

## **Welcoming Remarks**

**By H.E. Dr Surakiart Sathirathai**

**Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand**

**At the 6<sup>th</sup> BIMST-EC Ministerial Meeting**

**Phuket, Thailand, 8 February 2004**

---

Excellencies,

Distinguished Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I wish to extend to all of you a warm welcome to Phuket, the Pearl of the Andaman. This Sixth BIMST-EC Ministerial Meeting is indeed a historic occasion. It marks the first time since 1997 that BIMST-EC is expanding its membership beyond the countries represented in its name. I am delighted that the expansion of BIMST-EC is once again taking place at its birthplace. I also would like to commend His Excellency Tyronne Fernando of Sri Lanka for his able chairmanship for the past year.

On behalf of Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand, I would like to extend my warmest welcome to His Excellency Lyonpo Khandu Wangchuk, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bhutan, and His Excellency Dr. Bhekh Thapa, Ambassador-at-Large of Nepal, together with their delegations to our BIMST-EC family. Your accession to BIMST-EC could not have come at a more auspicious time. BIMST-EC is poised to fulfill its promise of bridging South and Southeast Asia and elevating the relationship onto a higher plane of cooperation.

This invigoration of BIMST-EC comes at a time when we are witnessing an unprecedented growth of sub-regional cooperation frameworks in this part of Asia.

At the pan-Asian level, the Asia Cooperation Dialogue provides an informal forum that links the various sub-regions of Asia through joint projects and annual ministerial dialogues. This network of functional cooperation, while embryonic, has the potential, in time, to develop into an Asian economic community. The building blocks for realizing this vision derive from intra and inter sub-regional partnerships.

In South Asia, regional cooperation is making impressive progress. SAARC has emerged stronger from its Summit last month, with the signing of a Framework Agreement on a South Asian Free Trade Area. This augurs well for the overall trend in Asia towards greater free trade, as evidenced by our plans for a BIMST-EC Free Trade Area, which will see

its Framework Agreement signed later today, and the Framework Agreement for a Free Trade Area between India and Thailand signed during Prime Minister Vajpayee's visit to Thailand in October 2003.

In Southeast Asia, we are moving towards an ASEAN community. For the first time, ASEAN has set a clear direction and path for cooperation among member countries in the political, economic and socio-cultural fields. At their Summit in Bali last October, the ASEAN Leaders agreed to establish the ASEAN Economic Community or AEC as the roadmap for economic integration.

Several sub-regional frameworks of cooperation in Southeast Asia are also moving forward. We have the Greater Mekong Sub-region or GMS framework, which includes Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, Viet Nam, and China's Yunnan Province. Our region also recently saw the birth of ACMECS, the Ayeyawaddy-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy, bearing the names of the three major rivers running through the four countries, which brings together Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Thailand. ACMECS held its first Summit last November in Bagan, and is expected to help narrow the economic gaps within ASEAN by leveraging the comparative advantages of member countries and emphasizing practical areas of cooperation such as agriculture, industry and infrastructure. By being open to partnership with outside countries, ACMECS offers opportunities not only to members but non-members as well.

The increasing dynamism within each of the two regions is being reinforced by growing cooperation between them. Last year, ties between India and ASEAN surged forward with a broad range of activities, including the first India-ASEAN Summit, India's accession to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, talks about an India-ASEAN free trade area, and an open skies policy for ASEAN. On infrastructure development, in December last year, I had the pleasure of working with my counterparts from India and Myanmar to advance the trilateral cooperation framework on transport linkages which is contributing as a building bloc to road linkages within BIMST-EC as a whole. Cooperation on developing short-sea shipping and management and sustainable utilization of fisheries resources in the Bay of Bengal should also enhance the Bay's central role in BIMST-EC.

Thailand, for its part, has been reaching out bilaterally to our partners in South Asia. In August last year, Prime Minister Thaksin visited Sri Lanka and affirmed Thailand's readiness to support Sri Lanka's reconstruction efforts. In line with our support for open skies in the region, early last year Thailand established with Bangladesh a direct air link between Chittagong and Chiang Mai, a move that is increasing tourism and travel between the two countries. India has offered Thailand and ASEAN countries daily flight service to 4 major Indian cities and unlimited service to 18 other Indian destinations, a move to which Thailand instantly reciprocated with daily flights to Bangkok and other cities, including Chiang Mai and Phuket.

All these activities bode well for BIMST-EC. By spanning two important regions, BIMST-EC is the logical linking mechanism to bring together various interlocking pieces of the jigsaw puzzle that is Asia. By tying together overlapping sub-regional frameworks, not only

will BIMST-EC serve as a bridge between South and Southeast Asia but also effectively link the Bay of Bengal with the South China Sea via the Andaman Sea, forming a tapestry of cooperation that weaves together some of Asia's most dynamic economies.

Excellencies,

Distinguished colleagues,

Strengthening linkages is what BIMST-EC is all about. We have seen how extensive transport networks, open trade and investment and people-to-people contact have contributed to the cohesiveness and prosperity of North America and Europe. Our joint efforts under the identified areas of cooperation will bring similar benefits to the BIMST-EC region.

We have moved forward on many fronts. On tourism, we have launched the Visit BIMST-EC Year 2004, which will promote joint marketing programmes and combining of destinations, and could even be extended to 2005, with two new members. To bring our peoples closer, we are organizing such activities as the First BIMST-EC Cup youth football tournament right here and now in Phuket. To facilitate trade and investment in the region, the BIMST-EC Chamber of Commerce serves as a mechanism to promote our business synergies. We are also in consultation on ideas to facilitate business travel, such as the issuing of long-term multiple-entry visas and the possibility of a BIMST-EC Business Travel Card. And to ensure our work and coordination proceed smoothly and efficiently, we will soon establish a Technical Support Facility in Bangkok as a 2-year pilot project.

We are therefore on the right track, but we still need to do more. We should generate quick and tangible results, so that they provide momentum for further activities. Our task ahead is to bring out BIMST-EC's promise, by making it more effective, efficient and relevant to the needs of stakeholders, which will be the true measure of BIMST-EC's success.

The Summit's postponement means we must work even harder for its success. Our task is to prepare well for our Leaders. There are pending issues to be resolved, future work to be identified, prioritized and prepared. If we succeed, Leaders will surely bless us for presenting them with a golden vision for BIMST-EC.

BIMST-EC is an on-going and forward-looking process. We have a long journey ahead. Given the strong political will and commitment of member countries, its prospects are bright. That is what we are preparing for our Leaders' first Summit Meeting. The time is right, the conditions are right, and BIMST-EC is right as a vehicle for bringing together South and Southeast Asia. Let us go together for BIMST-EC for the mutual benefit of our countries and peoples.