A Snapshot on Overseas Ministers & Diplomats Conclave during IISF 2020

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Overseas Ministers and Diplomats Conclave at the India International Science Festival 2020 was organized jointly by Department of Science and Technology (DST), CSIR-NISCAIR and Vijnana Bharati (VIBHA) on 23 December 2020 (online). The theme for the event was most desirable and relevant to our current scenario, i.e., **R&D Strategy in Post COVID Era.**

The event was divided into two sessions. In the first session, Ministers from neighbouring countries participated in the panel discussion. The session was inaugurated by Prof. Ashutosh Sharma, Secretary, DST. In the welcome address, he highlighted some major outstanding achievements of India. Prof. Sharma remarked that "the COVID-19 crisis has stimulated innovation & enterprise in India and for Indian science to be globally competitive, international collaborations need to be effectively leveraged". Emphasizing the importance of digitization, he stated that "the pandemic has accelerated digital transformation and we need to use artificial intelligence, machine learning with responsibility and accessibility".

Prof. Sharma highlighted the emergence of several challenges that the world is expecting to face in the post COVID era, such as climate change, water security, anti-microbial resistance, and energy, and stressed upon the need to reimage newer ways of cooperation between countries to face these challenges as well as rethink the funding of research.

Dr Chhem Kieth Rethy, Minister Delegate STI, Cambodia, added in his remarks that the Cambodian government is determined to increase investment in S&T from 0.2 % of GDP in 2020 to reach 1 % by the year 2025 and hopefully 1.5 % by 2030. Delivering the keynote address, Dr Myo Thein Gyi, Minister of Education, Myanmar, highlighted the importance of India-ASEAN collaboration as well as creating a roadmap for exploring opportunities for hi-tech ecosystem between Myanmar and India. Mr Abas Basir, Minister of Higher Education, Afghanistan stressed the fact that Science Technology and Innovation (STI) can be harnessed to overcome situations like COVID-19 pandemic. H.E. Prof. Fortunato T. De La Pena, Secretary (Minister) of Science and Technology, Philippines, shared that STI has provided new ways to collaborate and move forward to tackle future pandemics. Dr Seetha Arrambepola, Minister of Skill Development, Sri Lanka, highlighted that the focus should be on effective research programs. In his address, Mr Ibrokhim Yu Abdurakhmonov, Minister of Innovative Development, Uzbekistan shared that the main mission of his ministry is to bridge scientific results with the economy to change the industry-based economy to a knowledge-based economy.

The key Speaker of the first session was the Hon'ble Union Minister of Science & Technology, Earth Sciences, and Health & Family Welfare, Dr Harsh Vardhan. Echoing similar feelings, Dr Vardhan stated that "Science and Technology break all barriers. We also believe it validates the Indian philosophy of "*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*" – the world is one family that reflects our ancient panoramic traditions". He expressed his profound satisfaction while sharing that the Immunoassay Laboratory of the Translational Health Science and

Technology Institute (THSTI) has been recognized by the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) as one of the six global networks of laboratories for centralized assessment of COVID-19 vaccines.

He elaborated that the DST is facilitating the Indian scientific community to connect with researchers from other countries like Australia, ASEAN countries, Brazil, Japan, Portugal, Russia, Serbia, Slovenia, United States, and Uzbekistan to find solutions against COVID-19 through joint research projects. Dr Vardhan emphasized that "we must strengthen the use of science in policy, build public trust in science, ensure 'open science', universal access to solutions, and expedite action in response to scientific findings and innovation". Following the Hon'ble minister's address, diplomats from other countries shared their strategies and concerns in the post COVID era.

Dr Jakob Williams, Counselor for Innovation, Research, and Higher Education, Danish Embassy in New Delhi pointed out the failures of healthcare systems. In his captivating address, H.E. Vincenzo de Luca, Ambassador of Italy to India talked about the importance of S&T and how new technologies & innovations play a crucial role in the time of crisis. Dr Freek Jan Frerichs, Counselor- Innovation, Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, New Delhi, gave his views on the impact of innovation on the present scenario with optimizing the international scientific community and bilateral partnership. The emphasis on startups and the promotion of science and technology was highlighted by Dr Indraneel Ghosh, Senior Advisor, Education, Research and Innovation, Embassy of Switzerland, New Delhi. Prof. Ivan Prostakov, Vice-Rector, Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia, asserted that more importance should be given to the digital community. Dr Suvit Maesincee, (MHESI), Bangkok, opined that the challenge of the 21st-century is not only the technology disruption, but other threats that potentially harm the economics and the business. Ambassador of Denmark to India, Freddy Svane stated that cooperation is important not only bilaterally but also at the multilateral level. Overall, the 'Overseas Ministers and Diplomats Conclave-2020' stressed the need for well co-ordinated worldwide R&D strategies to tackle pandemics such as COVID-19.

Glimpses of OMDC-2020 on "R&D Strategy in Post COVID Era"



Dr Harsh Vardhan, Hon'ble Minister of Science & Technology, Earth Sciences and Ministry of Health & Family welfare addressing the gathering at OMDC-2020



Prof. Ashutosh Sharma, Secretary, DST delivering his welcome address



Mr Ibrokhim Yu Abdurakhmonov, Minister of Innovative Development, Uzbekistan