

SIXTH BIMST-EC MINISTERIAL MEETING

8 February 2004

Phuket, Thailand

JOINT STATEMENT

The 6th BIMST-EC Ministerial Meeting was held in Phuket, Thailand, on 8 February 2004.

The delegations to the meeting were led by H.E. M. Morshed Khan, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, H.E. Lyonpo Khandu Wangchuk, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Bhutan, H.E. Yashwant Sinha, Minister of External Affairs of the Republic of India, H.E. U Win Aung, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Union of Myanmar, H.E. Dr. Bhekh B. Thapa, Ambassador-at-Large of the Kingdom of Nepal, H.E. Tyronne Fernando, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, and H.E. Dr. Surakiart Sathirathai, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand.

Nepal and Bhutan attended as full members for the first time.

H.E. Dr. Surakiart Sathirathai, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, was elected Chairman of the meeting by acclamation on the proposal of H.E. Tyronne Fernando, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, outgoing Chairman of BIMST-EC.

The Ministers endorsed the Report of the Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM) held on 6 February 2004. The SOM's recommendations were noted.

At the conclusion of the Ministerial Meeting, the Leaders of the Delegations issued the following statement:

We warmly welcome the accession of Bhutan and Nepal of BIMST-EC and the participation of their Ministers for the first time.

We also welcome the signing of the Framework Agreement for the BIMST-EC Free Trade Area and look forward to early conclusion of the negotiations.

We renew our commitment to promoting socio-economic development and to creating an enabling environment for cooperation among member countries. We noted the outcome of the Trade/Economic Ministerial Meeting held on 7 February 2004.

In setting the course for BIMST-EC and preparing for the First Summit, we reviewed the progress in the 6 priority areas of BIMST-EC.

Priority Areas of Cooperation:

1. We encourage continued cooperation and implementation of projects in the six priority sectors namely: (1) Trade and Investment; (2) Technology; (3) Energy; (4) Transportation and Communications; (5) Tourism and (6) Fisheries, and agree that in addition to the areas of cooperation stressed at the 5th Ministerial Meeting in Colombo, special emphasis should also be placed on the development of hydrocarbon and hydropower potential and people-to-people contact in the region.
2. We recommend that BIMST-EC work towards greater air transport liberalization, technical cooperation/human resources development, management and sustainable utilization of fisheries resources in the Bay of Bengal, and facilitation of business travel.
3. We instruct SOM to oversee implementation of cooperative activities and to ensure that priority projects identified by member countries, initiatives identified by us and initiatives to be identified by our Leaders, are carried through effectively and expeditiously.
4. We commend the "Visit BIMST-EC 2004" initiative and encourage more activities, such as joint marketing for tourism, to support this endeavour. We encourage year-long activities in member countries by rotation to focus on "Visit BIMST-EC 2004" to enhance general public awareness.
5. We agree that members will take turns hosting the BIMST-EC Youth Football Tournament, and other similar activities in the future to increase people-to-people contact, deepen the level of understanding and instill a sense of community within BIMST-EC.
6. We encourage the issuing of long-term multiple entry visas to facilitate increased business travel.
7. We welcome Thailand's offer to augment BIMST-EC technical cooperation and human resource development by offering 100 training scholarships to BIMST-EC members and India's offer of 150 training scholarships.

Future Direction of BIMST-EC:

8. We recommend to Leaders the adoption of the principle of requiring at least 3 member countries for project implementation, and at least 4 member countries for the convening of an Expert Group, while consensus is needed for policy decisions, including on new membership.
9. We endorse the setting up of a Technical Support Facility (TSF) to serve the BIMST-EC Working Group (BWG) and to coordinate BIMST-EC activities, including those of the BIMST-EC Chamber of Commerce, for a trial period of two years. We welcome Thailand's offer to establish and provide full funding for the TSF in Bangkok for two years as a pilot project. We agree to revisit the issue of how to proceed further on the TSF issue and whether to have a permanent secretariat at the end of the trial period. We recommend that each member country also establish appropriate facilities at its headquarters to facilitate better coordination and implementation of BIMST-EC projects.
10. We endorse the criteria for BIMST-EC membership, as formulated by the Bangkok Working Group, with the understanding that countries having access to the Andaman Sea also enjoy, by definition, a direct opening into the Bay of Bengal.

Other Matters:

11. We recognize that the private sector plays a central role in advancing BIMST-EC's trade, investment and economic cooperation agenda. We call for wider participation by the private sector in BIMST-EC activities at all levels. We welcome the establishment of the BIMST-EC Chamber of Commerce and encourage members to make use of this facility to build a close-knit network of business professionals in the sub-region.
12. We encourage greater interaction amongst the government, business and academic sectors in activities which are relevant to the needs of our community at large.
13. We encourage continued cooperation to coordinate BIMST-EC's position in other multilateral fora.
14. We agree to build on our common stance, expressed at the 5th Ministerial Meeting in Colombo, of strengthening our resolve and active collaboration to combat the rising challenge of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations.
15. We note with concern the threat of emerging infectious diseases and agree on the need for an effective collective response through information sharing, expertise, technical cooperation, capacity building and other means.

Preparation for Future Meetings:

16. We welcome Thailand's offer to host the first BIMST-EC Summit on *(21-23 or 28-30 July)* 2004 in Bangkok, Thailand.
17. We recommend to Leaders that a Summit be held every two years .
18. We welcome the offer by Bangladesh to convene the next BIMST-EC intersessional SOM in September 2004 and Ministerial Meeting in February 2005 in Dhaka.