

STATEMENT BY MR. PRANAB MUKHERJEE, MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS,
DURING THE OPENING PLENARY MEETING OF THE HIGH-LEVEL PLENARY
MEETINGS DEVOTED TO THE MIDTERM REVIEW OF THE ALMATY PROGRAMME
OF ACTION AT THE 63RD SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL
ASSEMBLY ON OCTOBER 02, 2008



Mr. President,

The Almaty Programme of Action has resulted in a clear acknowledgement of the special needs and problems of landlocked developing countries, including the need for sustained international support to address these.

Equally important is the understanding that any effective solution must address the constraints and challenges faced by the transit developing countries neighbouring landlocked developing countries.

Yet, Mr. President, our review shows that the devil does indeed lie in the details of the implementation.

Despite their best efforts, landlocked developing countries have not been able to take full advantage of the global growth witnessed since Almaty and many of them continue to remain marginalized from the international trading system.

Modernization of trade facilitation and transit procedures remains pending, primarily due to lack of their own resources and capacities and financial and technical assistance.

Thus, it is no coincidence that of the 31 landlocked developing countries, 16 continue to be classified as least developed countries. The current global food and energy crises have made their problems more acute.

It is, therefore, imperative that we utilize this opportunity to make a genuine assessment of challenges to the implementation of the Almaty Programme of Action.

Various reports by the United Nations and other bodies clearly identify the lack of resources as a key barrier to the implementation of the Almaty Programme of Action.

Transit transport infrastructure projects involve high investments and long gestation periods, usually with low rates of return and comparative higher risks.

Naturally, it becomes difficult to attract private sector investment, particularly in countries where the private sector itself is not well developed.

Official developmental assistance or ODA, therefore, remains critical for long-term funding. Yet, regrettably, ODA to the transport sector has actually fallen in landlocked developing countries.

Moreover, infrastructure development needs to be complemented by efficient storage and logistics management systems, and integrated information and communication networks.

It also requires seamless integration of transport infrastructures of landlocked countries with the transit transport infrastructure of their transit developing countries, as well as with any special transit transport corridor. Inter-modal transport also needs to be encouraged. All these require significant financial and technical assistance, as well as capacity building.

Transit developing countries themselves face many development challenges. Yet, they take on additional costs of providing transit transport facilities to landlocked countries even when areas in their own countries remain as remote from the sea as those of landlocked countries. While the transit developing countries undertake this in a spirit of co-operation and friendship, they also need to be provided enhanced international support.

Other assistance envisaged in the Almaty Programme of Action has also been limited. Debt relief has not translated into additional resources since much of the debt was already in arrears. Technology transfer has not been effective. We need to put in place a proactive mechanism that promotes technology transfer at concessional and preferential rates.

Enhancing international trade from landlocked developing countries and transit developing countries is crucial for their development. This requires an enabling international environment. Developed countries need to provide enhanced market access to products of special interest to landlocked developing countries and transit developing countries. The overarching principle of special and differential treatment remains a categorical imperative.

Trade and transit issues are inextricably linked. Enhancement of trade facilitation, customs control efficiency and simplification of documentation and procedures for international trade, require technical and financial assistance.

We must also remain cognizant that there are significant regional variations in implementing the Almaty Programme, and one size cannot fit all. Bilateral initiatives, where appropriate, also play a key role.

Mr. President,

The enhanced focus on challenges of landlocked developing countries has highlighted that there are regions within some developing countries that have difficulty in accessing global markets on account of geography or political boundaries. This lack of easy access to the sea and remoteness from international markets causes them to face challenges similar to those faced by landlocked developing countries. It would be appropriate to recognise the need and call for cooperation for meeting special transit requirements of landlocked regions of a country.

Mr. President,

We have excellent and historical ties with our landlocked neighbours, and accord the highest importance to further strengthening these links, including through cooperation on transit transport issues. We have also contributed to the development efforts of other landlocked developing countries and transit developing countries as part of South-South cooperation.

Landlocked countries with a contiguous border with us have special bilateral cooperation agreements for easy transit of their goods through India.

Regional initiatives to improve transit connectivity and intra-regional trade are equally a priority for us. We also continue to join our landlocked neighbours with financial partnerships for infrastructure development and make available technical, economic and capacity building support.

Mr. President,

We hope that this mid-term review will invigorate the implementation of the Almaty Programme, including the provision of enhanced assistance from the international community.

Before concluding let me thank Mr. Cheick Sidi Diarra, Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, and his team for the excellent work they are doing, and their efforts in making this review meeting a success.

Thank you, Mr. President.

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