSTEC region), we are all aware that it is also striving to boost trade and connectivity within these four countries.

A Motor Vehicle Agreement has been signed in 2015 amongst the four BBIN countries which indeed - is a good progress; and we hope it will soon get its way - to implement the agreement. We are aware that discussions on energy trade & connectivity in the BBIN - are also progressing well.

Excellencies, BBIN's success will also be a success story for BIMSTEC. A good network of transport infrastructure & connectivity in BBIN and an efficient cross border trade in energy in BBIN - would also mean better connectivity & better cross border trade in energy for three other BIMSTEC member states as they just lie on the eastern borders of BBIN countries.

Excellencies,

While these connectivity initiatives, discussions and investments by the Governments in the sub region are taking place, it is also interesting to note – the Agartala Rail link, Cross Border Transport through Asian High Way & Inland Waterways Transport identified by UNESCAP as low hanging fruits or early harvest opportunities for Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal. I am sure this proposal from UNESCAP will be useful and worth considering.

Finally, I would like to mention that BIMSTEC and UNESCAP have been associated for quite some time and it has been a pleasure working together. The partnership between the two institutions has indeed been commendable. I am also pleased to inform that, very soon – sometime towards the end of this year, BIMSTEC hopes to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with UNESCAP to formalize our relationship - as well as - strengthen partnership.

Once again, thank you UNESCAP – thank you my friend Makiko - for including us in this event - and we look forward to a fruitful discussion.