

BIMSTEC leaders pledge to collectively combat COVID-19 impact

News Desk, bdnews24.com

Published: 06 Jun 2020 11:00 AM BdST Updated: 06 Jun 2020 11:25 AM BdST



Leaders of BIMSTEC nations pose for a photograph during a summit in Kathmandu in 2018.

Member states of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation or BIMSTEC have resolved to further strengthen cooperation to combat the impact of COVID-19 pandemic together.

In their messages commemorating the 23rd anniversary of its establishment on Saturday, the governments of the BIMSTEC member states -- Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand -- expressed their commitment to working together and building better resilience across the region.

However, BIMSTEC authorities did not organise an event to celebrate the occasion due to the ongoing coronavirus crisis.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina stressed the importance of BIMSTEC as a platform for nations to collectively address the fallout and challenges stemming from the pandemic.

"The COVID-19 pandemic posed the world a serious challenge. It will leave long-lasting multiple impacts on the lives and living of people of this region causing repercussions in the economic and social progress," the Bangladesh leader said.

"BIMSTEC forum provides an excellent platform to combat the devastating impact of COVID-19. We should not leave any stone unturned to utilise this platform in addressing the challenges of the post-COVID-19 era," she added.

Hasina underscored Bangladesh's commitment to work closely with BIMSTEC members on all areas of cooperation, including the promotion of trade and investment cooperation, strengthening energy cooperation, increasing connectivity and people-to-people contact, disaster management, and public health, combating terrorism and extremism, dealing with the adverse effects of climate change and poverty alleviation.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi pledged to extend all necessary support to the countries in the region to tackle and overcome the pandemic.

"No individual country can, by itself overcome its (COVID-19) huge consequences," Modi said.

"India stands ready to share its expertise, resources, capacities and knowledge, with all countries in the region," he added.

Although the BIMSTEC countries represent 22 percent of the world population, it only contributes 4 percent of the world GDP, noted Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

He believes BIMSTEC can play a more proactive role in uplifting the economic development of the member states by the way of trade, exchange of technological advancement and by developing human capital.

The battle against the Covid-19 pandemic has tested the abilities of member states to the fullest while exposing their vulnerabilities, said Nepalese Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli as he called for a collective response to the crisis.

"This trying time demands us to pool our strengths and build better resilience across the region. We face an increased level of uncertainty in the midst of this invisible enemy. This is a time to stand united and fight the Covid-19 collectively. We must fight collectively and defeat this enemy," he said.

Like most other countries of the world, BIMSTEC countries' initial response to the COVID 19 pandemic was to restrict trade, travel and other forms of connectivity. But as time wore on, some of these restrictions have been relaxed as countries begin reopening their economies.

"It is heartening to see that they are increasingly opening up trade and transport connectivity to restore essential supply chains," said M Shahidul Islam, secretary general of BIMSTEC.

BIMSTEC leaders are putting a renewed emphasis on developing regional transport connectivity resilient to disruptions caused by any future pandemic or other calamities, with particular focus on coastal shipping, waterways and railways, he noted.

The economic gains registered by BIMSTEC countries are constantly being threatened by natural disasters, climate change, pandemics, poverty and economic disparity.

Expressing his gratitude to Bangladesh for providing continued support to the Secretariat since its establishment in 2014, Shahidul reaffirmed the Secretariat's commitment to work closely with the member states in fulfilling the goals set by the BIMSTEC Leaders.

The leaders are expected to provide clear directives to invest more to ensure human security during the upcoming the Fifth BIMSTEC Summit later this year in Colombo, he said.

BIMSTEC was established on June 6, 1997 to accelerate economic development and social progress in the countries adjacent to the Bay of Bengal by leveraging geographical proximity and abundant natural resources.

Since its inception, BIMSTEC has been actively promoting physical and economic connectivity in the region through trade, transport, tourism, technology and energy cooperation. BIMSTEC is also mandated to promote collective action to address vulnerabilities like climate change, natural disasters, food security, terrorism, transnational crimes and communicable diseases.

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