

**Ministry of External Affairs
(MER Division)**

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**STATEMENT AT INAUGURAL SESSION OF THE BIMSTEC WORKSHOP ON
NATURAL DISASTERS; OCTOBER 2006**

Mr P G Dhar Chakrabarti, Executive Director, National Institute of Disaster Management,

Mr. Rajiv Kumar, Director, Ministry of Home Affairs,

Distinguished Visitors from BIMSTEC

Friends

I am indeed privileged to speak at this inaugural session. I join Mr P G Dhar Chakravarty in extending a very warm and sincere welcome to our friends from BIMSTEC. I do so on behalf of the Ministry of External Affairs. It is always a great pleasure for us to have visitors from countries with which we feel such a strong sense of kinship. I would also like to wish you a pleasant stay in India.

I would like to use this opportunity to outline to you our perspectives on BIMSTEC. This would, I hope, be useful when you consider the possibilities of cooperation in the field of natural disaster management & mitigation in the framework of BIMCTEC.

Our engagement with BIMSTEC is a key element of our "Look East" foreign policy. The "Look East" policy has a strong economic rationale. It is our understanding that the sustainable economic growth in India needs to be linked to similar growth in the rest of the region.

I would, in this context, like to quote from UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's foreword to UNCTAD's Trade and Development Report that was released in September last year. The Secretary General said: "China and India have become major engines of growth for the world economy as a whole. Rapid economic development in both countries has helped reduce levels of extreme poverty at home, by generating employment and boosting incomes. It has also had positive effects beyond the two countries borders, in particular in many other developing countries".

Regional integration, we believe, is now emerging as the new phase of globalisation. We are seeing increasing evidence of the reorganization of production processes into regional production networks. While market forces will undoubtedly shape the broad contours of the reorganization of production processes, it is our belief that Governments have a key role to play in this new development.

The Bay of Bengal initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, or BIMSTEC, that brings together Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand, can play an important role in this regard i.e. in promoting regional integration. BIMSTEC can also act as a bridge between the countries of South and South East Asia. A Free Trade Area lies at the core of BIMSTEC. All over the world, most countries normally have a fairly large percentage of their overall foreign trade with neighbouring countries. This, however, is not the case in our region. This is an anomaly that needs to be corrected urgently. The silver lining is that the relatively low level of regional trade and economic activity in the BIMSTEC region makes it easier to deliver on the unexploited potential for expanding trade and investment. This is what we seek to achieve through the FTA

The field of natural disasters was added to the list of BIMSTEC areas of focus only in December last year. In the Ministerial meeting held in New Delhi last August, India offered to be the lead country for cooperation in this sector. However, there had also been mention of this very important sector in the first BIMSTEC Summit held in Thailand in July 2004 as well. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had, at the Summit, said: " The vagaries of climate and weather in our region concern us all. We have had floods in some places and drought in others. India would also be willing to share its expertise in remote sensing for agriculture, environment and disaster management."

I would also like to recall the unparalleled tragedy that the Tsunami brought to some of us in December 2004. It, however, also brought with it a renewed realisation of the merits of activating a regional approach that complements national efforts to handle natural disasters, both with regard to prevention and mitigation. A regional approach allows us to pool together our respective strengths and complementarities efficiently and effectively.

Cooperation in the framework of BIMSTEC can contribute by strengthening preparedness against natural disasters. It should allow for timely warnings to be given to farmers, coastal zone managers and other people in the region. All our countries suffer immensely from natural disasters and cooperation can assist in minimising human and economic losses.

It is our expectation that this Workshop would help to identify resources both in terms of institutions and expertise and then develop a useful programme of action. It should also allow the identification of needs and strengths in various member countries. This should then lead to various concrete collaborative projects. Given the importance of this area, financing should not be a problem. India would be willing to take a lead in this regard.

The conclusions of your deliberations will be important. They will be considered carefully by Senior Officials and Ministers. We attach importance to this workshop and hope that your discussions would be constructive and fruitful.
