

**Statement by BIMSTEC Secretary General at the inaugural Informal Meeting of
BIMSTEC Foreign Ministers on the sidelines of 79th Session of UNGA
(27 September 2024, New York)**

Honourable Ministers, Excellencies, distinguished delegates, Namaskar!

01. A very Good Afternoon to you all. Warm Greetings from the BIMSTEC Secretariat!!
02. I thank Honourable EAM of India, H.E. Dr. S. Jaishankar, for hosting and chairing the first Informal Meeting of the BIMSTEC FMs on the sidelines of 79th Session of UNGA. It's a unique milestone, an affirmation of the commitment of the member States to reinvigorate BIMSTEC. I hope that it would be formalised into a regular annual mechanism.
03. I thank the BIMSTEC member States for their abiding support to BIMSTEC and its Secretariat. I reiterate the Secretariat's commitment to work towards expanding and deepening regional cooperation within the ambit of BIMSTEC.
04. The Secretariat is looking forward to prepare well for the 6th Summit. I commend the Chair and other member States for their resolve to decide on a date for the next Summit as soon as possible. Meanwhile, I hope that we would be able to make progress in realisation of some of the envisaged outcomes of the next Summit. The Bangkok Vision 2030 and the Rules of Procedure, as approved by the Ministers, are ready for adoption. The Summit Declaration is being finalised.
05. However, I regret to inform that there has been no progress in the status of signing and adoption of the Agreement on Maritime Transport Cooperation since the BIMSTEC FMs Retreat in July 2024. The Agreement was approved by the Ministerial Meeting in March 2023. The member States have since been repeatedly requested to indicate their readiness to sign the Agreement after completing their internal processes, if any. 18 months have since passed and 4 member States have yet to indicate their readiness to sign the Agreement. It is felt that member States should not seek revision of the Text of the Agreement in view of the fact that it has already been approved by their Foreign Ministers. I request the remaining member States- Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka - to convey their readiness to sign the Agreement at the earliest, so that it can be signed and adopted at the next Summit.
06. I am pleased to report that there has been some progress in the status of the proposed MoUs with our External Partners:

-As regards the MoU with IORA, while Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka have conveyed both their SOM and Ministerial approvals, Thailand has only conveyed its SOM approval and Nepal has yet to convey either SOM or Ministerial approval. I request Thailand to convey its Ministerial approval and Nepal to convey both SOM and Ministerial approvals.

-As regards the MoU with UNODC, I am happy to inform that Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Sri Lanka have conveyed both SOM and Ministerial approvals, while Thailand has only conveyed its SOM approval; Ministerial approval from Thailand is awaited. So, I request Thailand to convey its Ministerial approval also at the earliest.

-As regards the MoU with UNESCAP, 4 member States - Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar and Sri Lanka - have conveyed their Senior Officials and Ministerial approvals and Thailand has conveyed only Senior Officials approval. India and Nepal have not yet conveyed their either SOM or Ministerial approvals. So, I request Thailand to convey its Ministerial approval while India and Nepal are requested to convey their SOM and Ministerial approvals.

-As regards the MoU with the WB, the Secretariat has received SOM approvals from all the member States and Ministerial approvals have been received from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Ministerial approval only from Thailand is awaited. Thailand is requested to convey its Ministerial approval at the earliest.

07. As regards forging developmental partnerships with other regional and international organisations, the Secretariat has requested the member States for their concurrence on the Concept Note for Cooperation between ASEAN and BIMSTEC. Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka have conveyed their concurrence to date. Given the prospects of beneficial cooperation between BIMSTEC and ASEAN, in view of synergies in the membership and the agenda of the two Organizations, the remaining 4 member States, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Thailand are requested to convey their concurrences urgently.

08. I am happy to inform you that I have received positive responses to my outreach to two UN organisations - UNCTAD and UNDP - and 3 International Organisations - WHO, WIPO and ITU.

09. I would like to brief Honourable Ministers on the key developments since their Retreat in Delhi. Let me begin by outlining the key outcomes of the 4th Meeting of NSAs in Retreat format in Nay Pyi Taw on 25 July 2024, which took place after a gap of over 5 years.

- The NSAs resolved to strengthen regional cooperation in areas of information and intelligence sharing, capacity building, and law enforcement mechanisms and proposed to create a BIMSTEC Security Information Database and an Information Sharing Center to enable real- time information exchange.
- The NSAs stressed the importance of coordinated patrols, information sharing, and coordinated responses to maritime threats and proposed establishment of a comprehensive mechanism and finalization of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for cooperation on maritime security. India offered to host the 2nd edition of the BIMSTEC Ports Conclave.

- NSAs encouraged development and implementation of common cyber security standards, protocols and best practices across the region and underlined the need to develop mechanisms for sharing information on cyber threats, malware and incidents.
- The Meeting highlighted the importance of joint/coordinated military and counter-terrorism exercises, as they can improve the operational capabilities of member States and foster greater trust and coordination among security forces.

10. I am delighted to share that the 3rd Meeting of the BIMSTEC Expert Group on Maritime Security Cooperation, held in New Delhi on 11 September 2024, has finalised the Draft BIMSTEC Guidelines for Maritime Component of Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR). The Meeting also discussed the Draft BIMSTEC Guiding Principles: Conduct of MLEAs during Interaction at Sea and Draft BIMSTEC Guidelines for Coordinated Marine Oil Spill Response.

11. I am also delighted to inform that the Eminent Persons' Group submitted its Report on 12 September 2024. I have already shared the Report, as per the terms of reference of EPG, with the Senior Officials of the MFAs of the member States. The Report contains a number of useful recommendations and I would like to request the member States to consider the recommendations of the EPG with open-mind with a view to reform and revitalize BIMSTEC and to address the challenges that it has faced.

12. I take this opportunity to request India and Sri Lanka to take early the requisite steps for institutionalizing the Meeting of BIMSTEC Home Ministers and the Meeting of BIMSTEC Health Ministers respectively, which will be big steps forward for deepening regional cooperation in security and health sectors. I request India to quickly operationalise the BIMSTEC Energy Centre and make specific proposals to implement various pathbreaking initiatives that it had presented at the last Retreat of BIMSTEC Foreign Ministers hosted by External Affairs Minister of India in July 2024 in New Delhi.

13. As regards the BIMSTEC core and sectoral mechanisms, I believe that, besides the annual Retreats and Meetings of FMs on the sidelines of UNGA, convening of regular Ministerial Meeting is critical in order to deal with the regular agenda of the core and sectoral mechanisms, particularly the matters pertaining to Sectors where there are no Sectoral Ministerial Mechanisms. The last regular Ministerial Meeting was held in March 2023 in virtual mode. In this regard, I appreciate the kind indulgence of Honourable Ministers in accepting the Secretariat's requests for according their approvals on important matters by circulation.

14. I would like to underline the critical importance of timely decision-making by BPWC and SOM and the need for them to meet more frequently and regularly-BPWC should meet at least once in a quarter and SOM should be held at least twice a year. I take this opportunity to thank the BPWC and SOM for taking decisions through circulation, wherever necessary and feasible, as proposed by the Secretariat.

15. In order to make swift progress in regional cooperation through BIMSTEC, I would like to underline the need to create a “National Implementation Coordination and Monitoring Mechanism” in the Ministries of External/Foreign Affairs and appointment of Sectoral Focal Points for various Sectors to ensure effective and efficient coordination within the Governments, led by the MFAs.

16. As recommended by EPG, the Secretariat has planned, for the first time since inception of BIMSTEC, to draw a calendar of BIMSTEC Meetings and Events for 2025 in consultation with the member States in order to avoid the situation of the member States seeking repeated postponements and cancellations of the Meetings proposed by other member States.

17. It gives me pleasure to inform you that the Secretariat has taken the initiative of creating 3 new Units - a Policy Support Unit (PSU), a Project Management Unit (PMU) and an Implementation Support Unit (ISU) - at the Secretariat, within the existing resources and the sanctioned strength of the Secretariat.

18. I am happy to inform you that the Secretariat celebrated, two weeks ago, the 10th Anniversary of its establishment in Dhaka. I again thank Honourable Foreign Adviser of Bangladesh for gracing the celebration with his esteemed presence. As you all are aware, the Secretariat needs a more spacious premises to enable its future growth. In this regard, I am thankful to the Government of Bangladesh for its commitment to build a new state-of-art and spacious building for the Secretariat.

19. To conclude, I thank the Chair for giving me an opportunity to share the views of the Secretariat. I request continued support of the member States for the Secretariat and assure them of the Secretariat’s commitment to support them in implementation of their decisions. The Secretariat will work with the Chair to follow up on the ideas and proposals presented today. I want to thank Honourable Ministers and PR’s and Representative of the member States for their kind attention. I wish you all a restful and pleasant afternoon and evening. Namaskar!
