

Joint Statement of the Eighth BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting Dhaka, 18 - 19 December 2005

The Eighth BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting was held in Dhaka, Bangladesh on 19 December 2005.

The meeting was attended by H. E. Mr. M. Morshed Khan, MP, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh; H. E. Lyonpo Yeshey Zimba, Minister for Trade and Industry of the Kingdom of Bhutan; H. E. Mr. E. Ahamed, Minister of State for External Affairs of the Republic of India; H. E. Mr. U Nyan Win, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Union of Myanmar; H. E. Mr. Ramesh Nath Pandey, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Nepal; H. E. Dr. Kantathi Suphamongkhon, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand; and H. E. Mr. Karunatilaka Amunugama, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka.

Her Excellency Begum Khaleda Zia, Hon'ble Prime Minister, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh addressed the Inaugural Session.

H.E. Mr. M. Morshed Khan, MP, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh was elected chairman by acclamation upon the proposal of the outgoing Chair H. E. Dr. Kantathi Suphamongkhon, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand.

The Meeting approved the Report of the Tenth Meeting of the Senior Officials held on 18 December preceding the Ministerial meeting.

At the conclusion of the Meeting, the Heads of Delegation issued the following Joint Statement:

We, the Heads of delegation of the Eighth BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting, having convened in Dhaka on 18-19 December 2005:

Recalled the purposes and objectives of BIMSTEC, which call inter alia for promoting mutual interests, maximizing benefits of complementarities, and strengthening ties of friendship and cooperation;

Reaffirmed that in an increasingly interdependent world, the cherished ideals of peace, freedom, and well-being are best attained by fostering greater trust, understanding, good neighbourliness and meaningful cooperation among countries of our grouping;

Expressed our resolve to deepen economic integration and to create an enabling environment for rapid economic development, including through identification and implementation of specific projects on social and economic sectors in a time bound manner.

Decided to take action to promote cooperation in the six priority areas, ensure effective follow-up of the outcome of the First Summit and to undertake future actions as outlined below :

A. Priority Areas of Cooperation

1. Trade and Investment

We underlined the importance of timely implementation of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) to increase intra-regional trade and investment, enhance economic efficiency and achieve larger economies of scale and external competitiveness.

We expressed satisfaction at the progress realized by the BIMSTEC Trade Negotiating Committee (TNC) in finalising all issues, including Rules of Origin, Sensitive Lists and Dispute Settlement Mechanism, allowing entry into force of the Agreement on Trade in Goods, as scheduled, on 1 July 2006. In this context, we welcomed the offer of Bangladesh to host the next Trade / Economic Ministerial Meeting (TEMM) at which the Agreement on Trade in Goods is expected to be signed.

We stressed the need for fast tracking trade facilitation measures, including removal of non-tariff barriers, putting in place Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs), and arrangements for cooperation on conformity assessment, accreditation procedures, and standards and technical regulations in keeping with the provisions of Article 6 of the Agreement on Trade in Goods.

We underlined the importance of special and differential treatment and flexibility for LDC parties, as provided for in the Framework Agreement, to enable their more effective economic integration in the region;

We recognized the need for provisions on Avoidance of Double Taxation to realize the objectives of the Free Trade Agreement. We called for considering steps beyond the BIMSTEC FTA and set a vision for deeper economic integration.

We also agreed to recommend to the TEMM to consider steps beyond the FTA for deeper economic integration.

We took note of the outcome of the Business Forum and Economic Forum (New Delhi, 29-30 August 2005).

2. Technology

We recalled the decision of the First Summit to focus on cooperation in Science & Technology, in particular ICT and Bio-technology, and to enhance cooperation in development of human resources in these areas. We agreed that an inter-governmental experts' group should meet at the earliest to address these issues.

We underlined the need for establishing a fair, equitable and just intellectual property rights (IPR) regime, protecting the rights of all member states in the areas of Bio-technology, Traditional Medicine and Plant and Genetic Resources. We recommended setting up of an inter-governmental experts' group to address these issues.

3. Energy Cooperation

We welcomed the adoption of the Plan of Action by the First Conference of BIMSTEC Energy Ministers (New Delhi, 4 October 2005); and the decisions taken by the Conference, in particular, the setting up of two task forces, one on BIMSTEC Trans-Power Exchange Development and the other on Trans-BIMSTEC Gas Pipeline(s), both to be chaired by Thailand.

We also welcomed the offer made by Thailand to host the Second Meeting of BIMSTEC Energy Ministers in 2006.

We took note of Nepal's interest to coordinate the sub-sector on hydro-power.

4. Transport and Communication

We stressed the need for intensifying efforts towards air transport liberalisation, inland waterways, short-sea shipping and highway and rail linkages, as may be agreed upon between and among the Member States.

We took note of the ongoing regional studies on transport connectivity among Member States.

We agreed to look in a comprehensive manner at various regional projects underway or envisaged to increase connectivity in the region in order to maximize synergies among the countries.

5. Tourism

We welcomed the outcome of the first Roundtable and Workshop of Tourism Ministers (Kolkata, February 2005) and the proposed Plan of Action. We called for effective implementation of programmes and projects to promote and develop tourism in BIMSTEC area. We also welcomed the offer made by Nepal to host the Second Roundtable and Workshop of Tourism Ministers in 2006.

6. Fisheries

We recalled that the First BIMSTEC Summit agreed to intensify cooperation in agriculture and fisheries, including promotion of sustainable use of the marine resources in the Bay of Bengal through effective management and conservation in close coordination with the already existing frameworks. We called for early implementation of the approved decisions in this area, including those by the 6th Ministerial Meeting.

7. Agriculture

We noted the proposal made by Bangladesh to include areas like exchange of germplasm, post-harvest

technology, marketing, human resources development, research and development in Horticulture, Floriculture, Spices, Food processing.

B. Follow-up of the outcome of the First BIMSTEC Summit

1. Poverty Alleviation

We underlined the need for collective action for poverty alleviation through exchange of best practices and mobilization of resources, especially in rural areas employing innovative approaches and initiatives such as micro-credit and development of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs).

We strongly recommended that the forthcoming Ministerial Meeting on Poverty Alleviation, to be hosted by Bangladesh, should adopt a comprehensive Plan of Action on Poverty Alleviation, in keeping with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

2. Cultural Cooperation

We noted with appreciation the preparations being made by Bhutan to host the First Ministerial Meeting on Culture in May 2006.

3. Terrorism and Transnational Crimes

We reiterated the emphasis placed by the First Summit on combating terrorism and transnational crimes and noted with satisfaction the progress made by the Joint Working Group towards advancing cooperation in these areas among Member States.

4. Environment and Disaster Management

We welcomed the initiatives taken under BIMSTEC the establishment of a Weather and Climate Center in India and underlined its importance, including for disaster management. We agreed that the Centre should have networking and collaborative arrangements with other relevant regional and national institutions or departments in the region, including the SAARC Metrological Research Centre (SMRC) and Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre (ADPC).

We welcomed the offers made by India and Thailand to share remote sensing data in agriculture, environment and natural disaster management, and called for early finalization of specific proposals for cooperation in this area.

5. Public Health

We agreed on the need for a collective response to the threats to public health in the region, including emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS, SARS, avian influenza, malaria, dengue and tuberculosis, through sharing of information and expertise, technical cooperation, capacity building and other means. We welcomed the offer made by Thailand to share its experience in combating avian flu and encouraged other member states to take similar initiatives and projects.

6. People- to-People Contact

We decided to designate 6 June as 'BIMSTEC Day' to mark the establishment of BIMSTEC. Member States may observe the Day, as appropriate, to promote awareness of BIMSTEC among the general public.

We decided to encourage greater people-people contact and called upon the relevant national authorities in BIMSTEC countries to give necessary policy directives to issue long-term multiple-entry visas to qualified businessmen and entrepreneurs.

We further decided that the Experts' Group Meeting on BIMSTEC Business Travel Card would finalise all relevant modalities. We also directed them to consider introduction of a BIMSTEC Visa Exemption Scheme for selected categories of officials and other persons. The Experts' Group should make recommendations to the next Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM) in respect of both the issues. We welcomed the offer made by Nepal to host the Meeting

in the first quarter of 2006.

We appreciated offer of scholarship programmes by India and Thailand at the First Summit and encouraged further efforts in human resource development assistance.

C. Future Direction

We recognized the need for a permanent Secretariat as BIMSTEC has significantly evolved over the past years in terms of expansion of its membership, institutions and agenda. We agreed to set up an inter-governmental experts' group comprising of representatives of all member states, to examine the establishment of a small secretariat, including its modalities and other relevant details. The Experts' Group should submit its report to the Eleventh Meeting of the Senior Officials. We further decided that, as an interim arrangement, the mandate of the BIMSTEC Centre would be extended to enable it to function as a 'mini Secretariat', until a decision is taken on the establishment of a permanent Secretariat and is implemented. We thanked Thailand for setting up and funding the BIMSTEC Centre. We welcomed the offer made by India to extend assistance and support to further strengthen the Centre.

We recalled the decision of the First BIMSTEC Summit that projects should be clearly conceptualized, adequately funded and effectively implemented with well-defined goals and tangible results relevant to the needs of our peoples; and based, as far as possible, on internal financing from within the BIMSTEC member states. We also agreed to consider resources from outside, on a case by case basis.

We decided to add the following sectors, which were identified by the First BIMSTEC Summit, to the list of priority sectors:

- i. Poverty Alleviation
- ii. Agriculture
- iii. Cultural Cooperation
- iv. Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crimes
- v. Environment and Disaster Management
- vi. Public Health
- vii. People- to-People Contacts

We also decided that BIMSTEC Working Group (BWG) would finalise the Lead and Chair countries for the above-mentioned sectors and related sub-sectors, in coordination with the BIMSTEC member states, by March 2006 and report to the 11th Senior Officials' Meeting. In that regard, BWG may also make recommendations in re-organizing the sub-sectors under the existing sectors, as appropriate.

D. Future Meetings:

We welcomed the offer by India to convene the Eleventh Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM) in New Delhi in July/August 2006 and the Ninth BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting, keeping in view the provision for annual Ministerial Meeting, as contained in the Declaration establishing the Grouping on 6 June 1997.

We welcomed India's offer to host the Second BIMSTEC Summit on in early 2007.