

# CHIDREL TAWAA 2021

**Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
Royal Government of Bhutan**





*“As a small country with a small population, we can overcome any challenge we are faced with, if the people and the government work together.*

*It is important, however, to not lose sight of our national objectives, and aim to bring normalcy as soon as possible so that when this pandemic is behind us, we can continue to work on making our future better and stronger. In the meantime, we will continue to work ceaselessly through this challenging situation.”*

*-His Majesty The King’s Address To The Nation, 22 March 2020*

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# FOREWORD



**Dr. Tandi Dorji**  
Foreign Minister

It gives me great pleasure to share that our first publication of Chidrel Tawaa was successfully launched and was well received by the readers. The Ministry also received valuable feedback on areas requiring improvement which have been considered in the current issue. The first Chidrel Tawaa was released virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The second publication of Chidrel Tawaa comes out during an extraordinary time when countries, especially in the region are battling fresh COVID infections that are reportedly more contagious than the previous variants. The second publication reflects on various undertakings of the Royal Government of Bhutan and the visionary leadership of His Majesty The King in ensuring that the lives and livelihoods of the Bhutanese people are as least affected as possible. Besides this, we have also tried to put in some personal reflections of individuals.

We in Bhutan have been fortunate like always to have the leadership of His Majesty The King, who has selflessly led the fight against the pandemic since the day of the detection of the first COVID case in Bhutan. Galvanizing people from all sectors and walks of life, coordinating the work and efforts of frontline workers across the country, His Majesty continues to ensure that our response to the pandemic is smooth and effective.

Different accounts and narratives in the publication show how Bhutan and her people with the help received from our bilateral, regional and multilateral partners managed to confront the most turbulent of times during this pandemic. As countries in the region battle the next wave of more contagious COVID infections, I can only hope that our experience in managing the pandemic till date and the response we have implemented will help us minimize its impacts.

I wish all readers a happy reading and as always invite you all to give us your valuable feedback and comments on the content.

(Dr. Tandi Dorji)  
Foreign Minister

# MESSAGE



**Kinga Singye**  
Foreign Secretary

I am very happy that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is bringing out its second issue of Chidrel Tawaa. The first issue, Chidrel Tawa 2020, was a maiden initiative of the Ministry and despite lack of experience in such an undertaking, the issue received positive feedback from many quarters as well as suggestions for improvement. I would like to express the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' gratitude to all those who provided feedback. This edition has taken into account all the feedback and it is our hope that Chidrel Tawaa 2021 will prove to be a better read for all.

2021 continues to be as challenging as the previous year, with the Covid-19 pandemic still raging and an end to it far from sight. In Bhutan, our battle against the pandemic has been waged with wisdom, foresight and whole-of-government approach under the wise and selfless leadership of His Majesty The King. The Royal Government was also fortunate to receive the wholehearted support of the Bhutanese people and the international community led by the country's closest friend and neighbor, India.

The theme of Chidrel Tawaa 2021 is Bhutan's response to Covid-19 and its impact on our society and economy. The editorial team has chosen this theme as it provides the opportunity for Bhutan to share its experiences in dealing with the pandemic and its impacts. It is also an opportunity to highlight the importance of national resolve and global support and cooperation to continue our fight against the pandemic, which is going to be with us for the foreseeable future.

I would like to convey the Ministry's appreciation to the editorial team for their hard work and dedication. I would also like to express our gratitude to all friends and colleagues for their insightful articles.

(Kinga Singye)  
Foreign Secretary





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### From the Editor

Covid-19 has spilled over into 2021, and with new variants at that. It's been unrelenting in its scourge of lives and livelihoods. More than a year on, the 'new normal' is setting in. It's becoming routine, and normal. Thus, Covid-19 – fatiguing as it may be – is the theme of Chidrel Tawaa 2021.

It goes without saying that Covid-19 has had a debilitating effect on our economy and society. This edition discusses Bhutan's response to fight the pandemic, and to deal with it to live, as it were, an alternative lifestyle, by necessity – that is. And the response has been exemplary; for, in Bhutan, Covid-19 has had a formidable opponent.

Instantly after the onset of Covid-19 in Bhutan in March 2020, His Majesty The King has spearheaded the national response and led the battle against it, at the forefront, and with an unparalleled and indomitable spirit. His Majesty's regular, tireless, and selfless visits to high-risk areas safeguard us all. We couldn't have asked for stronger immunity.

You would not wish for a crisis. But if you cannot prevent it, capitalize on it. Because a crisis begets innovation. From remote working to virtual meeting to virtual learning, Covid-19 has required us to be technology-based and digitally functional. Fortuitously, this could accelerate us for the digital age – a shot in the arm of His Majesty's vision of a 'smart nation,' and of governance and development through technology.

Bhutan hasn't had any tourist since March 2020. So tap into domestic tourism. Boost agriculture. Build a skilled workforce. Today, these interventions will see us through the crisis. Tomorrow, it's self-reliance.

The men and women in orange have been critical to the success of Bhutan's response. The ubiquity of de-suups is unequivocal about the enormity as much of their service as of the pandemic. Who could have had the foresight to institute De-suung, Guardians of Peace, a decade prior? Chidrel Tawaa 2021 celebrates their dedicated service to the Tsa-Wa-Sum.

Recently, we gasped at two photos: one, His Majesty drenched in rain; the other His Majesty having a packed lunch at a security outpost. Both were of one of His Majesty's visits to the high-risk areas in the south to protect us as a parent, care for us as a brother, and serve us as a son. These inimitable scenes call on us all to rally behind His Majesty and the Government against the pandemic to keep ourselves safe.

That 'no one is safe until everyone is' underscores that international cooperation is indispensable to fight Covid-19. Bhutan has been successful in managing the pandemic. We owe it to our international friends. The kind support and cooperation from our friends in the international community have consolidated our domestic efforts. Continued international cooperation is all the more paramount to ensure that everyone is safe.

The editorial team is grateful for the contributions. That not all could make it here is regretted.

The editorial team wishes you all a happy reading. Stay safe.

(Dawa Tshering)  
Editor-in-Chief





Upon arrival at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka on March 23, Honorable Lyonchhen was received by Honorable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina

## THE STATE VISIT OF LYONCHHEN (DR.) LOTAY TSHERING, PRIME MINISTER OF BHUTAN, TO BANGLADESH FROM 23-25 MARCH 2021

### Royal Bhutanese Embassy,

Dhaka, Bangladesh

Lyonchhen (Dr.) Lotay Tshering, Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Bhutan, paid a State Visit to Bangladesh from 23rd to 25th March 2021. This was his second visit to Bangladesh as the Head of

Government. The main purpose of the visit was to attend the celebration of two historic events, namely, the Birth Centenary of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman or “Mujib Borsho” and the Golden Jubilee of the independence of Bangladesh. The Prime Minister was accompanied by an eight-member official delegation, a media team, and a twenty two-member cultural delegation from the Royal Academy of Performing Arts (RAPA).

Upon arrival at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, Dhaka on 23rd March 2021, Lyonchhen was received by H.E. Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh, and senior officials of the Government of Bangladesh. Following this, as is customary for all visiting heads of government and state, Lyonchhen visited the National Martyrs’ Memorial in Savar to pay respects to the martyrs of the Bangladesh Liberation War. Lyonchhen also planted a sapling of Baccaurea



Honorable Lyonchhen paid a courtesy call on Honorable President of Bangladesh Abdul Hamid on March 24 at Bangabhaban, the Official Residence of the President

ramiflora at the venue. On the same day, he also visited the Bangabandhu Memorial Museum in Dhanmondi, Dhaka, the residence of the Father of the Nation. Later in the afternoon, Foreign Minister Dr. AK Abdul Momen called on Lyonchhen at the Hotel InterContinental and thanked the latter for visiting Bangladesh to be part of the historic events despite the requirement to undergo institutional quarantine for 21 days upon return to Bhutan. In the evening, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina hosted a banquet followed by a cultural programme at the Hotel Pan Pacific Sonargaon in honor of Lyonchhen and the visiting delegation.

In the forenoon of 24th March 2021, Lyonchhen held a bilateral discussion with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at the Prime

Minister’s Office (PMO). From the Bangladeshi side, the bilateral meeting was attended by Dr. AK Abdul Momen, Foreign Minister of Bangladesh; Dr. Ahmed Kaikaus, Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister; Ambassador Masud Bin Momen, Foreign Secretary (Senior Secretary); and Mr. Shahidul Karim, Ambassador of Bangladesh to Bhutan. In the afternoon, Lyonchhen called on H. E. Mr. Abdul Hamid, President of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh at Bangabhaban, the Official Residence of the President. President Abdul Hamid thanked Lyonchhen for the visit to participate in the festive celebrations and recalled Bhutan’s contribution to the independence of Bangladesh. This was followed by a visit to the National Parade Ground, Dhaka, which was the main venue for the celebration of

the “Mujib Borsho” or Mujib Year. The programme at the National Parade Ground was attended by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and high dignitaries of the Government of Bangladesh. As the Guest of Honour for the event, Lyonchhen delivered his Bangabandhu Memorial Speech in which he recalled the legacy of the Father of the Nation and paid tribute to the contributions made by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in laying the “strong foundations for a peaceful, progressive and prosperous Bangladesh.” Lyonchhen also commended the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the tremendous contributions she has made towards realizing her father’s dream of “Sonar Bangla” or Golden Bangla. Recalling the historical bond and friendship between our two countries which dates back to



the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent country, Lyonchhen looked forward to far more successes and achievements as the two countries continue the journey together, marked with so much affinity and affection. Lyonchhen's address which was delivered with intermittent usage of Bangla words struck a chord with the audience and added an emotional touch to the celebratory atmosphere.

Lyonchhen's address at the National Parade Ground was followed by a series of well-choreographed cultural performances by the artists of the Royal Academy of Performing Arts (RAPA), which resonated with the spirit and theme of the celebrations and the Golden Jubilee of the inception of the bilateral relationship between Bhutan and Bangladesh. After concluding the National Parade Ground event, Lyonchhen visited the Chancery of the Royal Bhutanese Embassy in Dhaka and had an interactive session with Bhutanese students, the Embassy officials and the Bhutanese working in Bangladesh. Lyonchhen briefed the audience on the state of developments in



As the Guest of Honour, Honorable Lyonchhen delivered his Bangabandhu Memorial Speech at the National Parade Ground, Dhaka, on March 24

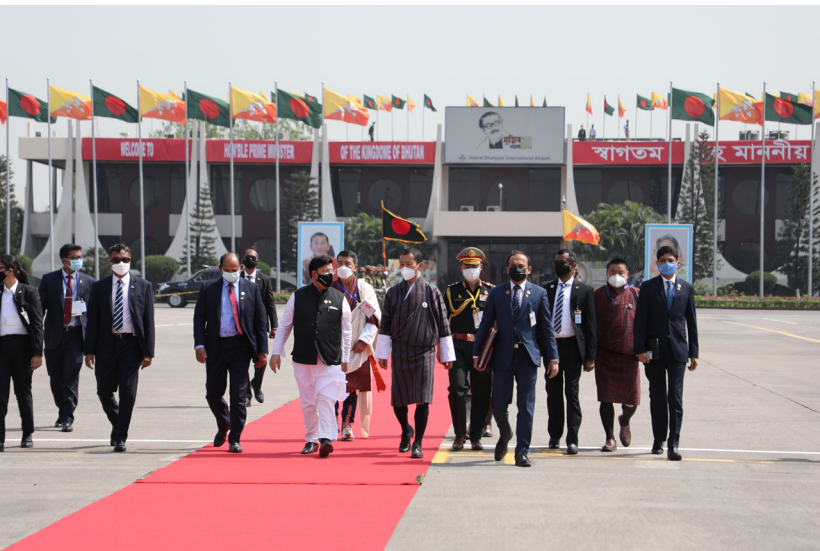
Bhutan, including the COVID-19 situation and the vaccination strategy, and heard out challenges and concerns facing Bhutanese students in Bangladesh. The Royal Bhutanese Embassy hosted a dinner in honour of Lyonchhen and the visiting delegation.

On 25th March, Lyonchhen and

the delegation were seen off at the airport by Foreign Minister Dr. AK Abdul Momen and other senior officials.

Besides the official engagements, Lyonchhen also met with other personalities on the sidelines during his stay in Bangladesh. These include meetings with Ambassador Jishnu Roy Choudhury, former Ambassador of Bangladesh to Bhutan; Mr. Tenzin Lekphell, Secretary General of BIMSTEC; Professor M. Khademul Islam, Chief Consultant; Dr. Md. Shaikat Ali, Cardiac Surgeon; Dr. Mamun Khan, Assistant Director, Sheikh Hasina Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery; and Professor Vincent Chang, the Vice-Chancellor of BRAC University, among others.

In what could otherwise have been a year-long celebration of Mujib Borsho, following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Bangladesh had to do away with most of its



Upon completion of his three-day state visit, Honorable Lyonchhen was seen off by Foreign Minister of Bangladesh Dr. AK Abdul Momen and senior officials of the Government of Bangladesh at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, Dhaka, on March 25

planned commemorative activities. Notwithstanding the COVID-19 pandemic, the Bangladesh government organized a grand closing ceremony to mark the end of the Mujib Year. The ten-day closing ceremony (17th to 27th March 2021) witnessed visits by leaders from the region in a staggered manner and felicitation messages flowing in from leaders and well-wishers from around the globe, paying their respective tributes and respects to the Father of the Nation.

Earlier on 6th December 2020, the two countries inaugurated the golden jubilee of the recognition of the independence of Bangladesh by Bhutan as the first country by signing the Preferential Trade Agreement, the first of its kind for both countries. Therefore, Lyonchhen's State Visit to Bangladesh could not have come at a better time, as it afforded the two countries not only the platform to jointly celebrate the historic Mujib Year but also to cherish five decades of a vibrant and ever-growing bilateral partnership.

In keeping with the spirit and

purpose of the visit, although no substantive matters were discussed involving bilateral cooperation between the two countries, the following are some of the outcomes of the visit:

1. Both sides agreed to study the feasibility of using the recently inaugurated Haldibari-Chilahati railway link by Bhutan for bilateral trade.
2. To honor the special bond of friendship and goodwill that exists between the two countries and as part of the celebration of 50 years of Bhutan's recognition of the independence of Bangladesh, Bangladesh gifted five additional MBBS slots to Bhutan, taking the total number of MBBS seats for Bhutan to twenty.
3. The Government of Bangladesh agreed to provide internet bandwidth to Bhutan at a friendship rate for its third international Internet gateway to be established from Bangladesh.
4. Bangladesh also agreed to provide

Bhutanese students studying in Bangladesh with a multiple-entry visa for the full duration of one's course, subject to the validity of the passport.

5. The two countries also agreed to pursue and expedite the following:

- a) Finalize the Transit Agreement and the Protocol to the Agreement;
- b) Hold the next Joint Technical Committee meeting to amend the SOP on the use of inland waterways;
- c) Hold the next Commerce Secretary-level meeting to discuss trade-related matters and pursue other pending issues; and,
- d) Hold the third Foreign Office Consultation between the two foreign ministries to discuss the entire gamut of bilateral cooperation.

At the end of the state visit, the two countries issued a Joint Statement covering all aspects of Lyonchhen's visit and the discussions held with high dignitaries of the Government of Bangladesh.

While the current visit of Lyonchhen to Bangladesh reinforces the tradition of regular high-level exchanges between the two countries, the visit also provided yet another opportunity to deepen the bilateral relations between our two countries. It has greatly contributed towards further enhancing the close ties of friendship, goodwill, understanding and cooperation between the governments, leaders and the peoples of the two countries.



A cultural performance by RAPA artists at the National Parade Ground, Dhaka, on March 24 in the presence of both the Prime Ministers





His Majesty speaks to a De-suup and Police personnel on patrol duty at Amochu

# LEADERSHIP AND LESSONS LEARNT FROM BHUTAN'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

## Leadership

When the first case of SARS-CoV-2 infection was detected in a 76-year-old American tourist at 11 pm on 5 March 2020, His Majesty The King was in the Ministry of Health building ensuring that all actions were taken to immediately control the pandemic. When the test result was confirmed just after midnight, command had already

been given to track and identify all contacts. Personally supervising and reviewing the work of the many agencies throughout the night from the health ministry premises, it was incredible that by 5 a.m. the next morning, all the primary and secondary contacts across the three districts of Paro, Thimphu and Punakha had been traced, tested and quarantined. By 6 a.m., the cabinet, the committee of secretaries and

heads of relevant agencies were briefed and commanded to take all measures to prevent further spread and to prepare the country for the long difficult road ahead.

Since then, His Majesty has been working tirelessly and travelling extensively across the country to ensure that every effort was made and a system put in place to protect the country from the pandemic.

While leaders across the world were being secluded to protect themselves from being infected, His Majesty The King was not only at the helm but also at the forefront giving directives and coordinating the work of all the agencies. Three districts were immediately put under lockdown, schools were closed, offices and businesses shut and people were asked to restrict their movement. As it was the first case of COVID in the country, fear of the disease kept everyone at home irrespective of the government directives. The capital city came to a standstill. Through this time, His Majesty worked daily from morning until late into the night reviewing the progress and providing support to all the people working relentlessly in controlling the pandemic. The mere presence of His Majesty in the building inspired and motivated everyone to dedicate themselves to the task at hand. The national disaster management authority was activated and plans were rolled out to respond to the pandemic for the immediate and long term.

With His Majesty's command to prevent any death from COVID in the country, treating and caring for the first case presented a huge challenge. Mr Hewitt<sup>1</sup> had all the risk factors that made him

<sup>1</sup> Mr Hewitt - name is being used as it has already been reported in the media and is available on the internet.

vulnerable and, as the US Secretary of State remarked later, he was quite *"frankly expected to die."*<sup>2</sup> Besides old age, he had other serious medical conditions and, as a result, lower immunity. Despite all the challenges, he did well initially. But his condition deteriorated rapidly and soon he had to be put on a ventilator. His Majesty commanded that he should receive the best care and that whatever was needed was to be provided. Following this directive, a dedicated team of specialist doctors and intensive care nurses worked around the clock taking care of him in a special COVID facility. All the health care providers were isolated within the hospital campus and took turns day and night providing medical care.

As opposed to many countries where tourists and foreigners who brought the infection into the country faced difficulty in availing treatment and faced harassment from many quarters, Mr Hewitt and his partner (who later also tested positive) were treated with inherent Bhutanese compassion and kindness. His Majesty instructed the hospital authorities to provide the best care and personally talked to Mr Hewitt and his partner, assuring them of not only the best health care but also at no cost at all. In addition to the hospital care, prayers and offerings were made by the monastic body and people across the country for his quick recovery. This is in keeping with the strong belief that, to recover from an illness, it is important to conduct prayers and rituals along with medical interventions (menchoe-rimdro).

<sup>2</sup> Slater J (2020) A king, a ventilator, an 8,000-mile journey: One American's coronavirus rescue from Bhutan. Washington Post, May 14, 2020. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/bhutan-coronavirus-american-tourist-evacuation/2020/05/13/2f43f1e6-8f16-11ea-9322-a29e75effc93\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/bhutan-coronavirus-american-tourist-evacuation/2020/05/13/2f43f1e6-8f16-11ea-9322-a29e75effc93_story.html) (Accessed on October 30)

As a small country with limited resources, there is skepticism abroad on the availability, capability and quality of health care in Bhutan. This is further aggravated by our poor understanding of the corona infection, the absence of an agreed treatment protocol, and the use of many medicines on a trial basis. As a result, it was understandable that Mr Hewitt's daughter was very concerned given his existing health conditions and wanted to repatriate her father to the US for treatment. She had reached out to the US government for support, and a special air ambulance, a gulf stream jet fitted with a bio-containment unit, eventually evacuated Mr Hewitt on 13 March 2020. Miraculously, he survived, and as one of the doctors in Baltimore where he was treated later told him, *"Whatever they tried in Bhutan probably saved your life."*<sup>3</sup>

To prevent further importation of the virus into the country, entry of tourists was banned while Bhutanese returning from overseas were asked to quarantine at home for 14 days. Compliance became a big concern as it was difficult to monitor every house, so the government took the difficult decision to mandate everyone to stay in facility quarantine, initially for two weeks and later increased to three weeks. The hotel industry, starting with the Bhutan Tourism Corporation Limited (BTCL) came forward in this critical phase by contributing their facility free of cost for quarantine purposes. This was a huge boon as the number of hotels required increased exponentially with an increasing number of Bhutanese returning home. The government however

<sup>3</sup> A complete report on Mr Hewitt's evacuation by Slater can be read in the Washington Post as provided in footnote number 2.



decided to pay the hotels for quarantine and in consultation with the hoteliers agreed on a nominal price depending on the rating of hotels. This was good for both parties considering that tourists were now completely absent.

Having secured against the risk of infection coming in through air transport, it was time to address the other route, the approximately 699 km of porous land border in the south with India which was of a greater threat. Having controlled the situation in Thimphu, with no demonstrated local transmission, His Majesty travelled to Phuentsholing, the largest town in the south and the main gateway for people and trade. After analyzing the risks and reviewing the preparedness, His Majesty addressed the nation on 22 March 2020 and announced the closure of all international borders. This posed a huge challenge as thousands of Bhutanese were residing across the border in the Indian town of Jaigaon. To accommodate more than a thousand families, His Majesty tasked the army to construct 1000 temporary houses in the shortest possible time. To coordinate the movement of goods and people, and to manage any potential infection, two regional task forces were constituted. One was based in Trashigang (later relocated to Samdrup Jongkhar in September) to coordinate the eastern part of the country. The other was based in Phuentsholing to look after the southern part.

Thereafter, His Majesty travelled across the country, reviewing the preparedness and situation in all the



His Majesty The King visiting the settlements along the borders where there is high risk of transmission

twenty districts. The Prime Minister accompanied His Majesty to most of the districts and implemented the commands received to respond to the needs of the people and to strengthen preparedness. More attention and focus was given to the southern districts because they were most at risk; all the major industries were located there and they served as the main entry point for all goods. Over the year, His Majesty has visited vulnerable and high-risk areas more than a dozen times, covering the entire 699 km of the border and entering quarantine each time. Border outposts were established every half to one km and volunteers were recruited to observe and monitor the illegal movement of people across the porous border.

His Majesty in his farsightedness started the De-suung program in 2011 to “promote peace, harmony and unity through a spirit of

camaraderie, volunteerism and cooperation in the nation”. De-suups, translated as “Guardians of Peace,” are trained for three to four weeks by the military on discipline, rescue technique, crowd control and disaster management. Pivotal to being a De-suup is to volunteer and serve the nation in times of need, such as during festivals, national events, disasters, accidents and organized functions. At the time of the COVID outbreak, there were less than 5,000 trained De-suups. His Majesty saw the need for many more to respond to the pandemic and commanded the setting up of new training centres. The criteria for enrolling were also relaxed to include high-school students. There was an overwhelming response; thousands applied for the training.

After the first COVID case in Bhutan, nearly 18,000 more De-suups were trained and recruited to



His Majesty The King with the representatives of the De-suung fraternity during the 113th National Day at the historic Punakha Dzong

serve as volunteers across the country. Today, there are close to 23,000 De-suups. The largest number of De-suups were sent to man the outposts and to patrol the borders, while others volunteered across towns and villages in the entire country monitoring compliance of health protocol and supporting central and local governments activities. De-suups played a major role during the two national lockdowns in stocking up warehouses with essential goods, packaging and distributing food and groceries, maintaining law and order, supporting the provision of essential services and patrolling communities to ensure compliance with the health guidelines.

One of the greatest contributors to the country’s success in the COVID response has been the presence of De-suups. As the program was initiated by His Majesty, it is prestigious. There is immense interest to be part of it. The training is very rigorous and the services provided by De-suups on various occasions over the years have won admiration and trust from the people. The bright orange uniform donned by De-suups has become a symbol of selfless volunteerism and personal sacrifice made in the service of the Tsa-Wa-Sum (the three jewels comprising King, country and people). His Majesty personally oversees the training program, looks after the welfare of De-suups and grants audiences to every batch of De-suups.

There are many other significant activities carried out by De-suups during the pandemic. One of the earliest activities was in the initial few days when hand sanitizers were completely sold out. On the command of His Majesty, all the alcohol stocked in the Army Welfare Project<sup>4</sup> was diverted to make hand sanitizers. De-suups made hand sanitizers from the alcohol in huge drums and then drove around the capital city to distribute them free to

<sup>4</sup>The Army Welfare Project is a company that manufactures world-famous alcohol beverages. Profits from it are used for taking care of soldiers and their family members during and after their service.

the people. The most important duty however was in manning the border outposts, majority of which were in remote locations with very rudimentary and temporary shelters. Despite the challenges and difficult circumstances, De-suups, buoyed and inspired by His Majesty, served with dedication, commitment and patriotism along with army, police, foresters and volunteers from the community, including officials from the local governments.

As His Majesty has reminded us, Bhutan is a country of “tendrel”<sup>5</sup> and the De-suung program is one. Although it was initiated more than a decade ago and De-suups have contributed on a number of occasions since then, it seems that His Majesty foresaw the pandemic and established De-suung to respond to it. I am certain that this can be a model for other countries to follow.

Most deservedly, His Majesty The King conferred the Druk Thugsey medal to De-suung on 17 December 2020 at the 113th National Day celebrations for its extraordinary contributions to the nation during the pandemic.

Under the leadership and guidance of His Majesty, the government has implemented rigorous evidence-based measures that have successfully prevented a full-blown community transmission in the country. At the time of writing this article, Bhutan has had only one death from COVID.

<sup>5</sup> Tendrel: Literally means “dependent and connection” or the results that occur due to certain causes and conditions.



### Lessons and Opportunities

While there is no doubt that COVID-19 has been a huge challenge to health services, wrecked economies of countries around the world and disrupted people's lives and livelihoods, it has also given us an opportunity to learn and adapt. There are many lessons we can learn, from the responses and measures taken to the pandemic, challenges and obstacles encountered, deficiencies and vulnerability in our systems and reactions and behaviors of people.

The first and most critical is the importance of good leadership and trust. People in Bhutan, as always, have been most fortunate in having His Majesty lead the fight against the pandemic at the forefront. Galvanizing people from all sectors and coordinating the work and efforts of frontline workers across the country, His Majesty has ensured that our response is smooth, homogenous, efficient

and most importantly effective. The wholehearted trust placed by the people in His Majesty has secured unconditional cooperation and full compliance with the strict and rigorous preventive measures, particularly during the two national lockdowns. The pandemic has taught us that we are all interdependent and that the actions of one or few can affect everyone. If we are to successfully overcome the pandemic, each one of us must take responsibility and abide by the measures put in place in the best interest of the country.

The second lesson is the extent of our vulnerability and the consequences of the development progress that we have made. There is no doubt that 12 five year plans have in over 60 years brought immense economic development, reduced poverty to 5% and brought Bhutan on the cusp of becoming a middle-income country. This has however come at the cost of eroding traditional

and family ties, neglecting farming and agriculture and the absence of critical skills amongst our youth that our forefathers had to survive independently. Universal free education, while extremely effective (>100 % enrolment) has created disillusioned and dependent youth seeking only white-collar jobs, and unwilling to get their hands and feet dirty.

Thus, there is a need to relook and reform our education system by modernizing teaching methods and revising curriculum and standards to make them relevant for the present and future times. As His Majesty has stressed, it is imperative that we focus and prioritize STEM subjects and invest in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) which is critical for the economy. We must invest more in agriculture and water technology, both of which are very important for self-reliance and make them a major contributor to the economy. Our youth must be equipped with proper knowledge and have a conducive environment to take up entrepreneurship, innovate, become self-employed and create jobs rather than seek jobs. We must instill in our youth the importance of hard work and dignity of labour. We must instill confidence in them to take up whatever opportunities come their way, and a sense of loyalty and dedication to the Tsa-Wa-Sum no matter what job they do. The mark of a true patriot is when he becomes a contributory citizen, not a dependent.

Our dependence on foreign labour for manual work, especially in the construction sector was most

apparent during the pandemic when hordes of migrant workers from neighboring countries began to leave in droves. Work at many construction sites came to a standstill and, even in the major hydropower project sites, the management was threatened and held to ransom by workers who were determined to return to their loved ones. Decades of building our offices, homes and industries by foreign labour have created dependency and an absence of skilled Bhutanese workers. This is compounded by a lack of interest, and reluctance to do physical work by our youth. What is even more lamentable is the quality of the design and construction of our buildings brought on by woeful procurement rules that award work to the lowest bidder, resulting in cheap material and labour. How many structures that were built in the last half of the century in our country can we really be proud of as a fine example of the craftsmanship of Bhutanese architects and builders? We must build a pool of highly skilled construction workers, specialized in different aspects, such as masons, carpenters, plumbers, electricians, heating and ventilation, landscaping, etc., and have a strong workforce buoyed by attractive salaries and work conditions. Despite several attempts to improve the construction sector, there has been no focused intervention or investment to uplift the basic foundation starting with training and building skills. The Build Bhutan Project and specialized construction firms recently established are expected to bring major changes in the construction industry.



Picture courtesy: Fablab-Bhutan

The third lesson is how to invest in technology, capitalize and utilize it efficiently. Ever since television and the internet were introduced in Bhutan at the beginning of the 21st century, investment and expansion in technology have been rather slow. In the last decade or so, expenses at national, family and individual levels have been wasted on entertainment. The use of various social media platforms has been most popular. COVID-19 has taught us that there is much more we can do with information technology, especially virtual platforms that enable efficient work and decision-making. Investing in and developing smart apps has allowed a better response to the pandemic and the use of multimedia platforms has

enabled people to work from home (reducing pollution and saving energy) and conduct meetings quickly and effectively. One of the most important successes following the national lockdown has been the development and creation of the zoning system throughout the country. Despite decades of investment and work by a myriad of agencies on having an address system for Thimphu, it could never be completed. When His Majesty personally took up the initiative of forming a team from all the relevant agencies and tasked them to deliver, the work was completed in two days! Within a few weeks, the whole country was categorized into zones, to manage the pandemic more efficiently and plan and build



Picture courtesy: PMO Bhutan





De-suups distributing hand sanitizer to the general public. Picture courtesy: ORF

modern convenient public services and facilities that will eventually benefit the people.

The fourth lesson from the pandemic is the importance and availability of reliable and updated data. We have known this all along but have not been able to invest, coordinate and utilize the available data more effectively. Vital data such as the number of residents in Thimphu and Phuentsholing, old and infirm people, Bhutanese studying and working abroad, and status of essential goods, requirement of vegetables and groceries in the country, etc., were scant, outdated, unreliable or simply not available. These were very important during the early phase of the pandemic to plan and prepare the distribution of essential goods and medicines, arrange charter flights and repatriate Bhutanese, procure and stock essential goods, etc. We must learn from this and identify a set of indispensable data that is required for all times and to keep this updated in real-time so that essential services and actions can be taken in any eventuality. In doing this, we must also work towards better coordination, pool resources and share

information to reduce duplication and wastage of limited resources.

The pandemic has also improved the environment globally albeit temporarily and brought focus and attention to climate change. Lockdowns around the world have led to cleaner air and clearer skies, reclamation of nature by animals and above all the peace and solace of the silence and calm around us. Bhutan has always accorded high priority to the environment and this pandemic has reinvigorated our will and effort to protect and preserve this precious resource. Our policies need to align with our resolve, by encouraging and incentivizing the use of cleaner energy, such as electric cars, induction cookers, biogas, solar and wind energy, etc. More investment needs to be made and every individual needs to take responsibility for managing waste in the country. We cannot afford to espouse environmental conservation and claim to be the only carbon-negative country when we cannot take care of our waste and keep our backyard clean. While

taking care of the people's needs, it is equally important to take care of the needs of nature and especially of other living beings. In a remarkable demonstration of compassion, His Majesty commanded the army to feed the thousands of stray dogs that were left hungry during the lockdown.

Most importantly, one of the valuable lessons is to be better prepared in the future. This time it is the pandemic and Bhutan has done extremely well under His Majesty's leadership and guidance. However, in terms of preparation, were we really prepared? This will certainly not be the last pandemic and, as a country located in the Himalayas, we face existential threats of natural disasters and other calamities. We must harness the lessons from this pandemic to better prepare and institute systems so that future responses are quicker, more efficient and coordinated. The hundreds of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and guidelines that were developed to ensure smooth operation of essential services and the multitude of emergency phones that needed to be installed to answer queries and cater to services need to be compiled and consolidated. We should be clear about what constitutes essential services that have to be provided at all times. We should be clear about the identity of critical frontline workers. A consolidated list of communication channels is a must. And we should strengthen supply chains for essential goods. In the words of His Majesty, *"Being small is our greatest advantage. We can do things better, more efficiently, and faster than any*

*other nation in the 21st century"*.<sup>6</sup>

There are many other lessons that we can learn from which are equally, if not more, important, such as securing and manning our international borders, enhancing trade by increasing export and streamlining import, diversifying the economy, creating more jobs, addressing the menace of contraband and substance abuse, etc. Many of these are components of those that are mentioned above and are being addressed. The greatest impediment and challenge for the government is not the will or the capability, but the availability of funds. The limited resources that we have and which can be availed needs to be carefully rationalized and prioritized to reap maximum benefits. We must be realistic and practical, knowing what, when and how much we can do, given the limitations of our resources and the situation of the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also underscored the pivotal role international cooperation and support plays in managing and overcoming the challenges posed by a global crisis of such nature and scale. No matter how concerted our efforts are, our lone efforts in fighting the pandemic would have been rendered futile without the understanding and support from the international community. Timely response by international partners, particularly the unstinting support and assistance extended by the Government of India has been

crucial in effectively responding to the challenges posed by the pandemic. Bhutan is thankful to all its international partners for their generous support and contributions. International cooperation and understanding have also been important in implementing containment measures and border management.

This is no time to think of one's interest whether as individuals, sectors, institutions, districts or political parties. The interest of the nation is paramount, the life of every Bhutanese is precious, maintaining unity and harmony is sacred and it is the duty of each and every one of us to serve the Tsa-Wa-Sum. I have no doubt that under the leadership of His Majesty The King, and with the prayers of the Dratshang led by His Holiness the Je Khenpo, and the collective thoughts and hard work of the people, we will rise stronger and better from this pandemic and bring progress and prosperity to our beloved Druk Yul.

Palden Drukpa Gyalo!

6 His Majesty's Address to the 11th Convocation of the Royal University of Bhutan - 7 June 2017. Available online at <https://www.rub.edu.bt/index.php/en/the-university/chancellor/363-his-majesty-s-address-to-the-12th-convocation-of-the-royal-university-of-bhutan-7-june-2017>, accessed on 2 November 020.

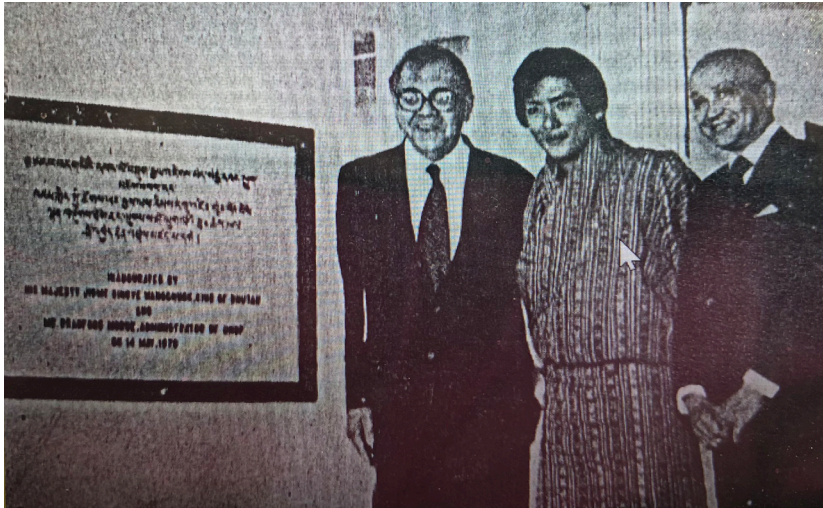


# UNDP AND BHUTAN - OVER FOUR DECADES OF PARTNERSHIP IN PROMOTING RESILIENT, INCLUSIVE, AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

## Azusa Kubota

Resident Representative  
UNDP

The year 2021 is a special year for the United Nations (UN) family in Bhutan as we mark the country's 50 years of membership in the UN. The partnership between the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) began from the very beginning of its membership with the development of the country's human development, tourism and energy sectors. Our partnership was consolidated through the establishment of UNDP Bhutan Country Office in 1973. Over the years, the partnership has grown and diversified as we joined hands in addressing complex development challenges in the areas of poverty reduction, environment conservation, climate change mitigation and adaptation, disaster risk reduction, and inclusive governance.



His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo and UNDP Administrator Mr. Bradford Morse inaugurated the office of the Resident Representative of UNDP formally on 14 May, 1979

Throughout our presence, UNDP has walked with Bhutan side by side to facilitate the attainment of its development aspirations as a nation of Gross National Happiness. Early examples of the fruits of our partnership include the launch of Bhutan's first airline, Drukair, in 1981 and the establishment of the Bhutan Trust Fund for Environmental Conservation (BTFC) in 1996.



Bhutan's national airline Drukair began humbly with an 18-seat Dornier 228-200 that made its historic touch down at the Paro airport on 14 January 1983 with support from UNDP. Picture courtesy: Cornelis Klein



UNDP's partnership with Bhutan in the area of climate action, which continues to date, began with the first National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) project. The project implemented from 2008-2012 lowered the water level of Thorthomi glacial lake in Lunana to reduce glacial lake outburst flood (GLOF) risks

UNDP has also ensured optimal access for Bhutan to global climate financing and mechanisms through the design and implementation of adaptation and mitigation projects. Examples of recent joint efforts include the National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) and the climate adaptation projects in the agriculture sector. Some of the outcomes of NAPA projects include stabilization of four critical landslide-prone areas in Rinchening, Phuntsholing, and protection of Bhutan's largest industrial estate in Pasakha from recurrent flooding, thus securing Bhutan's main economic corridor. These interventions have also helped strengthen community resilience to drought in four districts through water harvesting system installations. Furthermore, the partnership has contributed towards mitigation of Glacial Lake Outburst Floods (GLOF) risks in Lunana between 2008 and 2013. Similarly, UNDP supported the formulation of the National Disaster Risk Management Framework. Under the ongoing agriculture adaptation projects, close to 40 climate-resilient irrigation schemes will be completed, securing lifeline water supplies to agricultural communities in the wake of climate change.

Our recent strong partnership with the Royal Government in building a solid scientific basis to design the even more ambitious Nationally Determined Contributions and Low-Emission Development Strategies, ahead of the COP 26 is an example of UNDP's continued commitment to further strengthening Bhutan's global climate leadership.

As the international community finds ways to recover from the devastating COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of sound governance institutions is felt more than before. Building on past efforts to consolidate democracy and strengthen systems of governance, such as the establishment of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) in 2006 and the Justice Sector Strategic Plan in 2018, UNDP continues to work with all three arms of the state and

civil society as an indispensable mechanism to reach out to the vulnerable groups and deliver essential services. The achievement of SDG 16 is a necessary bedrock for sustainable and inclusive development.

Accelerating efforts towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) attainment before 2030 remains a priority as UNDP continues to work with the Royal Government through innovative partnerships, cutting-edge global knowledge, technical and financial assistance.

But in moving forward, the partnership must evolve in tune with the fast-changing world. The challenge of reaching Agenda 2030, which was momentous already before the COVID-19 pandemic, has now been amplified. The human development index has plummeted for the first. Although the number of people living in extreme poverty dropped from 1.9 billion in 1990 to 689 million in 2017, across 107 developing countries, 1.3 billion people, or 22% of the population, live in multidimensional poverty. Since 1990, inequality has increased in most developed countries and some middle-income countries, home to 75% of the world's population. The crisis has exposed multiple dimensions of inequalities, be it in digital space or vaccine access. In Bhutan, the extraordinary leadership, fast actions by the Royal Government, and community support have all contributed to effective containment of the virus, but we are all aware of the increasing prevalence of mental illness, suicides, gender-based violence, and youth unemployment. This virus has spared no one.

Although COVID-19 has illuminated the challenges the world is faced with, it has also demonstrated



the scope for choice in how and where to address those challenges. It certainly triggered renewed interest in policies previously considered impracticable, such as temporary basic incomes. Many governments launched bold and massive green economic recovery plans. The crisis presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reset the unsustainable development pathways that the global community was pursuing and achieve structural transformation, particularly green, inclusive, and digital transitions.

The world community continues to be confronted with complex challenges that require whole-of-society efforts and integrated approaches. Our world today is, in so many ways, a different world from what it was when UNDP was established in Bhutan over four decades ago. The world, and certainly Bhutan, needs a new set of solutions, and to help deliver those, we in UNDP must also evolve.

The COVID-19 crisis taught us valuable lessons. One defining lesson is the importance of the Triple A (being Agile, Anticipatory, and Adaptive). The states around the world also realized the importance of building the capabilities and resilience required to respond to systemic uncertainties and risks.

In recognition of this reality, UNDP recently launched a network of Accelerator Labs. This facility goes beyond the traditional parameters of projectised partnerships and allows us to apply the Triple A principle. The Lab offers a platform to co-create agility and adaptiveness in operations and practices and aims to ensure that capabilities are built to understand the complexities of 21st century problems. The lab



UNDP is supporting the 180 KW Pilot Grid-Tied Ground Mounted Solar PV System in Rubesa, Wangdue Phodrang. The project is part of a COVID-19 response and recovery project titled, 'Towards a Smarter, Greener and More Resilient Recovery through Innovation in Bhutan', funded by the Government of Japan

does this by firstly adopting systems thinking approaches, and, secondly, rapidly testing and experimenting ideas to accelerate learning on a small scale before making expensive mistakes. As part of a globally integrated network (115 labs serving 117 countries), each lab connects and collaborates, drawing ideas and practices from one another in real time. In Bhutan, the lab is focusing on three frontier challenges: to bring about a systems approach to overcoming barriers in the youth unemployment landscape, to apply behavioral insight interventions in waste management, and to build a public sector innovation ecosystem in the country. The lab is currently exploring the potential for enhancing foresight capabilities in the public sector. We all recognize that public service reform is a prerequisite for many of the reforms that are urgently needed in Bhutan. Facilitating digital solutions is an integral part of addressing all three frontier challenges that our Accelerator Lab is focusing on.

Another valuable lesson from the pandemic is that there is no development problem that does not have a global face. From air pollution to unemployment, multilateral cooperation will be vital in resolving these shared predicaments that cross boundaries of geography and time. These include more diverse alliances of governments and businesses, regions, and cities collaborating to find solutions to common concerns.

While development challenges are becoming ever more inter-connected and multi-faceted, the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement bring clarity of purpose to this complex, uncertain world we operate in. As we mark 50 years of Bhutan's membership in the UN, it is time for UNDP to step up and reaffirm our commitment to remain Bhutan's trusted development partner, a partner who brings new solutions and connects Bhutan to the global network of knowledge and thought-leadership.

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# THE KING, NATIONAL DISCIPLINE AND UNITY: SHIELDS AGAINST A PANDEMIC

*"As a small country with a small population, we can overcome any challenge we are faced with, if the people and the government work together.*

*It is important, however, to not lose sight of our national objectives, and aim to bring normalcy as soon as possible so that when this pandemic is behind us, we can continue to work on making our future better and stronger. In the meantime, we will continue to work ceaselessly through this challenging situation."*

*-His Majesty The King's Address To The Nation, 22 March 2020*

## Kinley Wangdi

Director  
Directorate of Services

The dawn of 2020 unfurled painfully with the spread of COVID-19. The Indian states of West Bengal and Assam, Bhutan's immediate and closest neighbours, reported regular increases in COVID-19 cases. The threat posed by increasing infections in India with whom we share a long and porous border mandated the adoption of a tough strategy. Bhutan understood well the challenges that could emerge on account of the stringent measures adopted. Bhutan closed its international borders on 23 March 2020 to combat importation and transmission of the virus and it remains so to this day.

Just before the first COVID-19 case was detected in Bhutan, His Majesty The King, sensing the lurking threat, visited all southern districts. These visits gave birth to

the High Level COVID-19 Task Force (C19TF) in March 2020, Bhutan's first frontline workers at the Indo-Bhutan border. The idea and urgency of preparedness and response to the pandemic originated from the Golden Throne. A 22 member C19TF was formed with representatives from all relevant government ministries and agencies (Health, Home Affairs, Economic Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Agriculture, Finance, Transport, Royal Institute for Governance and Strategic Studies, Phuentsholing Thromde, Food Corporation of Bhutan Limited, Bhutan India Friendship Association, Royal Bhutan Army and Royal Bhutan Police) with the mandate to:

- (i) prepare for COVID-19;
- (ii) maintain uninterrupted supply of essential items from India and third countries; and
- (iii) maintain security at the southern border for six southern dzongkhags, viz., Samtse, Chhukha,

Tsirang, Dagana, Sarpang, Zhemgang.

The C19TF, later renamed as Southern C19TF (SC19TF), is still functioning today as the main frontier guard at Phuentsholing. In a short span of time, numerous protocols on health and safety, containment and quarantine, guidelines on import and export, provision of essential and medical services, zonation maps and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) were developed considering different pandemic scenarios such as closure of the Indo-Bhutan border. These were reviewed from time to time and communicated to relevant agencies on the ground.

His Majesty The King visited the southern belt of the country several times to ensure that the SC19TF was always alert and prepared. Between March to November 2020, His Majesty The King visited Phuentsholing, Samtse and Gelephu ten times each while making several visits to Samdrup Jongkhar and



His Majesty speaks to Police and De-suups on duty at the border outpost in Langchenphu, Jomotsangkha, one of the most remote places in Samdrup Jongkhar, during peak COVID-19 times

Lhamoizingkha. In every Royal audience that the SC19TF received before the first national lockdown, His Majesty The King emphasized that the COVID-19 battle for Bhutan would start from Phuentsholing and that it must end in Phuentsholing. His Majesty also stated that it was only a matter of time till COVID-19 would make its way into Phuentsholing.

His Majesty personally visited all high-risk places along the southern Indo-Bhutan border and met with the frontline workers - de-suups, police, soldiers, villagers, farmers and business people. His Majesty's visits during these unusual times were a source of uncommon inspiration, strength and wisdom.

Bhutan went into her first lockdown on 11th August 2020. On 12th August, a loader working at the Regional Revenue and Customs Office (RRCO) containment facility in Phuentsholing tested positive and on 13th, 12 loaders working at the Mini Dry Port (MDP) and RRCO containment facility tested positive for COVID-19.

Subsequently, on 14th August, Phuntsholing was declared a red zone. As predicted, the COVID-19 battle had indeed begun. The strength of our plans, strategies and SOPs were put to the test in a single day.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, hundreds of Bhutanese started returning home from India, Nepal, and the Middle East through Phuentsholing. At the Phuentsholing international gate, they were received by members of the SC19TF and briefed on the pandemic situation and the mandatory facility quarantine. All returnees were escorted to the quarantine facility and quarantined for 22 days. Medical tests, rooms and food in the quarantine facility were provided entirely free by the state despite resource constraints. The number of returnees increased on a daily basis. At the end of the quarantine period, members from the SC19TF would visit such facilities and explain the need to undergo home quarantine once back in their communities.

For over three decades, more than 5,000 Bhutanese



were living in the neighboring Indian town of Jaigaon due to the shortage of affordable housing in Phuentsholing. Jaigaon started reporting an increasing number of cases every day. On the command of His Majesty The King, around 5,717 Bhutanese were evacuated from Jaigaon to Phuentsholing. In a matter of months, 2,918 Bhutanese evacuated from Jaigaon were given kidu and accommodated in 1000 units of a newly built temporary housing facility in the Ammochu area in Phuentsholing. It represented an unprecedented *kidu* from His Majesty in terms of size, timing, urgency and impact.

**From plain paper to full pandemic readiness**

Lockdown unfurled a series of problems and triggered a chain reaction of multiple challenges. Ensuring timely delivery of food, medicine, utilities and emergency medical services to 33,000 people in Phuentsholing injected fear and panic in the first week of the lockdown. With the sudden imposition of the lockdown, over 1,500 people and 500 vehicles from different parts of the country were stranded in Phuentsholing. There were people suffering from other diseases, pregnant mothers requiring emergency attention, senior citizens without caregivers, stranded people in hotels without money to pay their bills, travellers without a place to stay and hosts of other problems. The frontline team comprising SC19TF members supported by regional offices of trade, customs, health, labour, transport, de-suups, Bhutan Exporter Association, Association of Bhutanese Industries, wholesalers

and retailers acted promptly in a single coordinated manner as per the systems and procedures in place.

The return of people stranded in Phuentsholing was facilitated in a phased manner. The SC19TF even went to the extent of evacuating a pet dog left behind during a family’s move from Jaigaon to the Ammochu resettlement facility. Hotline services were set up and operators were recruited and trained to attend to lockdown distresses. Lockdown restrictions were enforced stringently to break the chain of transmissions. Post-mortems of SOPs, guidelines, strategies and protocols were continuously conducted to ensure zero defects.

The nation’s first COVID-19 Task Force had to work round the clock from plain paper to full preparedness. As infection increased each day in Jaigaon, the Task Force in Phuentsholing worked meticulously and successfully managed to keep the virus from entering Bhutan for five months, since the



Temporary housing facility in Ammochhu area in Phuentsholing for the Bhutanese evacuated from Jaigaon

detection of the first case in the neighboring states of India. These five months served as a Golden Period providing adequate time for the entire nation to prepare against the pandemic. The unstinting efforts of the SC19TF and the frontline team for the last ten months resulted in total containment of community transmission in Phuentsholing.

**Discipline and democracy aided each other in Bhutan**

Bhutanese displayed a strong sense of discipline, duty and willingness to abide by restrictions imposed during these trying times. This strong sense of discipline was not instilled overnight but inculcated in all Bhutanese as a way of life. It proved to be a great asset and manifested as a core strength during the fight against COVID-19. Leading by example was His Majesty



His Majesty The King speaks to a woman at her home in Thongling of Sampheling gewog in Chukha

The King. On return to the capital from his regular visits to high-risk places, His Majesty always stayed in quarantine, followed national health protocols and containment procedures like any other individual. One can only imagine how difficult it is to undergo quarantine time and again. The Prime Minister Dr. Lotay Tshering followed the same path after his visits to Phuentsholing, Samtse and Sarpang.

**Synchronization of unity and loyalty**

Discipline would not have translated into action if people were not united. His Majesty’s exemplary leadership and deep compassion for His citizens bonded people across all walks of life. Countless times during the peak of summer, His Majesty walked through thick forests, paddy fields, mountains and riverways inspiring people to do their part. This unity was further cemented by the hard work and sacrifice of frontline workers, de-suups, police, soldiers (serving and retired) that guarded the Indo-Bhutan border enduring harsh conditions.

Phuentsholing went into a second lockdown on 23rd December 2020, a few days after the capital Thimphu. The lockdown was calm, quick and well managed through the ‘Smart Lockdown’ strategy. The minute the lockdown was declared, Phuentsholing glided into a silent city, with not a single person visible outside. Such instant convergence of PPE (People, Plan and Effort) was catalysed by His Majesty’s speech on 17th December on the occasion of the 113th National Day and the experiences from the first lockdown. The SC19TF and IMT managed to keep Phuentsholing safe, the economy uninterrupted and our border secured.

**Conclusion**

On 7th November, twelve years ago, His Majesty The King delivered His coronation speech:

*“Throughout my reign I will never rule you as a King. I will protect you as a parent, care for you as a brother and serve you as a son. I shall give you everything and keep nothing; I shall live such a life as a good human being that you may find it*

*worthy to serve as an example for your children; I have no personal goals other than to fulfill your hopes and aspirations. I shall always serve you, day and night, in the spirit of kindness, justice and equality.”*

The quintessence of this unprecedented speech manifested live this past year. Truly, each and every word and action of His Majesty The King embodies the perfect characteristic of a Bodhisattva.

Today’s leadership story is tomorrow’s history. I owe considerable gratitude to the SC19TF, IMT and my fellow frontline workers for giving me the opportunity to serve alongside them. I am proud to be part of this historic but challenging time in our nation’s history.



# BHUTAN IN THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA IN 2020 - HIGHLIGHTS

## Ugyen Dorji

Chief  
Social and Humanitarian Division  
Department of Multilateral Affairs

Notwithstanding the immense challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the year 2020 was special for Bhutan in the international setting. The year was marked by high-level appointments of Bhutanese to lead two regional organisations – ICIMOD and BIMSTEC. Bhutan was accorded the prestigious UNFPA Population Award and saw the successful election of a Bhutanese to the UN Committee for the Rights of the Child (CRC). Bhutan made significant contributions to multilateral discourse by hosting the 35th APRC in September and the Thimphu Ambition Summit in December. Bhutan also represented the 47 LDCs in the high-level Climate Ambition Summit organized by the United Nations and the United Kingdom, held virtually on 12 December 2020.

## I. Appointments

1. Dr. Pema Gyamtsho, Director General of the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) from Bhutan assumed office on 29 October 2020. He is the first Director General to be appointed from the Hindukush Himalaya region. ICIMOD, based in Kathmandu, is an intergovernmental knowledge and learning centre that develops and shares research, information, and innovations to empower people in the eight regional member countries of the HKH – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan.



2. Mr. Tenzin Lekphell, BIMSTEC Secretary General from Bhutan assumed office on 6 November 2020. He is the third Secretary General of BIMSTEC. The Secretary General of BIMSTEC is appointed by the BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting for a term of three years, upon nomination by a Member State based on the principle of alphabetical rotation.



3. Dr. Rinchen Chopel, CRC Member from Bhutan

Dr. Rinchen Chopel was elected as a member of the United Nations' Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) for the term 2021-2025 at the election held during the 18th Meeting of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child at UN Headquarters in New York on 24th November 2020. The CRC is a body of 18 Independent experts that monitors implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its two Optional Protocols.

The Royal Government Bhutan had nominated Dr. Rinchen Chopel to contest the CRC election given his outstanding commitment and distinguished service in promoting and protecting the rights of the children spanning close to 30 years, both in Bhutan and SAARC region.

Dr. Rinchen Chopel is currently serving as the Director General of the South Asia Initiative to End Violence Against Children (SAIEVAC) Regional Secretariat based in Kathmandu, Nepal.



## II. Awards

Her Majesty Gyalum Sangay Choden Wangchuck was awarded the prestigious individual laureate for the 2020 UN Population Award during a virtual ceremony held on 10 December 2020. The award was presented to recognize Her Majesty's outstanding contribution in raising awareness and devising solutions to population and reproductive health issues. Mr. Gerald Daly, the UN Resident Coordinator presented the Award to Her Majesty on behalf of the UN Secretary General.





III. High Level Multilateral Events

1. 35th Asia-Pacific Regional Conference of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the UN

The Ministry of Agriculture and Forests in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs hosted the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation’s (FAO) 35th Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific (APRC) virtually in Thimphu from 01 to 04 September 2020. It was the first virtual FAO regional conference and provided valuable experience for Bhutan as the host. Lyonpo (Dr.) Tandi Dorji, Foreign Minister graced the opening of the Conference as the Chief Guest and delivered the keynote address on behalf of the Prime Minister. The conference saw one of the largest numbers of participants in the APRC.



2. Thimphu Ambition Summit, 9 December 2020.

Bhutan, as the current Chair of the Least Developed Countries Group in the UNFCCC hosted the Thimphu Ambition Summit virtually on 9 December 2020 to build global political momentum for a 1.5 degree Celsius World. Chaired by Foreign Minister Dr. Tandi Dorji, the Summit discussed critical issues around climate ambition, finance and the green recovery from Covid-19 crisis. The Prime Minister made the keynote address virtually.



3. Climate Ambition Summit, 12 December 2020.

Representing the collective voice of the 47 most vulnerable countries as LDCs, Hon’ble Lyonchhen participated virtually in the Climate Ambition Summit co-hosted by the United Nations, the United Kingdom (COP26 President) and France on 12 December 2020, marking the fifth anniversary of the Paris Agreement and to bring forward concrete enhanced climate ambition plans to deliver the Paris Agreement goal of limiting global temperature under 1.5 degree Celsius.



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# DIPLOMATS AS TRAVEL AGENTS

## Evacuation Team

Department of Bilateral Affairs

### Overview:

As we read, watched and listened to the news of the novel coronavirus sweeping across the world, we prayed and hoped against hope that the deadly virus would never reach our backyard. But the inevitable soon became obvious when a 76-year-old American tourist tested positive on 5th March 2020. With the detection of the first COVID-19 case in the country, the Government responded immediately by putting in place all the necessary measures to contain the spread of the virus, including restriction on the entry of foreign nationals and closure of schools in Thimphu. A few days later, on 11th March 2020, WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic. By then, the virus had spread to more than 114 countries, and almost all countries began to close borders, suspend international flights and impose travel restrictions, and some even enforced complete lockdowns. Similarly, with the closure of international borders from 23rd March 2020 by Bhutan, the two airlines also suspended their international



flights. The world abruptly came to a grinding halt, and panic seemed to spread faster than the virus. In the face of the raging pandemic and uncertainty lurking under the shadow of the unprecedented health crisis, many Bhutanese abroad made stress calls to the Ministry and our Embassies, Missions and Consulates (EMCs) about their difficulties, and the urgency to travel back home as early as possible. Those working abroad were either laid off or furloughed as businesses and offices were forced to close. Further, with

the closure of schools and universities, students were asked to return home or make their own private logistical arrangements.

The Ministry swung into action soon after it received calls of alarm from Bhutanese abroad. A Situation Room (SR) was activated from where the Ministry's team led by the Foreign Secretary coordinated and managed on a real-time basis all sorts of emergencies, from responding to calls from Bhutanese seeking information and assistance related

to travel to ensuring uninterrupted supply of essentials and medicines to Bhutan.

### Operation:

Cognizant of the dire situation of Bhutanese living and stranded abroad and the overwhelming requests to facilitate their return home, the Ministry immediately launched a consular exercise, the like of which it had never done before. The Ministry formed an Evacuation Team, which soon morphed into something resembling a busy travel agent, to coordinate relief flights to bring stranded Bhutanese home while also ensuring that this did not lead to importation of the virus.

The evacuation team immediately initiated work on planning evacuation/relief flights in coordination with EMCs and the two national airlines. Given the large number of Bhutanese people spread in more than 74 countries, the Ministry had to prioritize relief flights keeping in mind the urgency of the situation, restrictive travel measures imposed in various countries, number of Bhutanese in a particular country and the ease of arranging direct chartered flights.

The evacuation team worked day in day out to help every stranded Bhutanese travel home, no matter where they were in the world. Using social-media platforms such as the Ministry's Facebook page and website, and several WhatsApp Groups, the team reached out to Bhutanese all over the world with daily updates on relief flights, travel restrictions, and guidance on the registration

process. Communicating with the registered returnees on airfare, ticketing and transit requirements was made easy with the use of WhatsApp.

Given the large number of Bhutanese stranded in India and the report of rapid surge in positive cases there, the first priority was to arrange a relief flight from Delhi. Amidst fear, skepticism, and the potential risk of importing the virus into the country, the first relief flight landed in Delhi on 9th April 2020. As soon as India declared a 21-day national lockdown from 25th March 2020, the number of Bhutanese who wanted to return home rose sharply. Subsequently, the Ministry coordinated 11 evacuation flights and 4 road evacuations in April 2020, bringing home around 1000 Bhutanese, including patients and escorts, during the first month of relief flight operations from India.

From May 2020, the Ministry started repatriation of Bhutanese citizens stranded in the Middle East, Japan, Australia, the United States, Europe and a few other countries.

### Results:

By the first week of July 2021, the Ministry, in collaboration with EMCs, had organized a total of 59 special flights bringing home a total of 4889 Bhutanese from across the world. This also includes repatriation of 460 people via road organized by the Royal Bhutanese Consulate in Kolkata during the lockdown in India. While the majority of the returnees were Bhutanese working, studying and living in India and the Middle East, there

were also Bhutanese returning from the US, Australia, Europe, Africa and other South East and South Asian countries. In addition, 203 foreign nationals were repatriated from Bhutan with the direct or indirect help of the Ministry.

A complex and year-long repatriation of Bhutanese citizens from around the world was carried out successfully. This would not have been possible without the unremitting efforts and hard work of the EMCs, the two national airlines, and relevant RGoB agencies, particularly the Ministry of Health and the Cabinet Secretariat. While such operations were never seamless, our diplomats abroad displayed tenacity and foresight to function in a fluid and highly disruptive environment. In some cases, EMCs had to also facilitate and arrange transport and travel to airports as some countries imposed restrictions on the movement within the state/city. Accounts of some EMC's are provided separately in subsequent sections. The repatriation exercise also provided Drukair with an opportunity to operate its first direct flights to destinations such as Kuwait, Doha, Dubai, Bahrain, the Maldives and Sri Lanka. Hopefully, this will help them to operate regular flights to these destinations in the future.

In recent months, as governments eased restrictions and resumed economic activities, some Bhutanese have requested the government to facilitate their return to countries of their workplace or studies. Till date, the Ministry facilitated the return of 1063 individuals to India, the UAE, Kuwait, the Maldives, Sri Lanka and



Thailand, USA, including 182 foreigners who had to travel out of the country due to compelling reasons.

#### **Challenges:**

Initially, we expected the repatriation exercise to be a straightforward one, but it turned out to be a herculean task, an amalgamation of complex activities: registering names of those requesting to be repatriated, arranging flights, coordinating COVID tests to enable them to fly, obtaining clearances from local authorities, negotiating airfares, and coordinating with multiple actors both at home and abroad. Further, the evacuation team had to attend to overwhelming telephone calls 24/7, which was also challenging as information on international travel was mostly unavailable and rules on travel restrictions kept changing by the hour.

Since the repatriation was unprecedented both in size and scope and given the stringent protocols and movement restrictions in place, coordinating relief flights was logistically challenging. Coordinating with multiple actors in a constantly changing environment amidst many ambiguities proved to be a stressful task for the team.

Processing necessary clearances from foreign governments for operating special flights and transit approvals involved negotiating through a series of bureaucratic steps. As other countries were also working in an environment severely disrupted by the pandemic, processes were different for each country which made the coordination even more difficult. For example, in some

countries even interstate travelers had to undergo mandatory quarantine. Further, with dwindling frequency of flights and bus services, our response teams at EMCs had a difficult time ensuring that our people reached the airport on time. EMCs were constantly in touch with foreign governments and our citizens abroad to ensure that those who needed to return home were not left out.

As returnees had to be quarantined for 21 days, and since the quarantine facilities were limited, evacuation had to be planned in a phased manner to ensure quarantine facilities were not overwhelmed by mass arrivals. As such, relief flights had to be scheduled carefully taking into consideration the availability of quarantine facilities, flight crew members and all the other procedures and rules.

While the cost of the ticket had to be borne by passengers, the team in coordination with EMCs had to also ensure that air fares were reasonable and affordable so that the cost of travel did not deter anyone from returning to the safety of their country. Where required, RGoB defrayed the cost for each route to break even for the airlines. The Government also took care of the expenses of some Bhutanese with financial difficulties. In total, RGoB spent Nu.10,928,393.08 to organize the relief flights.

## **Repatriation and other related activities undertaken by the Royal Bhutanese Consulate, Guwahati**

Though the first case of COVID-19 in Assam was detected on 30 March 2020, the Government of Assam had closed educational institutions and postponed examinations on 15 March 2020. On 24 March 2020, Prime Minister Modi announced a 21-day nationwide lockdown in India. After the national lockdown ended, the Government of Assam announced another 14-day lockdown in Guwahati city and weekend lockdown in urban areas to break the chain of transmission on 28 June 2020.

There were 35 Bhutanese students in various colleges, institutions and universities in Assam. These students returned to Bhutan before the nationwide lockdown in India. Given the proximity of Bhutan to Northeast India, most of the students returned by road. The Royal Bhutanese Consulate, Guwahati liaised with private transporters and negotiated the fare to ease financial burden on students. In two isolated cases, the Consulate evacuated the students from their college/place of stay in India to the nearest border town in Bhutan. The Consulate facilitated the return of 23 Bhutanese nationals to Bhutan from various states of Northeast India.

With the closure of international flights in India and Bhutan, referral of emergency patients had to be done via surface transport. Since Guwahati was the closest city, four patients, including an expatriate were referred to Guwahati. With the support of the Regional Director, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, State Government and Management of Hospitals, the Consulate ensured that all patients were successfully treated. Unfortunately, the Regional Director who rendered his selfless support to the Consulate during such pressing time succumbed to COVID-19 on 09 October 2020. He is in our thoughts and prayers and we offer our heartfelt condolences.

The Consulate kept in close contact with the Assam Government, Assam Police and SSB to ensure that the supply of essential commodities to Bhutan was not disrupted during the lockdown in India and Assam State. The Consulate also facilitated transport of two consignments of N-95 face masks imported by Bhutan Medical Supplies, and a consignment of Drug Testing Kits for Bhutan Narcotics Control Agency. For proper channel of communication, the Consulate formed a WhatsApp group comprising all concerned officials from Bhutan. The Consulate is grateful to the Assam Government and Assam Police for being very supportive and cooperative during this crucial time.

## **COVID-19 response by RBE Brussels: Ensuring the well-being of Bhutanese in Europe**

COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization on 11 March 2020. Shortly after, Belgium became one of the COVID-19 hotspots, with high infection and death rates. This led to the first total lockdown on 18 March 2020 followed by the second lockdown on 1 November 2020.

During the exceptionally distressing time brought about by the pandemic, the paramount concern of the Royal Bhutanese Embassy in Brussels was to reach out and extend support to Bhutanese students, residents, and visi-

tors spread across Europe. The Embassy contacted all Bhutanese under its jurisdiction and confirmed their wellbeing while simultaneously creating a database with relevant information. The list grew from a few students and residents to over 300 today. Almost all responded positively to the Embassy's outreach and regularly updated on their well-being, travel plans and even helped the Embassy reach out to other Bhutanese in Europe. While assistance was provided to all Bhutanese, students were given priority. We stayed in touch with each of them, monitoring their health, responding to queries, assuring them of the Royal Government's support and even maintained contact with each student's advisor/international relations officer. Chat groups were created to disseminate important information and travel advisories. All important information was also posted on the Embassy's Facebook page. The Embassy also received virtually regular blessings and prayers from our Lams and monks located at various Buddhist monasteries across Europe in response to our messages.

Thankfully, only a few Bhutanese across Europe were infected with COVID-19 and all recovered. Infected individuals were regularly contacted to check on their physical and mental wellbeing and were reassured of our concern and support. Individuals who suffered anxiety and depression were given special attention and emotional support. We regularly checked the status of each Bhutanese and continued to remain accessible to them at all times.

Once the Royal Government initiated relief flights via the Middle East and Singapore, the Embassy's objective was the safe return of Bhutanese to Bhutan. However, returning home was not a straightforward exercise, with most commercial flights suspended, and airports and many land borders, even within the EU closed. The Embassy sent official communications to Foreign Ministries, Immigration Offices of concerned countries and the concerned airlines. Each individual was issued an official letter to the concerned airline conveying details of the passenger and the connecting flight(s) and a 'to whom it may concern letter' seeking assistance and requesting all concerned to allow them to pass without hindrance. Each individual was assured that the Embassy could be contacted anytime



should they encounter any problem during their journey.

Despite all efforts, the journey home for Bhutanese continued to be fraught with problems. We received numerous calls, at all hours, from distressed passengers who were denied boarding from the airports of Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Helsinki, London, Madrid, Milan, Rome, Tallinn and more. We spoke to numerous airline staff to convince and plead each case with them. They were refused boarding not only because transit airports imposed ever-evolving rules but, more disconcertingly, airport systems were unable to identify the repatriation flights to Bhutan. Boarding was also denied in view of issues such as absence of an inter-airline agreement between our airlines and other international airlines, which would not allow baggage to be transferred directly between flights. Further, the visas of a few Bhutanese had expired and despite the Embassy's best efforts, visa extension was not possible due to lockdown in most countries. This sometimes led to difficult situations where we had to let the passenger take a chance, while we left no stone unturned to ensure that the passenger did not face any issue during the journey. Perhaps the longest and most complicated journey home was that of a student in Poland whose visa had expired and who had to travel to Frankfurt, Germany to board a flight, uncertain whether he would be able to exit without a visa. Fortunately, he could board the flight from Frankfurt towards Doha and ultimately arrive safely in Bhutan. The Embassy ensured that the passengers boarded their

flights without issues and that their baggage were on board at all transit points. We kept in touch with each passenger and shared anxious moments from the time they boarded from Europe till their safe arrival in Bhutan.

Notwithstanding many challenges, the Embassy successfully coordinated the repatriation of a significant number of Bhutanese and thereafter the return of a few students back to Europe for their studies. The Embassy received numerous messages of appreciation, photos and videos documenting their journey and time in lockdown. With every successful repatriation, we have experienced a great sense of achievement and joy. We came across quite a number of interesting incidents, some of which provided moments of light relief. For instance, we received an email from a student in Moscow, which we assumed was the capital of Russia and included in our list. We later discovered that he was indeed from a small town called Moscow in the United States and was cordially redirected to our Mission in New York.

Throughout this pandemic, our Honorary Consuls and Friendship Societies proved most critical and effective in supporting Bhutanese in Europe. They were always ready to support the Embassy despite the difficult situations in their own countries and cities. With their support, we could contact relevant authorities to render timely assistance to our Bhutanese. Having the advantage of being locals, speaking the language and having their own network and access to local authori-

ties, they were instrumental in facilitating visa and permit renewals for stranded Bhutanese. They liaised with airlines and airports to get updated information in the face of ever-changing rules. Many went out of their ways to help, physically travelling to different cities to check on the well-being of Bhutanese, driving them to and from airports, helping them checkin and even providing financial support. We were also fortunate to have a good friend of Bhutan working at a major European airport, who assisted every Bhutanese checking in or transiting there. The Embassy would not have been able to effectively facilitate and support as many Bhutanese as we did, if not for the continued support from and collaboration with our Honorary Consuls and Friendship Societies.

The pandemic provided an unprecedented opportunity for the Embassy to connect with Bhutanese across Europe and we continue to stay in touch with those still in Europe to ensure their wellbeing. The air bubble agreement with India has now provided a reliable option for travelling, allowing Bhutanese to make their own travel arrangements with minimal assistance from the Embassy. However, we continue to advise them and ensure that they have all necessary information for a safe journey. We also invite all Bhutanese travelling to Europe henceforth to contact the Embassy.

## Repatriation and other related activities undertaken by RBE, Dhaka



Bhutanese students studying in Chittagong were evacuated on 24 March 2020, and kept at the Ambassador's residence in Dhaka, before their departure for Bhutan on 26 March 2020 on a relief flight

Following the detection of the first COVID-19 case in Bangladesh on 8 March 2020 and the subsequent surge in the number of positive cases in the country, the education ministry decided to close all educational institutions on 17 March, 2020. As the infection trend continued to surge upwards, the Government of Bangladesh declared a month-long lockdown starting from 26 March 2020.

The initial detection of COVID-19 cases in Bhutan and Bangladesh also resulted in the suspension of scheduled flights between Dhaka and Paro due to a lack of travelers and health safety precautions implemented in the respective countries. With their future uncertain, as was the case with other foreigners in Bangladesh, the immediate priority for the Bhutanese, mostly students, was to safely return to Bhutan. This posed a significant logistical challenge for the Embassy as most of the Bhutanese students were scat-

tered across the country, some as far as Chittagong and Sylhet. Against such constraints brought about by a near-complete-lockdown state in Bangladesh, the Embassy in coordination with security officials and educational authorities of Bangladesh was able to bring over 115 Bhutanese students to the Embassy by 25 March 2020, with the Chancery and the Ambassador's residence serving as temporary guest houses. Accordingly, on 26 March 2020, the Embassy facilitated the arrangement of two relief flights to Bangladesh, which repatriated 124 Bhutanese nationals to Bhutan. In the ensuing months, the Embassy arranged four additional special passenger flights between Dhaka and Paro for those Bhutanese still stranded in Bangladesh and for those Bangladeshis and foreign nationals exiting Bhutan.





At the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka on 26 March 2020. Evacuating Bhutanese nationals in Bangladesh on two separate Drukair flights to Paro

INTERNATIONAL DEPARTURE 07:17					
Airline/Flight	Destination	STD	ETD	CK	Remark
TK 713	Istanbul	06:55			Cancelled
BG 091	Kolkata	07:00			Cancelled
G9 518	Sharjah	07:55			Cancelled
BG 084	Singapore	08:25			Cancelled
BS 315	Kuala Lumpur	08:50			Cancelled
BS 205	Chennai	09:10			Cancelled
KB 301	Paro	09:10		D	Ck-In Open
KB 303	Paro	09:40		D	Ck-In Open
SG 72	Kolkata	09:40			Cancelled
EK 583	Dubai	09:55			Cancelled

At the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka on 26 March 2020. All flights to other destinations were cancelled due to the pandemic, except the two Drukair relief flights to Paro



A Bhutan Airlines flight landed at the Velana International Airport in Male, the Maldives, on 9 April 2020, to evacuate 71 Bhutanese working in the Maldives

The Bhutanese studying and working in Sri Lanka and the Maldives also faced a similar situation. In Sri Lanka, where over 190 students study, the closure of universities meant exploring ways to return to Bhutan as all international flights were suspended in March and April 2020. The Embassy facilitated the arrangement of two special flights to Sri Lanka on 30 March and 10 April, 2020, respectively, to evacuate 152 Bhutanese nationals, mostly medical students. The unstinting support and assistance rendered by the Office of the Honorary Consul in Sri Lanka to the Embassy's repatriation efforts, during such difficult times, deserves a special mention. The Embassy is deeply grateful to Mr. Abbas Esufally, Honorary Consul of Bhutan in Sri Lanka, and his staff for their assistance. With the sustenance of the Bhutanese working in the Maldives—mostly in the tourism and hospitality sector—hampered by travel restrictions and the lack of tourist arrivals thereof, the Embassy arranged a special Bhutan Airlines flight to Male to repatriate 71 Bhutanese to Bhutan on 9 April 2020. The Embassy also attended to a myriad of repatriation requests from Bhutanese nationals on a case-by-case basis in close liaison with the Embassies and the Governments of Bangladesh, Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.

# AMICI DEL BHUTAN ITALIA, FRIENDSHIP ASSOCIATION OF BHUTAN, ITALY

## Prof. Maddalena Fortunati

President  
Amici Del Bhutan

How many in the world know that Italy hosts the oldest university in the world? I guess very few but some living in Bhutan have also had the chance to study in it. It's been some time since Italy hosted the first batch of students in Bologna, but after them, many other young Bhutanese have had the chance to earn a degree in this country. The first fabulous ten (Dawa Penjor, Sanjay Pradhan, Tshering Dorji, Rinzin Namgay, Tshering Tenzin, Nidup Wangdi, Bhim Lal Dhungyel, Hasta Chetri, Deo Garmer, Dorji Wangchuk) arrived in May 1987 and had to endure quite a challenge: not only by travelling across the world and getting accustomed to the Italian way of life in one of its most lively cities, but also learning the language in order to attend classes and in order to become medical doctor, agronomist or engineer. More followed their steps. Shortly after, they were joined by more notable students such as Dr. Kinzang P. Tshering and Dr. Ugyen Tshomo who are now well known in their profession. While today these former young men and women are now leaders in their chosen path of life, every year there are more and more students who choose Italy as their academic destination.

This is why one of the most productive activities of the Italian Bhutan Friendship Society – Amici del Bhutan is welcoming students, making sure that they settle in a warm and friendly environment

while trying to avoid homesickness by celebrating all possible festivities together. The year 2020 posed new challenges with the arrival of Covid and while we all had to deal with the practical consequences of a fully fledged pandemic, members of our society were very involved in making sure that no Bhutanese was left behind.

Yeshey Choden (pursuing her Masters in Communication and Multimedia Technology) and Manoj Ghalley (Masters in Civil and Environment Engineering) currently finishing their studies at Brescia University, had suspended their classes and reverted to online courses during spring. This meant no social life and being on campus, in one of the areas that was first affected in the world, was no easy option. They took the opportunity to return home as soon as feasible and returned after summer in order to resume their coursework. Dechen Wangmo arrived in Brescia in September 2019. She is currently studying in second year Masters in Civil and Environment Engineering and will complete her studies by 2022. Tashi Yangki was also studying in Italy and had the chance to finish her studies and leave before summer.

At the time of writing there are plans for more students to arrive in the New Year and we have planned for them to stay in a safe and healthy environment. This means checking with them regularly and also to ensure that typical lockdown depression which creeps up and makes people unwell are kept at bay. Sometimes we simply facilitate their transportation between places or make things easy



by contacting the appropriate office or professor when things are too complicated to understand by email and across languages. In fact, even if more and more university courses are offered in English, we can't – and surely we won't – erase thousands of years of writings and practices that sometimes are hard to understand for us natives.

In the end, we are quite sure some people will make a joke about the fact that Italian mothers tend to be over protective of their offspring and that our hospitality often takes the shape of joyful loud gatherings with food to spare for every sort of diet. But this, together with our laboriousness and respect for history, is something that brings our cultures easily together and, despite the pandemic, this is also something we particularly cherish so we are quite sure more and more Bhutanese will enjoy it. Who is next?



# COVID-19 AND THE DISRUPTION OF STUDIES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM



## Andrew Sutton

Chairman, Bhutan Society of the United Kingdom

For many years, courses in the UK have attracted students from Bhutan – the majority choosing one or two year post-graduate or master's courses with some studying for their first degree and some researching for three or four years for a doctorate. The Bhutan Society of the UK (the Society) is pleased to welcome such visitors and offers

them honorary membership while resident as students. It also offers to maintain contact with any other Bhutanese in the country. The Society's vision is to achieve "the warmest friendship and cultural relations between the people of Bhutan and the UK". During 2020, the challenges of Covid-19 reinforced the need for connections and communication and the virtual lines of contact between Bhutanese and British have been growing.

When Covid-19 arrived at the start of 2020, there were thirty three Bhutanese busy with their

studies, some with their spouses and children, and a further twelve working in the UK who were known to the Society. Several have been working for the UK National Health Service (NHS) throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and we are especially grateful to them for their stamina in the crisis and the care they have provided. Others have studied medical-related courses and have either provided support to the NHS or are engaged with care back home in Bhutan.

Students' principal contact with the Society is through its Student

Liaison Officer, Ms Dee Cano, who took on the role in early 2020 by chance. She soon realised how important this liaison was to be during the confusion and uncertainties of the pandemic. Dee established a WhatsApp group which UK-based Bhutanese could join and this proved to be a great way to share information and experiences; those students returning to Bhutan are able to stay in this contact group. Dee also made direct personal contact with every UK-based Bhutanese known to the Society and began weekly conversations and messages with each individual to give them an opportunity to discuss their concerns and provide them with tailored guidance and support. Dee is delighted to have a much bigger 'family' now. She has used opportunities to meet up for a meal with students as far north as Edinburgh and as far south as Brighton and, for students living close by pre-Covid, arranged various social events including competitive archery matches in her mother's garden.

Students choose their universities for particular courses and it is not

surprising that they are scattered around the UK. This makes contact and communication through the WhatsApp group all the more valuable – helping to create a sense of community. As there is no procedure by which the Society can learn of the arrival of new students from authorities in either Bhutan or the UK, contact with students relies on 'word of mouth' and often on introductions by current or former students. While this proves to be quite effective, contact with some students only comes after they are well into their courses. The Society's President, Sir Simon Bowes Lyon, is also the chairman of the Trustees of the Bhutan Society Trust Fund and he wrote to all Bhutanese honorary members in April, soon after virus-related regulations and restrictions were introduced, with his best wishes and offering the support of the Society's officials.

In the summer of 2020, there were opportunities for students to return home – sometimes with possessions left in the care of Society members – and quarantine there. Some sixteen travelled back and have pursued their studies remotely; we

have had some video reports on their experiences and these have been shared through the Society's website. Despite the disruptions to life, study and the preparation of dissertations, many have been able to complete their courses. Our congratulations to them and particular commendation to those awarded distinctions.

Back in February 2020, five Bhutanese students were able to accept an invitation from Lord Wilson, first President of the Society, to visit the House of Lords in London for a tour of the principal ceremonial rooms, to observe a debate in the House and to discuss the ways that parliamentary business is conducted. Sadly Covid-19 has cancelled the Society's 2020 dinner. This annual gathering usually is the principal event for members and students to meet; successful testing of Covid-vaccines should mean that such things will be back-to-normal before the end of 2021.

Six students (four with UK government-sponsored Chevening Scholarships) have arrived for the start of the 2020/21 academic year; they bring the total of those in the UK on university courses (at the end of 2020) to seventeen with eight new or existing students studying online in Bhutan planning to return to the UK in January. All have been given advice on travel, accommodation and visas by Dee. We all hope that they can return to their universities with a chance to engage further with the Society and to enjoy more aspects of life in the UK when we are free of restrictions related to Covid-19.





# HOW TO GET TO BHUTAN?

We welcome everyone. We do not limit the number of tourists but we target responsible and mindful tourists. Getting visa for Bhutan is relatively simple process. Once transferring the total tour payment along with the USD 40 visa fee as advised by the Bhutanese tour operator or their international counterparts, visa can be processed.

## Gateways to Bhutan

### By Air

Tourists can fly to Paro International Airport from:

India : New Delhi, Baghdora, Bogdhgaya, Kolkata, Guhawati,

Nepal : Kathmandu

Thailand : Bangkok

Singapore : Changi Airport

Bangladesh : Dhaka

You can book your tickets online at [www.drukair.com.bt](http://www.drukair.com.bt) or [www.bhutanairlines.com.bt](http://www.bhutanairlines.com.bt) or through their ticketing agents/offices.

### By Land

Visitors can also enter Bhutan from Phuentsholing, Samdrup Jongkhar and Gelephu.

## What Can I Do In Bhutan?

The tourism experience in Bhutan can be summarized under these five themes – Adventure, Tradition, Mystery, Well-being, Authenticity & Rejuvenation.

White water rafting, mountain biking, kayaking, rock climbing and motor biking have increasingly caught the eyes of adventure seekers. Similarly, more and more tourists chose Bhutan for well-being and rejuvenation.

Bhutan offers visitors a myriad of activities ranging from soft to extreme adventures. So, there is something to do for all ages.

## When Is The Best Time To Visit Bhutan?

Bhutan is an all season destination. Spring and summer fill the landscape with myriad of flora and fauna. Autumn casts a bright golden glow on the landscape. The crisp winter air and the clear skies make it ideal for capturing some of the best mountain views.

All year round, there is a unique sense of peace and contentment in the environment marked by traditional festivities as people celebrate their festivals in ancient local traditions.

## How Much Does It Cost To Visit Bhutan?

### Permit

Tourists from Bangladesh, India and Maldives need permit processed in advance to visit Bhutan. Permit is granted by paying the Sustainable Development Fee (SDF) of Nu. 1,200 per person per night. SDF is a government levy only and this does not include other logistical costs. Other costs like food, lodging,

transport, etc., are extra. They need permit instead of visa. Similar to visa, permit must also be processed in advance with the help of a Bhutanese tour operator.

### Visa & Tour Packages

And tourists from other countries will have to pay one-time visa fee of US\$ 40. However, they must also pay the following all-inclusive minimum daily package rate per person per night in advance:

- USD \$ 250 for March, April, May, September, October and November
- USD \$ 200 for January, February, June July, August and December

Bhutanese tour operators work closely with the tourists on preferred itineraries and arrange their travel plan ahead of the time. Tour packages are all-inclusive – sustainable development fee, food and selective beverage, licensed guide, all trekking needs, a minimum of three-star accommodations, ground transportation and other charges.

Please get in touch with a Bhutanese operator or their international counterpart, and they will assist with visa and other travel plans. Getting visa is easy and fast with the online visa system. Tourists can choose a tour operator from [www.bhutan.travel/tour-operators](http://www.bhutan.travel/tour-operators)

### Tour Booking Process

- Select a Bhutanese tour operators who will be arranging your trip to Bhutan. A comprehensive list of registered tour operators can be found at: [www.bhutan.travel/tour-operator](http://www.bhutan.travel/tour-operator).
- Work out a tour itinerary in consultation with the selected tour operator. Based on the itinerary the tour operators will calculate the amount to be paid in advance.
- Transfer the tour payment calculated by a tour operator as well as USD 40 (one time visa fee) as advised by the Bhutanese tour operator.

Please email the money transfer receipt copy to the Bhutanese tour operator.

- The Bhutanese tour operator will complete your visa application but you must send them a clear, scanned copy of your passport. Visa will normally be processed within a maximum of one week's time.
- The Bhutanese tour operator will email the copy of the approval of the visa once the visa application has been approved.

## Where do I look for More Information?

Tourism Council of Bhutan

Tel: +975 2 323252/52

Website: [www.bhutan.travel](http://www.bhutan.travel)

Facebook: [facebook.com/destinationbhutan](https://facebook.com/destinationbhutan)

Twitter: [twitter.com/tourismbhutan](https://twitter.com/tourismbhutan)

Instagram: [instagram.com/tourismbhutan](https://instagram.com/tourismbhutan)



# TAPPING THE DOMESTIC TOURISM MARKET

## Namgay Choden

Asst. Desk Officer  
Department of Bilateral Affairs

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a tremendous impact on the global tourism economy. One of the foremost measures undertaken by most countries towards containing the virus included suspension of international flights and banning entry of foreigners, leading to a complete cessation of international tourism-related activities. Hence, the tourism sector was one of the first sectors to be affected by the pandemic, resulting in tremendous loss of jobs and incomes.

As international tourism came to a complete standstill, the COVID-19 pandemic inspired a newfound interest in domestic tourism even in Bhutan. Ever since international travel became impossible, more people have started looking inwards to satiate their travel desires. As the frequency of such travels increased, the cases of littering around tourists and sacred sites and instances of other irresponsible travel behavior also increased, highlighting the need for more stringent domestic tourism-related policies and measures.

Because of our dependence on international tourism, Bhutan hasn't been able to tap the true potential of domestic tourism. The pandemic presented an opportunity to develop domestic tourism in Bhutan. Towards this end, the Tourism Council of Bhutan (TCB) organized a workshop in July 2020 in collaboration with its partners to identify domestic-tourism products and potential destinations and develop strategies to tap their potential.

According to TCB, domestic tourism refers to a trip undertaken by a resident within his or her country, individually or in a group, for any leisure activity. Tourism-related leisure activities include trekking, hiking, hot springs and hot stone baths, rafting, swimming, horse riding, camping, cycling, pilgrimage, bird watching, helicopter rides and others.

In Bhutan, we have observed that the travel restrictions and lockdowns because of the pandemic have increased the demand for nature- and spiritual-based tourism. Accordingly, on 17 December 2020, coinciding with the 113th National Day, TCB launched the domestic tourism brand called Druk Kora and the Domestic Tourism Guidelines along with two new products, viz., Druk Neykor and Food Map of Bhutan. The Guidelines for the Management of Domestic Tourism 2020 aim to streamline domestic tourism in the country, improve safety and service delivery, and promote and facilitate sustainable development of domestic tourism.

The Druk Kora program aims to promote domestic tourism by encouraging locals to travel and support tourism businesses. Under the program, TCB plans to offer incentives worth Nu. 5,000 to travel operators for every 100 persons upon completion of the trip, offer certain percentage rebates to the highest spender during the trip and offer transport subsidy to op-



erators organizing trips to locations that receive fewer tourists. The platform under the name 'Druk Kora' with the slogan 'Bhutanese exploring Bhutan' on the TCB website will serve as one reference platform for people exploring different domestic tour packages and those promoting and offering such packages. Likewise, the Druk Neykor is a pilgrimage travel program, developed in collaboration with the Zhung Dratshang, Department of Culture and National Land Commission Secretariat, aimed at promoting pilgrim sites, encouraging balanced regional tourism and promoting cultural conservation for sustainable tourism. 16 sites have been identified for the Druk Neykor program which will be expanded to cover 108 sites from all over Bhutan. Pilgrims can make use of the Druk Neykor stamp which contains images of pilgrimage sites under the program. Individuals will receive a stamp of the site after visiting it. Similarly, the Food Map of Bhutan, launched by the Royal Institute for Tourism and Hospitality will help promote the culinary heritage of Bhutan as well as develop and promote gas-

tronomy tourism in the country.

Bhutan receives hundreds and thousands of international as well as regional tourists every year. The tourism industry in Bhutan generates foreign exchange, supports jobs and businesses, drives regional development and supports local communities. The pandemic has put thousands of jobs at risk in Bhutan, affecting the livelihoods of many who are directly dependent on the sector and many others indirectly dependent on it. Vaccination brings renewed hope to the travel industry. However, with the detection of new variants of the virus and second waves of infection being reported in many countries, it will be a long while before governments are able to ease travel restrictions and travelers regain confidence in travelling.

Amid the pandemic and despite the challenges, TCB's decision to focus on tapping the domestic- tourism market is timely. The number of domestic tourists doesn't compare to that of our international visitors. However, we see possibilities of this number increasing in the days

ahead, especially due to the influence of social-media personalities and the love for travelling among the younger generation. Development of domestic-tourism destinations and introduction of regulations to make domestic tourism safe and comfortable provide an opportunity for the tourism industry to reduce the impact of the pandemic and accelerate recovery from it. Domestic tourism has a huge potential in bringing down the level of rural poverty by improving living standards of host communities. It can also generate employment, develop attractions and facilities, and protect natural resources and cultural heritage. Development of domestic tourism- related infrastructure and facilities also complement our efforts in developing international tourism services leading to a sustainable tourism industry.

While efforts are underway to promote domestic tourism in the country, tourism litter continues to remain a huge concern. Tourism litter poses a great threat to natural areas, affecting their visual appeal and ecological health. Tourism litter has increased drastically in the past few months with an increase in domestic tourists. While relevant government agencies introduce various rules, regulations and measures to prevent tourism litter, individuals should take responsibility to manage self-generated litter. Therefore, while TCB continues its efforts to develop and promote domestic tourism, the role domestic tourists play by being responsible travelers will have a significant impact on developing sustainable tourism.



# TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (TVET) AND BUILD BHUTAN PROJECT (BBP)

## Passang Dorji

Sr. Desk Officer  
Department of Bilateral Affairs

### TVET in the global context

According to UNESCO (2019), TVET comprises education, training and skills development relating to a wide range of occupational fields, production, services and livelihoods. Further, as part of lifelong learning, TVET can take place at secondary, post-secondary and tertiary levels and includes work-based learning and continuing training and professional development which may lead to qualifications. TVET also includes a wide range of skills development opportunities attuned to national and local contexts. Thus, learning to learn, the development of literacy and numeracy skills, transversal skills and citizenship skills are its integral components.

Developed countries have long recognized TVET as a key driver of economic and social development. For instance, Germany, the largest economy in Europe generating almost a quarter of the EU's GDP, has had a Vocational Training Act since the 1960s that oversees vocational education, including vocational further education and job retraining. Similarly, there are other industrially developed

nations such as the UK, US, South Korea and Japan, who embraced TVET as the engine to drive the country's economy. Strong TVET system is generally considered the marker of a strong and robust economy, particularly due to its ability to generate employment opportunities that match the requirements of the labour market.

### National context

Bhutan continues to face the dual challenge of high youth unemployment and an increasing number of youth entering and passing out from universities and colleges. the labour market. As of 2019, youth unemployment was 11.9 percent (NSB, 2019) and a large number of university graduates were unable to find employment. This problem will persist as 62,743

youth are projected to enter the labour market over the 12th FYP period (2019-2023). Further, the agricultural sector is still the largest employer engaging 51.3 percent of the total labour force, followed by wholesale and retail trade at 8.6 percent, public administration at 8.5 percent, and manufacturing at 7.6 percent. Therefore, there is a need to diversify the economy in areas with high potential for job creation to absorb the growing number of youth entering the labour market each year. The youth unemployment can be addressed by providing skills development training to meet labour market needs focused on tourism and production and manufacturing sector. One key way to achieve this is by strengthening the technical and vocational education and training



system to equip TVET graduates with high-quality technical and vocational skills for employability both within and beyond Bhutan.

However, TVET systems in Bhutan have not been able to effectively align with the needs of the economy due to poor technical and institutional capacity to deliver relevant and quality programmes, weak coordination and collaboration among the key stakeholders, and weak institutional arrangement for education progression for TVET graduates. Further, the TVET systems are dictated by government officials' understanding of the labour market instead of relying on private sector demands. Moreover, negative societal attitudes towards TVET impacts its perception as a valid career option. Similar to the poor perception of TVET programs in the developing world, Bhutanese society's generic attitude towards "blue-collar job" undermines the perceived dignity and prestige associated with TVET. Thus, it is often considered as a last career option and associated with low-income groups.

These problems manifest in the popularity of TVET programs in the country. Only seven percent of class X passed students take up TVET courses in Bhutan. In comparison, countries such as Singapore, Finland, Germany and Australia have more than 40 percent of students choosing to enroll in TVET courses. These

countries have well- developed TVET systems capable of providing skills that match their respective economic needs. Moreover, TVET systems in these countries have clear pathways to progress within the vocational field as well as to transit into the general education system. On the contrary, nearly 80 percent of TVET courses in Bhutan are at certificate level with limited opportunities for further progress. This highlights the need for immediate reforms in the existing education system that may be done with an organized and coordinated approach. Currently, our education system is knowledge-based and lacks focus on skills development unlike the education systems in developed and majority of the developing countries which focus on development of both knowledge and skills. An education system focused on both knowledge and skills will enhance employability of our TVET graduates in both national and global markets.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought this requirement to sharp focus. The economy has taken a severe toll due to the necessary preventive and containment measures. The tourism and allied sectors have been impacted. The construction sector with its heavy reliance on foreign labour is experiencing a shortage of workers. A similar problem is evident in the agricultural sector as Bhutan remains dependent on India for imports.



**Build Bhutan Project**

Against this backdrop, as part of the overall contingency plan to respond to challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and to enhance the country’s economic resilience, the Royal Government of Bhutan devised a range of strategies, one of which is the Build Bhutan Program. The program aims to enhance resilience of the Bhutanese workforce by providing high-quality training necessary for the emerging economy. It is designed with an intent to mitigate socio-economic impact caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and to ensure an effective, inclusive and sustainable recovery. It is expected to address the shortage of skilled workforce in the construction sector by providing relevant and high-quality training by expert professionals. The program will target the unemployed Bhutanese workforce.

As an essential component, the program plans to recruit Master Trainer (expert professionals) from third countries. The primary objective is to improve and enhance the quality of TVET training delivery and workmanship in the construction industry in line with international best practices. The training program shall be adapted to both Bhutanese and global markets.

The following occupations have been prioritized under the TVET Master Trainer engagement program:

- 1. Masonry (with specialization in plastering, tile and marble laying, plaster of Paris, brick laying, rod binding, etc.).
- 2. Construction Carpentry (with specialization false ceiling, kitchen cabinet and other wood work).



- 3. Plumbing.
- 4. Electrical (with specialization in light and sound).
- 5. Welding (Steel fabrication).
- 6. Building Painting.
- 7. Interior design and landscaping.
- 8. Heat, Air Ventilation and Cooling (HAVC).

To professionalize the construction sector’s workforce and promote it as an attractive avenue for employment, the Government has reached out to Master Trainers from Europe, South Korea and Thailand. These Master Trainers will supervise, mentor, demonstrate and impart high-quality training to the trainees engaged at the construction site or Specialized Firms under the Build Bhutan Project. It is also expected to improve workmanship and quality of construction services leading to professionalization of the construction sector in Bhutan. The Master Trainers under Build Bhutan Project will also be engaged with training institutions as TVET

teacher/instructor to deliver high quality technical and vocational training attuned to the emerging needs of the economy, and in line with the best international practices. They are also expected to provide advice and technical input to bring improvements in the delivery of the TVET programs relating to their expertise. They would also be engaged to advise MoLHR in matters related to reforming the TVET system of Bhutan. To make it successful, the Government also needs to work on partnering with the private sector to offer training to unskilled employees that would be working within the industry.

By skilling and re-skilling our Bhutanese workforce through the Build Bhutan Project, it provides a good opportunity to tackle unemployment and layoffs by filling the gap in the construction sector caused by the lack of foreign workers. The project would also enable trainees and learners to become self-employed and create their own businesses and enterprises that will, in the long run, give jobs to other trainees.

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# IFS EXPERIENCE: AN EXPERIENCE OF A LIFETIME



Authors with Indian Foreign Service Officer Trainees of 2020 Batch

## Sonam Palden

Asst. Desk Officer  
Department of Multilateral Affairs

## Kezang Dema

Asst. Desk Officer  
Department of Regional Cooperation

Two of us were fortunate to have been given this opportunity by the Ministry to undergo the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) training program, along with 24 IFS Officer Trainees of the 2020 batch at the Sushma Swaraj Institute of Foreign Service (SSIFS) in New Delhi, India from 21st December 2020 to 11th June 2021.

Bhutanese foreign Service officers have been participating in the IFS training program from as early as the 1990s. Our seniors, who attended the IFS training program, had set impeccably high standards and expectations during the course of their participation, so it was with mixed feelings of excitement and apprehension that the two of us ar-

rived at the Institute in New Delhi on 7th of December 2020. The IFS Officer Trainees arrived at the Institute a fortnight later on the 21st of December 2020, upon completion of their 2 months long Foundational Course at the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration (LBSNAA) in Mussorie, Uttarakhand.

The 6 months long IFS training program is part of a mandatory training regime that all IFS Officer Trainees need to undergo prior to entering the fold of the Ministry of External Affairs of India. The program, tailor-made to suit the ever-changing needs of the IFS fraternity, includes modules on Theories of International Relations, India's Foreign Policy objectives, state of India's bilateral relations with its neighboring countries and beyond, and its roles and priorities within regional and multilateral organizations. Additional classes to accommodate subjects such as Protocol, Economic and Commercial Diplomacy, Defense and Cyber Security, Hospitality and Media Managements were also held. The classroom learning was facilitated by a pool of imminent resource persons consisting of both serving and retired Indian diplomats, heads of resident missions of foreign countries based in New Delhi, academicians and subject experts from academic institutions and think tanks.

The well-structured classroom learning coupled with hands-on simulation exercises, field visits and role plays of a diplomat's work both at one's headquarters and missions abroad took us on an intellectually

stimulating ride. In addition to getting a holistic perspective of India's Foreign Policy objectives, our participation also allowed the two of us to get a nuanced understanding of the geopolitical race playing out within the Asian subcontinent and beyond. Further, the course included two extensive field visits within India to primarily provide the trainees with an opportunity to immerse oneself and get a grassroots understanding of India and its people. The Bharat Darshan, a two-week long travel program took the two of us to various Indian states stretching from the state of Meghalaya in the Northeast to the Union Territory of Pondicherry in the south, during the course of which we experienced the manifestation of India's diversity firsthand through the people, cultural and traditional practices and geographical terrains that we came across en route.

The second field visit, through the State Attachment, took the two of us to Assam, a state that shares close historical and civilizational ties, trade and commercial linkage and a 267 kilometer long border with Bhutan. During the course of this week-long attachment, we were able to familiarize ourselves with the officials of the State Government and know the intricacies surrounding the administration of the state. It was also an opportunity to hear from them Assam's developmental priorities and agendas. As a state located in the eastern side of India, officials of the State Government also provided us with an overview of the roles played by the state of Assam in furthering India's Act East Policy.

Unlike in the past, the IFS training program this time around was unique in the sense that the course was conducted amidst the COVID-19 pandemic times. The SSIFS Administration ensured that the COVID-19 virus was kept at bay through periodic testing, provision of medical amenities and care to all the trainees. Despite occasional difficulties of physical mode learning due to COVID-19, the SSIFS Administration left no stones unturned in ensuring that the course progressed swiftly and as planned by introducing virtual modes of learning, which were timely, convenient and efficient.

Reflecting back on the past 6 months, the opportunity that the two of us got to engage and interact with the 24 IFS Officer Trainees of the 2020 batch at close quarters stands out from the rest. From screening of the Bhutanese movie Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom to dancing to some hit Bollywood numbers on stage, from greetings of Kuzu Zangpo to Namaste and from sharing classrooms to sharing hand sanitizers, we built a sacrosanct bond of friendship amongst ourselves. Like the excellent state of bilateral relationship between our two countries that continues to grow from strength to strength, it is also our joint aspiration that this bond of friendship will grow ever stronger as we all grow into the service of our respective nations.



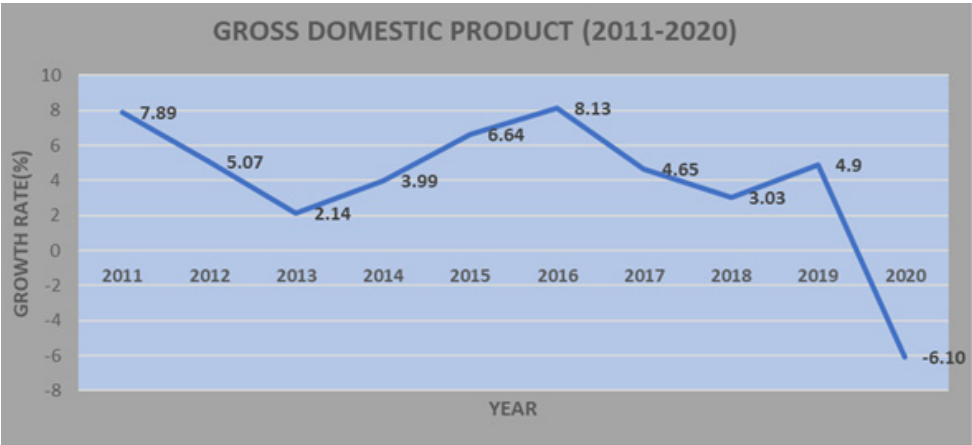
# COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE ECONOMIC IMPACT IN BHUTAN AND POLICY INTERVENTION

## TSHEWANG DORJI T

Deputy Chief of Protocol  
Passport Division

The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 as a ‘Global Pandemic’ in March 2020. Many countries initially responded to the pandemic as a health concern. Socio-economic consequences were not severe. However, over time, the impact of the pandemic beyond health became apparent, encroaching on the socio-economic sphere of the global community. In a span of few months, many countries experienced economic downturn. The economic impacts of the virus are unprecedented and more devastating than that of the Great Depression. With no sign of deceleration of the pandemic, the global economic downturn is likely to persist and the recovery will not happen anytime soon. The pandemic has changed nearly every aspect of our daily lives and exposed the vulnerability of the global economy.

The pandemic has not spared Bhutan as well. The first COVID case was detected in March 2020. Under the leadership of His Majesty The King and the government, Bhutan has managed to keep the cases of infection at a minimum



Data source: Ministry of Finance.

and averted health and economic crises till date. To prevent and limit the spread of the virus, all international borders were sealed, schools and colleges closed, 21 days of mandatory quarantine enforced, imports restricted and lockdown imposed periodically. The welfare of affected people and business entities is ensured through His Majesty’s welfare (Kidu) program in the form of income and loan repayment supports. In view of socio-economic uncertainties, His Majesty The King has commanded that the Kidu program be continued until June 2022.

Despite low cases of infection, Bhutan’s economy has been severely impacted by the pandemic. Like other countries, Bhutan is going through economic difficulties and continue to face uncertainties. The economic output has been significantly reduced with low

business activities, investment, exports and consumer spending. The economy recorded a growth of 5.46 percent in 2019 and was projected to have a growth of around 6.9 percent in 2020 under normal circumstances. The pandemic has, however, severely disrupted the economy and Gross Domestic Product(GDP) growth plummeted to a record low of -6.10 percent with an estimated loss of Nu. 4.8 billion. The economy is expected to shrink in 2021, but is likely to rebound in 2022 according to the Asian Development Bank.

Many people working in the country and abroad have also been displaced, worsening the unemployment situation in Bhutan. The unemployment rate of 5 percent has been recorded in 2020 which is the highest in recent years. The credit growth and tax return are also expected to be low for the

year 2020 which will adversely affect both government and private investment. The fiscal deficit for the upcoming fiscal year is expected to be higher compared to the past years. As such, there is a need to explore external sources of funding and come up with stringent fiscal measures. The government has also allocated approximately Nu. 3 billion for COVID-19 related activities to manage the pandemic and minimize economic disruption.

The most affected sectors in Bhutan are tourism, construction, airline, financial institutions, hospitality, entertainment and trade. Tourism sector, the highest source of hard currency for the country is the hardest hit and has literally come to a standstill with no tourist visiting the country since March 2020. A revenue loss of USD 138 million has been projected and more than 50,000 people were displaced in 2020 due to disruptions in the tourism sector. The construction sector which is also one of the key sectors of the economy has been severely affected with shortage of both skilled and unskilled migrant workers from India. The construction sector accounted for 11.48 percent of GDP in 2019.

The only positive growth has been in the agriculture sector where activities have been increased by manifolds due to the restriction on import of agriculture produce, particularly fruits and vegetables. The restriction has, however, fueled the price of locally produced fruits and vegetables and subsequent inflation. The price of such local produce will continue to rise until the import restriction is lifted or local production is boosted in commensurate with the demand in the market. For agriculture, the

pandemic has come as a boon, ramping up agriculture’s share to GDP. Otherwise, the sector’s contribution to GDP has only seen a marginal increase, i.e. from 14.44 percent in 2015 to 15.82 percent in 2019. Growth in the agriculture sector is crucial to minimize imports and achieve food self-sufficiency.

Further, hydropower which is the main driver of the economy has been spared by the pandemic. Although, there have been shortages of migrant workers in the construction of Punatsangchhu I and II hydropower projects, the generation and export of electricity largely remained unaffected. It was reported that in the first half of 2020, import decreased by 32 percent, export increased by 38 percent and subsequently trade deficit declined by 32 percent as compared to the same period last year. Increased export is attributed to increase in export of electricity with the commissioning of the Mangdechhu Hydropower project. The export of boulders and cash crops such as potatoes, apples and oranges have not been affected as well and the revenue generated would to an extent offset the revenue loss from the tourism and other sectors.

The pandemic has disrupted an already weak and vulnerable Bhutanese economy and the recovery will take time. In an effort to rebuild the economy, a wide range of policy interventions is essential both in short and long terms. In the short term, the government needs to ensure that the disrupted economy continues to function while the pandemic continues. Interventions such as supporting the affected business entities, entrepreneurs and displaced people, cutting interest rates to enhance

access to finance and increasing government spending or investment in productive sectors is crucial.

Since, the economic disruption is created by the pandemic, it requires health policy responses in addition to comprehensive monetary and fiscal policy interventions in the long term. The policy responses and interventions suggested both for short and long terms could be part of the 21st Century Economic Roadmap. The 21st Century Economic Roadmap is the economic vision for the country till 2030 and must be aimed at reviving the economy and achieving economic prosperity. The Roadmap should be charted out based on the principle of Gross National Happiness and must create economic opportunities, generate employment and contribute to GDP growth.

The Roadmap must focus on diversifying the economy with concrete strategy on potential sectors (hydropower, mining, agriculture, tourism and ICT), promoting economic diplomacy (trade, investment, financing for development), improving business environment, developing entrepreneurship and special economic zones, enhancing remittances and engaging Bhutanese diaspora in economic development and developing the capacity of the private sector. The Roadmap must also include a mechanism to ensure that the benefits accrued are shared by all sections of the society. In a nutshell, the Roadmap must serve as a panacea for the economic ills caused by the pandemic and contribute towards achieving a prosperous, sustainable and inclusive economy.



# BHUTANESE DIASPORA: SIGNIFICANCE AND THE WAY FORWARD

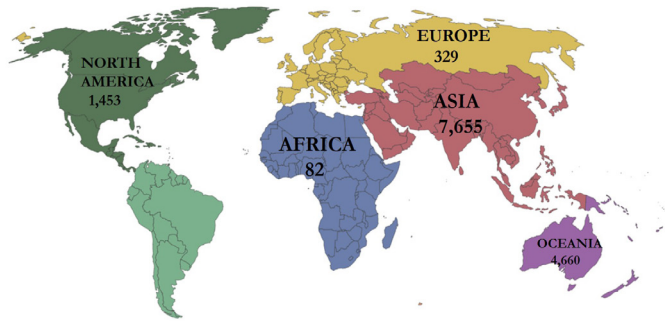
## Sangay Tenzing

Senior Protocol Officer  
Department of Protocol

The term “diaspora” broadly refers to migrants or descendants of migrants who identify themselves with their country of origin, but are living abroad. Traditionally, governments see their nationals abroad as a loss for the country in the form of brain drain and are known mainly for the remittances that augment the income of their relatives and government investment in the country of origin. According to the World Bank, the global inflow of remittances as of October 2020 stands at US\$ 666,223 million. Governments are, however, increasingly realizing that an engaged diaspora can be an asset with diverse benefits for the countries of origin. Diasporas are known to be bridges to knowledge, expertise, networks, investment and markets for their countries of origin. Diaspora helps their countries of origin not only through financial remittances but also social remittances in the form of new and improved skills, knowledge and expertise.

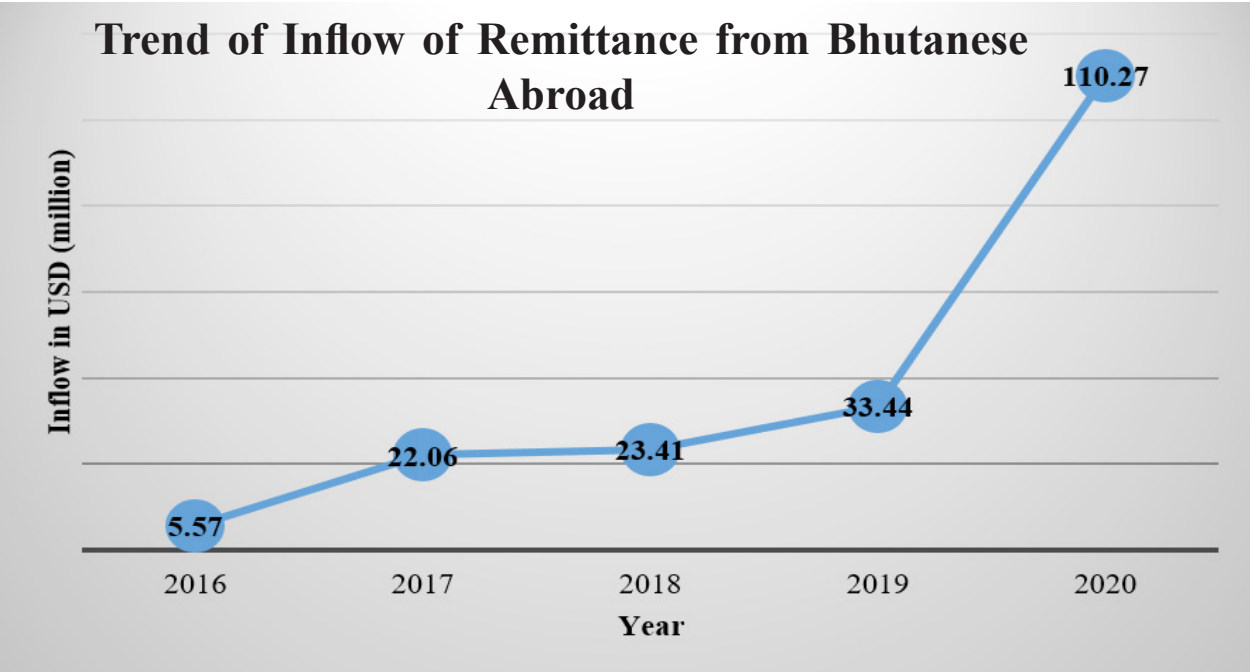
Diaspora is also becoming an important facet of foreign policy. In the current global setting, where countries are more interconnected and interdependent than ever before, it is imperative to develop and support complex networks of people to leverage social, cultural and economic benefits of interdependence. In recent years, many countries have developed their diplomatic and administrative capacity to increase influence and communication channels with their diasporas. Countries have established institutions at various levels to exclusively manage diaspora. For instance, India has created the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs in 2004 solely focusing on their diaspora. Similarly, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have ministry-level institutions to look after their diasporas.

Bhutanese diaspora has increased significantly over the years. Bhutanese travel mainly to find better employment, economic opportunities and upgrade their skills and knowledge, besides other purposes. The Embassies, Missions and Consulates (EMCs) of the Royal Government keep in touch



Distribution of Registered Bhutanese Diaspora by Continent as of 30 April 2021.

with the Bhutanese diaspora. As of March 2020, more than 14,000 Bhutanese from 70 countries had registered with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its EMCs abroad, out of which 15,452 were still abroad as of 31 May 2021. The number includes only those who have officially registered with the Ministry and EMCs; the actual number could be much higher.



Inflow of Remittance from Bhutanese Diaspora (2016-2020).

According to the Royal Monetary Authority, Bhutanese diaspora remitted a total of Nu. 8.27 billion in 2020 which has increased by 229.8 percent compared to 2019. The inflow of remittance constitutes 4.4 percent of the Gross Domestic Product in 2020 and is expected to rise with increasing number of Bhutanese traveling and residing abroad.

Generally, Bhutanese residing abroad have secured good jobs and are economically doing well with notable achievements in various fields. This has not only contributed to their livelihood, but also to the economic wellbeing of their families back in Bhutan. Besides maintaining links with family and friends in Bhutan, Bhutanese diaspora has also established numerous social groups and associations in their countries of residence. These communities are known to meet occasionally to celebrate significant national events together, promote social networking and promote Bhutanese culture and traditions abroad. Bhutanese communities abroad have also come together to help each other during the COVID-19 pandemic and contributed to the country’s COVID-19 relief fund.

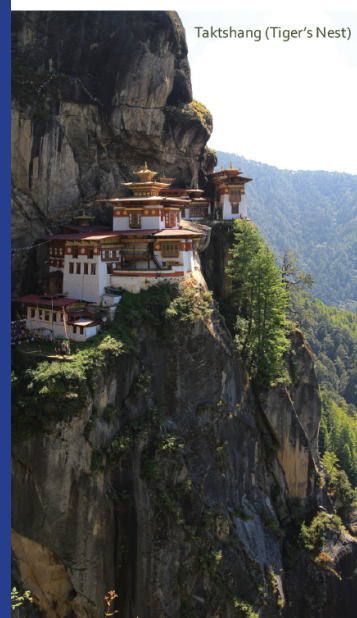
The Ministry of Foreign Affairs considers providing consular services to Bhutanese diaspora as one of the core mandates of the Ministry. With increasing Bhutanese diaspora, the extension of consular services is crucial and expected to increase over time. The Ministry has already started maintaining a database on Bhutanese diaspora with the ultimate goal of reaching out to them in times of need and providing coordinated and efficient consular services. The Ministry is also exploring avenues for meaningful engagement with them.

Further, the Ministry may focus on consular diplomacy, strengthen its human resources and come up with plans and programmes to optimize the contribution of the diaspora in national development by facilitating easy transfer of remittances, encouraging investment in productive sectors, purchase of shares and government bonds, encouraging organization of Bhutanese cultural shows, musical performances, exhibitions and related events, promotion of the country’s soft power and informal diplomatic outreach in their host communities by promoting goodwill.





## GETTING TO BHUTAN



We welcome everyone. We do not limit the number of visitors but we target responsible and mindful tourists. Getting a visa for Bhutan is a relatively simple process. Once you have contacted a government licensed local tour operator and planned your itinerary you must wire the complete payment along with the USD 40 visa fee to the Bhutan National Bank through one of their certified international partners with the Bhutanese tour operator specified as the ultimate beneficiary.

## GATEWAYS TO BHUTAN

### By Air

Visitors can fly to Paro International Airport from:

India :	New Delhi, Baghdora, Bodhgaya, Kolkata, Guwahati, Mumbai (May 2014)
Nepal :	Kathmandu
Thailand :	Bangkok
Singapore :	Changji Airport
Bangladesh :	Dhaka

You can book your tickets online at: [www.drukair.com.bt](http://www.drukair.com.bt) or [www.bhutanairlines.com.bt](http://www.bhutanairlines.com.bt)

### By Land

Visitors can also enter Bhutan from Phuentsholing, Samdrup Jongkhar and Gelephu.



## WHAT CAN I DO IN BHUTAN?

White water rafting, mountain biking, kayaking, rock climbing and motor biking have increasingly caught the eyes of adventure seekers.

Bhutan offers visitors a myriad of activities ranging from soft to extreme adventures. So, there is something to do for all ages.

## WHEN IS THE BEST TIME TO VISIT BHUTAN?

Bhutan is an all season destination. Spring and summer fill the landscape with myriad flora and fauna. Autumn casts a bright golden glow on the landscape. The crisp winter air and the clear skies make it ideal for capturing some of the best mountain views.

All year round, there is a unique sense of peace and contentment in the environment marked by traditional festivities as people celebrate their festivals in ancient local traditions.

## VISA

Please get in touch with a local tour operator and they will assist you with your visa and other travel plans. Getting visa is easy and fast with the online visa system. You can choose a tour operator from [www.tourism.gov.bt](http://www.tourism.gov.bt)

## WHERE DO I LOOK FOR MORE INFORMATION?

Tourism Council of Bhutan

Tel : +975 2 323251 / 2  
Email : [info@tourism.gov.bt](mailto:info@tourism.gov.bt)  
Web : [www.tourism.gov.bt](http://www.tourism.gov.bt)  
Facebook : [facebook.com/destinationbhutan](https://facebook.com/destinationbhutan)  
Twitter : [twitter.com/tourismbhutan](https://twitter.com/tourismbhutan)



## HOW MUCH DOES IT COST TO VISIT BHUTAN

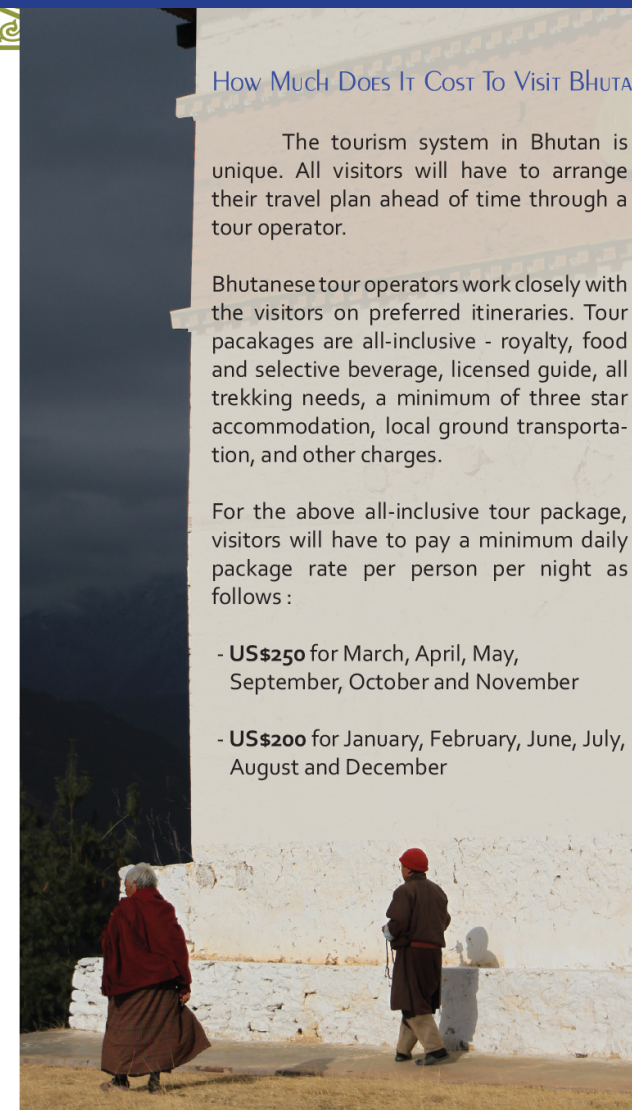
The tourism system in Bhutan is unique. All visitors will have to arrange their travel plan ahead of time through a tour operator.

Bhutanese tour operators work closely with the visitors on preferred itineraries. Tour packages are all-inclusive - royalty, food and selective beverage, licensed guide, all trekking needs, a minimum of three star accommodation, local ground transportation, and other charges.

For the above all-inclusive tour package, visitors will have to pay a minimum daily package rate per person per night as follows :

- **US\$250** for March, April, May, September, October and November

- **US\$200** for January, February, June, July, August and December





# MEETING BHUTAN'S WATER CHALLENGE

“...While global conflicts and wars will be fought over access to water, if we can solve this problem once and for all in Bhutan, it will be a truly noble accomplishment. This would also ensure food security, an essential aspect of our overall national goal of self-reliance.”

-His Majesty The King's Address to the Nation, 12 September 2020



Sopsokha Village, Bhutan

Picture courtesy: Bernard Gagnon, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0

## Dechen Pelmo

Dy. Chief of Division  
Department of Multilateral Affairs

The importance of water for sustaining all forms of life on this planet is undisputed. A fact driven home more recently by the knowledge that one of the most effective methods available for preventing

COVID-19 is washing one's hands with soap and water. Bhutan is fortunate as it has been endowed with abundant water resources. It has one of the highest per capita availability of water in the region. However, accessibility remains an issue in both urban and rural areas with only 81 percent of housing units having access to reliable water supply during critical hours of the day<sup>1</sup>. Issues surrounding the quality of water are also emerging. The rural water supply scheme program initiated in 1964 boasts a coverage rate of approximately 95% but there are cases of non-functional infrastructure and inadequate supply from source<sup>2</sup>. Bhutan's agriculture sector which engages the majority of the working population still relies largely on monsoon rains. Only 23 percent of agricultural land is irrigated of which 21 percent

<sup>1</sup> Population & Housing Census 2017, National Statistics Bureau of Bhutan.

<sup>2</sup> Draft Blueprint-Water Flagship Programme, May 2020

of the irrigation schemes have inadequate water supply<sup>3</sup>. The country's rugged terrain makes it difficult to make water accessible for drinking and irrigation and increases the cost of delivering water services. Bhutan's water predicament is mirroring the problems manifesting at the global level. Even though over 70 percent of the Earth's surface is covered by water, globally around 2.2 billion people still lack safely managed drinking water. The United Nations estimates that two in five health care facilities worldwide have no soap and water and that water scarcity could displace 700 million people by 2030. The global water problem is also one of accessibility and distribution, impacting development outcomes across education, health, gender parity and livelihood. To address this pervasive problem, the United Nations has identified clean water and sanitation as Sustainable Development Goal 6 with the objective of ensuring availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all by 2030.

Increasing urbanisation and socio-economic development will only continue to increase demand for water and allied climate smart and resilient infrastructure in Bhutan. The Bhutan Water Vision 2008 has clearly set the long-term goal as ensuring access to adequate, safe and affordable water to enhance and maintain the quality of lives and the integrity of the natural ecosystem. Recognising the need to better manage Bhutan's water resources and the implications it has on larger national goals such as food security and self-reliance, the Royal Government of Bhutan has undertaken numerous initiatives. Policy and legislative instruments such as the Bhutan Water

<sup>3</sup> National Irrigation Master Plan 2016,

DoA, MoAF



Act 2011 to govern the management of water have been put in place. The country's 12th Five Year Plan has identified "Sustainable Water Ensured" as one of the national key result areas. The focus is on ensuring adequate water for both drinking and irrigation. To achieve the objective, a national water security flagship program is being implemented. The Water Flagship aims to address systemic issues identified in governance, management and provision in a holistic manner. The resource requirement for the Water Flagship has been estimated at Nu.5 billion (approximately USD 68.5 million).

In order to address water accessibility issues being faced by rural communities, the Office of the Desuung in collaboration with the Royal Government initiated Water Projects in four districts in 2020 to provide safe, reliable drinking and irrigation water to various commu-

nities. The water pilot projects are being executed as National Service Programs by Bhutanese youth volunteers. The projects were inspired by His Majesty The King's address to the Nation on 12 September 2020 to provide youth with the opportunity to serve in a task of national importance that will benefit the nation in the long term<sup>4</sup>. Till date a total of 10 water projects have been initiated under the program.

Bhutan has to also contend with the larger threat of climate change on its water resources and the dire consequences that global inertia on pursuing meaningful climate action will have for the country. Bhutan perseveres with championing ambitious climate action and commitments to inspire other countries to follow suit. Rising global temperatures combined with the fragile Himalayan

<sup>4</sup> www.desuung.org.bt





De-suung Water Project Site. Picture courtesy: De-suung Website

ecosystem makes Bhutan highly vulnerable on numerous fronts. Bhutan's economy is heavily reliant on earnings from the sale of hydropower generated by its glacier-fed rivers. The impacts of climate change are already being seen with decreasing quantities of water, drying up of traditional water sources and irregular weather patterns. Collective global action is the only viable solution to deal with this climate threat.

Bilateral and multilateral development partners play a critical role in helping Bhutan address these pressing issues. It continues to receive support from the Government of India to develop its hydropower capacity and is implementing a range of urban infrastructure and irrigation projects through its Small Development Projects scheme under the 12th Plan. The Royal Government in partnership with UNDP has accessed USD 25.3 million through the Global Climate Facility to support efforts to prepare and adapt to climate change and pursue climate-resilient development. This long-term project aims to benefit rural communities through provision of sustainable land and water management, more climate-resilient irrigation and agriculture, and climate-resilient roads. EU has committed to provide additional support amounting to USD 4 million over and above the agreed assistance to support implementation of the Water Flagship Programme. Work is also underway to process project support in

both grant and loan forms worth approximately USD 20 million through ADB for the Water Flagship Program.

Adequate resources will be required to achieve Bhutan's water security goals and objectives. Meeting the resource gap will be challenging given the many competing development priorities before the country and the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs must redouble efforts to mobilise international support to help meet the resource gap. Exploring and accessing innovative financing windows and enhancing cooperation with partners on cost-efficient technologies will be crucial. The Ministry must continue to facilitate Bhutan's meaningful engagement at various international fora to consistently call for global climate action.

We know better than anyone else what the issues on the ground are and solutions that need to be implemented. The matter has been given priority from the highest levels of leadership, development partners stand ready to support and even our youth have proven that they will step up and contribute if given the opportunity. It is therefore imperative that Bhutan resolve its water woes and each agency must do its part to realise the call that has been given. Meeting this and every other development challenge confronting the country today, will require agencies to break away from silos and work together fluidly. After all, we are all in this together and we will determine if we sink or swim.

# AN MP'S EXPERIENCE AS A DE-SUUP



those in quarantine. They continue to guard the country's borders that were sealed after the first COVID-19 case was detected in March, 2020.

It was gratifying to be able to serve my King, country and the people of Bhutan during the national lockdowns. I had a satisfying experience serving as a sub-Gojay at the Kabisa zone for 14 days during the first nationwide lockdown. We were involved in patrolling, advising people to use face masks, wash hands, keep distance from each other and avoid public gatherings. We had two teams deployed on rotation. All De-suups looked smart in our orange uniforms and performed our duties diligently. During the second nationwide lockdown, I was involved in providing support to the Traffic Police patrolling for 40 days together with twenty other senior De-suups. We also provided support in unloading groceries, vegetables and gas cylinders. The work involved receiving goods, repacking as required and delivery. Many of these activities were being carried out for the first time and therefore, unforeseen hitches were encountered. Nonetheless, the teams were able to carry forth the job with vigor and discipline imbued in all De-suups.

Besides their effort in combating the COVID-19 pandemic, De-suups were also instrumental in assisting other agencies in their work, such as activities related to the Road Safety and Transport Authority, Forestry, Bhutan Agriculture and Food Regulatory

## Jurmi Wangchuk

Member of Parliament

*Before the flood construct your channel*

*Before the disease perform your ritual*

The wise adage aptly fits the establishment of De-suung, the Guardians of Peace by His Majesty The Druk Gyalpo. De-suung was instituted with the objective to cultivate the values of amity, allegiance, unity and harmony and to encourage all citizenry - young and old, men and women - to be active in the greater role of nation-building.

The De-suung institution after its establishment has come to be known to all Bhutanese for its various services. De-suung activities range from managing big crowds during important functions with differentiated services for special needs and attending to important and emergency national calls. In the year 2020, with the outbreak of COVID-19, De-suups played important multifaceted roles in Bhutan's overall response to the pandemic. Today there are more than 20,000 De-suups. As frontline workers alongside the health and security personnel during the pandemic, De-suups provided a range of logistics support during mass COVID-19 testing to monitoring of



Authority, Revenue and Customs and volunteering for the De-suung National Service projects. As compared to the past, remarkable changes were also seen in the behavior of the public. The general public gradually accepted the new norm and discipline and they acknowledged, cooperated and participated in the lockdown. They adhered to COVID-19 protocols like washing hands, using face masks, maintaining social distance and restricting movements within the designated zones. This discipline brought dividends to the public and the country at large.

In my opinion, the service of the De-suups has had a far reaching impact on the country's effort to confront the COVID-19 pandemic. My service during the lockdown along with other De-suups instilled in me good human traits such as discipline, integrity, teamwork, commitment and dedication to work, respect, sense of comradeship, sense of ownership, accountability and responsibility, sense of duty and accomplishment. These traits and values will always be upheld in my personal life, in my service as a representative of my constituency to the National Assembly and beyond.

His Majesty The King recognized the contributions of De-suups with the award of the Druk Thuksey during the 113th National Day held at the historic Pungthang Dewachen Phodrang on 17th December 2020.

From 27th March 2021, Bhutan started vaccinating its entire eligible population against COVID-19. De-suups continued providing services for the smooth conduct of the nation-wide vaccination programme. His Majesty's magnanimity as usual remained unsurpassed during the fight against COVID-19. His compassion and constant vigil not from a remote command center, but by physically visiting every place, discussing strategies and monitoring the situations on the ground, putting His own life at risk is exemplary. His Majesty is constantly at the forefront making routine visits to all the vulnerable hotspots along the porous southern borders. There were occasions when some farmers did not even know that the King had come to their doorstep.



Author during one of the night patrols

The areas that His Majesty physically monitors are the most vulnerable spots from where a little spill over of the virus could easily turn into an uncontrollable flood or tsunami. His Majesty's unfailing care for the De-suups and regular visits to the hotspots boost the morale of all, strengthening the fight against COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic is still a huge global threat and therefore we must be vigilant and alert. We must persevere to work together and protect ourselves. We have to adhere to 'Perform your rituals before the disease' and 'construct the channels before the floods'.

Lastly, we thank His Majesty The King, His Holiness the Je Khenpo, Dratshang, our ever protective and dependable deities and the people who came together to fight COVID-19. Palden Drukpa Gyalo!

# THE KINGDOM OF ZANGDOPELRI AND ITS E-DIPLOMACY EXPERIENCE

## Dorji Nidup

Sr. Desk Officer  
Department of Bilateral Affairs

The Kingdom of *Zangdopelri* is a small landlocked country in the Himalayan region roughly the size of Singapore. A state of around one million inhabitants, it is snuggled between two giant neighbours, *Zombuling* in the south and *Draminen* in the north. Despite its small population and limited resources, the government of *Zangdopelri* took advantage of the tremendous technological revolution and advancement of ICT around the late 20th century. They responded to digitisation and globalisation trends by building an open, dynamic and transparent e-society. So, at present, it enjoys one of the greatest economic, trade, and internet freedoms in the world.

Unlike Bhutan, which is well-known for the visionary leadership of its Monarchs and Gross National Happiness, the tiny *Zangdopelri* attracted the attention of the world with its high-tech digital society and an extensive web of digital services that have allowed 99 per cent of its public services to be electronic. The citizens of *Zangdopelri* proudly claim that only two things — marriage and divorce — cannot be done online in their country. The secret of this tiny Kingdom's rise to a digital powerhouse lies in its government's pioneering advances under their King's farsighted and dynamic leadership in pursuing innovative e-*Zangdopelri* initiative, fostering innovative education, virtual businesses and digital citizenship.

The government of *Zangdopelri* initiated automation to make up for the lack of human resources. It has declared Internet access as a fundamental human right, and despite their geographical challenge and rugged mountains, they have managed to provide the world's fastest Wi-Fi for free. It has mandated that all public schools teach all students starting from first grade how to code.

*Zangdopelri's* entire banking system operates online, all their health care programmes run on e-prescription, and citizens file their taxes online in less than five minutes. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Zangdopelri's* digital public services such as electronic voting, online learning in schools, digital bureaucracy, banking and healthcare continued without interruption. However, despite being a global leader in becoming a digital society, their diplomacy largely remained conventional. It has embraced digital technology but has not pursued digital diplomacy. Up to this point, *Zangdopelri's* social media presence and how they conduct diplomacy through ICT has been somewhat ad hoc. For instance, their Foreign Ministry has Facebook and Twitter accounts, few of their overseas missions have Facebook pages and a handful of ambassadors tweet about their work from individual accounts. Only recently under the leadership of their new foreign minister, who is himself tech-savvy and active on social media, has their foreign ministry upped its digital game.

So, as part of their e-diplomacy ini-



tiative, they established the Public Diplomacy Division. The Division, as part of their mandate, has swiftly adapted to public diplomacy's rising global profile and rapidly evolving communications environment through responsive and focused outreach to domestic and international audiences. They have engaged extensively with the media in expanding their public diplomacy footprint, both at home and abroad, and embraced social media and other modern tools to maximise outcome. They have also incorporated new technologies in its working and streamlined internal communication, using encryption and complex authentication processes for extra security. Today, digital diplomacy has become *Zangdopelri's* foreign policy essential; they have integrated technology and digital diplomacy as a crucial component of their bilateral, regional and multilateral cooperation. They have signed several agreements and MoUs to exchange best practices and solutions in digital, e-governance and cybersecurity.

Within a short period, their official Twitter handle has become one of the most followed foreign ministry handles in the world. Similarly, their Facebook page has one million followers. More impressive is that their foreign minister is the second-most followed leader on Facebook and Twitter. Further, they have successfully brought all of their embassies and missions on Facebook and Twitter. They have launched a mobile App to provide efficient consular services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their embassies and consulates are using this mobile App to offer advice on flights, repa-

triation procedures, travel restrictions and to support the local population affected by the pandemic. They have truly embraced a robust social media personality and digital identity to offer timely and effective consular services as well as seamless and uninterrupted work even when their country was on a nationwide lockdown. Confident that they have successfully implemented the objectives of their digital diplomacy, they now have a plan to open a virtual embassy in those countries where they have a large number of *Zangdopelri* diaspora to engage in public diplomacy, provide advice for students and extend consular services and, to a certain extent, replace a brick-and-mortar embassy to minimise costs.

So, what can Bhutan and its foreign ministry learn from the e-diplomacy experience of the Kingdom of *Zangdopelri*?

While the essence of diplomacy has not changed, what has changed vastly, almost beyond imagination, is diplomacy's operating environment. In the 21st century, the growing use of ICT and social-media platforms has influenced our way of life, including international diplomacy. Digital diplomacy has become an active diplomatic mode with the help of new interactive communication technologies such as WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, video sharing website, and blogs. And these communication technologies play an increasingly important role in international relations. Although Bhutan has gradually recognised the pivotal role of digital diplomacy and recently put it into practice, it still needs to pull its socks up. Simply

put, *Zangdopelri's* experience can be an exciting case study to help implement new technologies and services and pursue digital diplomacy.

Bhutan's foreign ministry (MFA) can examine how it conducts its diplomacy in the new era of the digital world. How far and how can MFA use digital technology to drive its diplomacy? How can MFA navigate its diplomacy in the digital age? Suppose MFA dynamically adapts, synthesises, and embraces new channels and methods of diplomacy, implementation of its foreign policy will undoubtedly be optimal to promote and protect its national interests, as well to establish a strong standing on the international stage. If *Zangdopelri* can, why not Bhutan? Bhutan's MFA need to only go the extra mile and roll their sleeves up!

# BHUTAN'S BEST PRACTICES IN COVID-19 RESPONSE

## Dr. Tshokey

Technical Advisory Group and Clinical Management Team Lead  
COVID-19 Response  
Ministry of Health

The catastrophe caused by COVID-19 continues, and has recently been worsening in several countries. Many countries are experiencing multi-fold infections and deaths, collapse of healthcare services, burnout in and shortages of healthcare workers (HCWs), lack of PPE, hospitals being overwhelmed, exhaustion of medical supplies, and disruption of routine healthcare services. As of the first week of May 2021, there were over 156,496,592 confirmed cases and more than 3,264,143 deaths globally. On the anniversary of the pandemic, Amnesty International reported that HCWs deaths due to the pandemic reached 17,000 across 70 countries which equates to a health worker dying from Covid-19 every 30 minutes. Bhutan has also been affected by the pandemic, but the overall morbidity and mortality are far below the global situations. This is because of the best practices that the country has adopted right from the beginning.

### Benevolent selfless leadership

Bhutan's COVID-19 response is personally spearheaded by His Majesty The King who is the force and pillar behind everything. Beginning with personally overseeing the management of the first COVID-19 case in March 2020, His Majesty has been out of the palace, continuously in the field, mostly in the



His Majesty The King speaks to the personnel on duty at one of the border outposts between Phuntsholing and Samtse

high-risk areas. His Majesty's wisdom and guidance keeps the country moving forward despite the challenges.

### Preparedness is the key

Bhutan comprehended the challenges of limited human resources and medical supplies and planned extensively. The Health Emergency Management Committee (HEMC) was activated, simulation exercises were held, and several measures were put in place. Airport screening was initiated, international borders were closed, several guidelines and protocols were developed, doctors and nurses were trained in COVID and ICU management, ventilators and other medical supplies were procured, and worst-case scenarios of the pandemic were prepared early in the pandemic. Prior preparation has extensively benefited our response.

### Whole-of-a-government approach and multi-sectoral teamwork

Bhutan's response to COVID-19 is an exemplary show





His Majesty The King with the hospital staff in Samtse

of how a country can approach a problem wholly. The Prime Minister's office, cabinet ministers, religious bodies, members of parliament, government and other offices, military and paramilitary organizations and the public were in unison. Several teams including the national, regional, dzongkhag/dungkhag COVID-19 Task Forces were formed. The technical aspects were spearheaded by a multi-sectoral Technical Advisory Group (TAG) for COVID-19 and several other teams in the Ministry of Health, with support from other relevant sectors.

### Public solidarity

A strong sense of national solidarity was exhibited by all sections of society, greatly contributing to Bhutan's success. Organizations such as the De-suung and the Bhutan Red Cross Society were at the frontline for various tasks. Farmers both in groups and as individuals donated their cash crops; members of Parliament, civil servants and corporate employees contributed from their salaries;

numerous individuals donated in both cash and kind; businesses and hoteliers offered their hotels for use as quarantine facilities; and many individuals volunteered to support the government's pandemic response.

### Exceptional and unique quarantine system

Bhutan started with a mandatory 14-day quarantine (home/facility) for incoming travelers and primary contacts/suspects in early March 2020 but made it a mandatory facility quarantine later. By the end of March 2020, the mandatory facility quarantine was increased to 21 days as it still stands. There is also a mandatory 7-day facility quarantine for people travelling from the high-risk areas to the low-risk areas within the country. The uniqueness in the quarantine is that all costs for accommodation and testing are borne by the government, and hotels are mostly tourist-grade with facilities for meals, tea, water, wi-fi, and a mobile medical team to attend to the needy.

### Extensive testing and enhanced testing

Bhutan has always followed the 3T (test, trace and treat) strategy. The Royal Center for Disease Control was the lone laboratory in the country with RT-PCR capacity prior to the pandemic. Currently Bhutan has five RT-PCR laboratories spread across the country. Surveillance teams at national, dzongkhag and dungkhag levels are continuously engaged in contact tracing, quarantine monitoring, follow-up on travelers from high-risk to low-risk areas, and follow-up on recovered and discharged patients. All tests are provided free of costs by the government.

### Clustered COVID-19 case management

One of the key components of the response was COVID-19 case management. Cases were managed in the four regional COVID-19 centers instead of every hospital managing their own cases. If all 49 hospitals in the country managed their own COVID-19 cases, each hospital would deploy a set of

doctors, nurses and support staff regardless of the number of cases and this would result in unnecessary deployment of HCWs and overuse of PPE contributing to shortage and crisis, including disruption of routine healthcare services. The clustering strategically divided the country into four regional clusters (Fig. 1):

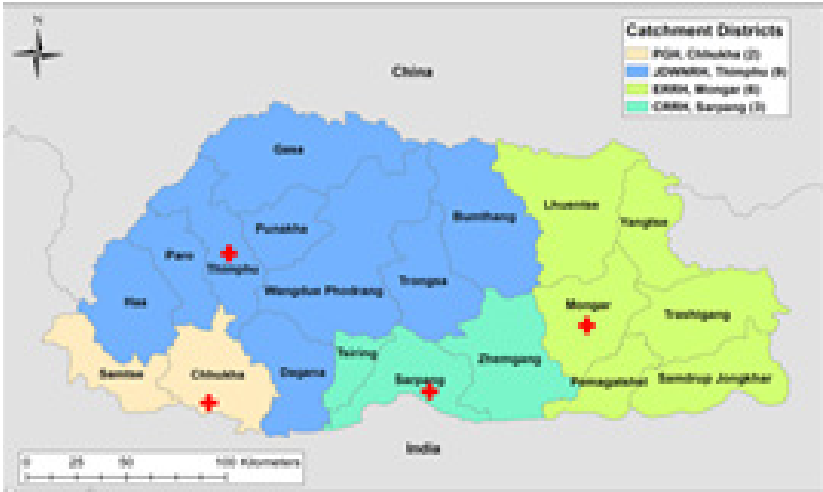


Figure 1: Map showing the four National COVID-19 Centers with their cluster districts

To avert the risks of cross-transmission of COVID-19 to routine hospitals, separate structures were identified for the purpose. Accordingly, for the benefit of the people, His Majesty The King has granted the utilization of key structures in the four regions as the National COVID-19 Centre (Fig. 2):

- Gyalyum Kesang Choeden Wangchuck National Eye Center in Thimphu
- Royal Institute for Governance and Strategic Studies hostel in Phuentsholing
- Royal Guest House in Mongar
- Central Regional Referral Hospital in Gelephu (old)



Figure 2: The four National COVID-19 centers (First row from left: Thimphu, Phuentsholing, Mongar and Gelephu. Second row: ICU and ward settings in these centers)

All the four National COVID-19 centres have isolation wards, adult and paediatric intensive care units, operation theatres, delivery room and X-ray rooms. Clustering of COVID-19 case management has benefited in the following ways:

- Strategic deployment of HCWs thereby preventing their shortages and burnout
- Judicious use of PPE
- Prevented transmission of COVID-19 to other parts of the hospitals
- Enabled uninterrupted provision of other routine healthcare services
- Allowed cost saving by reducing quarantine requirements and limiting use of PPE
- Averted shortages of medical supplies and equipment through strategic mobilization and utilization
- Allowed strategic location and buffering of PPE and other medical equipment such as ICU beds, ventilators and other respiratory support equipment.

### Smart and timely lockdown

Bhutan has experienced two national lockdowns. These lockdowns were carried out in a timely and smart manner. A timely lockdown prevented the spread and broke the chain of possible transmission effectively. A smart lockdown allowed delivery of essential services and permitted people to come out in a controlled manner.

### Uninterrupted provision of essential health care services

Detailed plans were drawn to provide uninterrupted essential health-



care services at all times, including during lockdowns. Maternal and child-care services, including immunizations were provided through home visits. Medical consultations were provided through tele-consultation. Medicines were delivered to individual houses or to identified drop-points during the lockdowns. Hospitals facilitated pickups and drop-offs of patients who need physical care in the hospital for acute care, wound dressing, delivery and other emergencies. There have been no major interruptions in routine medical services until now.

#### Socioeconomic support

The pandemic has severely impacted the socio-economic status of several people. In His National Address, His Majesty said, “We must exhibit the strength that comes out of our smallness, remain united and support one another. During such exceptional circumstances, the government will take the responsibility of alleviating any suffering to the people due to the virus”. His Majesty has provided numerous support, such as waiver of interest on loans, employment opportunities and unemployment or work-lost allowances through the Druk Gyalpo’s Relief Fund. Several families were relocated from the high-risk Indian border towns in houses built through His Majesty’s support. Many other support mechanisms have also been carried out by the government, corporate and private institutions and individuals.

#### Collaboration and assistance

Contributing to the success of Bhutan’s best practices, several collaborative assistance were received

at different stages. These include individuals, institutions, bilateral, multilateral, international and UN agencies. Supports included contributions of PPE, medicines, diagnostics kits, laboratory reagents, vaccines and technical expertise.

#### Successful nationwide vaccination

Under the benevolent leadership and guidance of His Majesty The King and the government, the Ministry of Health planned and carried out the vaccination campaign successfully from 27th March to 4th April 2021. The vaccines were donated by the Government of India. More than 3,600 health professionals and 4,800 volunteers were involved in the 1200 vaccination posts established throughout the country. The national vaccination coverage for the eligible population was 94.8% and the overall population coverage stands at 63.3%. A total of 8,184 individuals (392 pregnant and 7792 lactating women) were also vaccinated. There were 8526 (1.8%) minor side effects and 46 (0.01%) serious side effects reported. Bhutan’s vaccination drive was hailed as unique and applauded by the international community.

Adding to the successful first dose vaccination, Bhutan also held the national campaign for the second dose of COVID-19 vaccine from the 20<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> of July 2021. The campaign was extended by another few days to vaccinate children and also provide home-based vaccination for the needy. The second national campaign vaccinated 473,715 individuals which account for a vaccination coverage of 95.6% of the

eligible population and 65.5% of the overall population. During the same campaign, about 38,000 children of age between 12-17 years in high-risk areas were vaccinated.

#### Conclusion

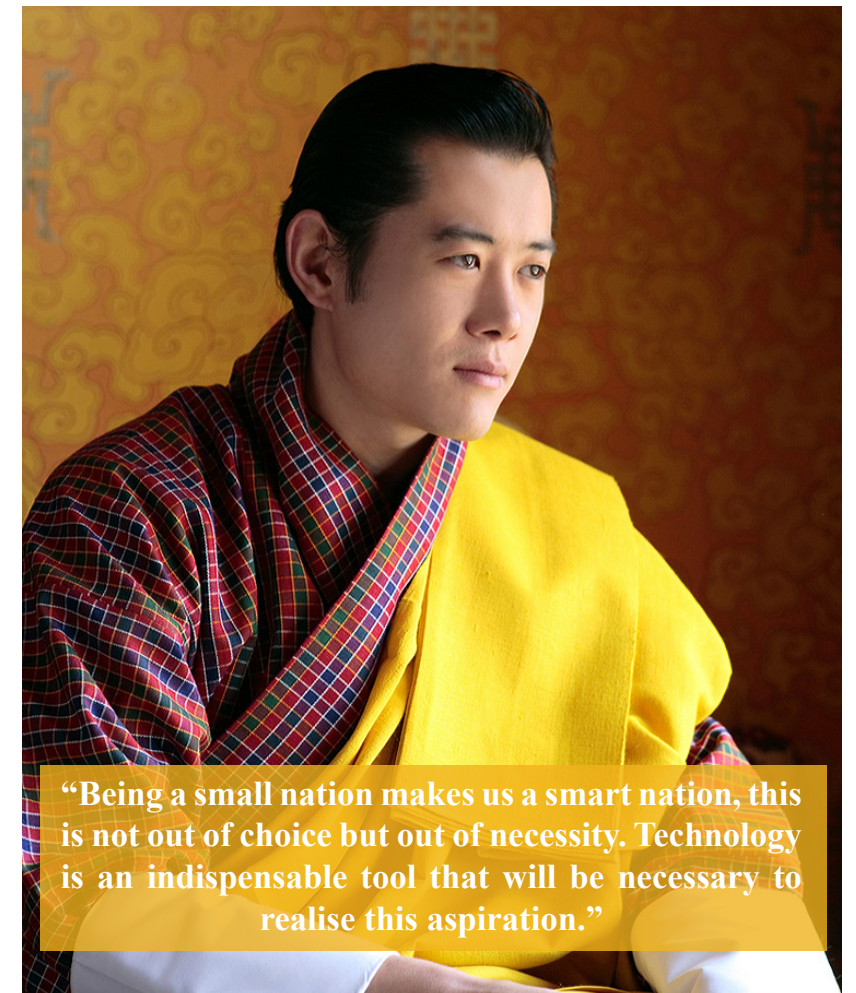
More than one year since the first positive case in Bhutan was detected in March 2020, Bhutan has managed the COVID-19 pandemic exceptionally well and successfully conducted mass vaccination. However, there is a continuous threat of leakages of transmission into the community, the main risk being the regular arrivals of Bhutanese from outside via air, land and porous borders. These situations call for higher and continued vigilance and reinforcement of all COVID-19 protocols and public health measures. “No one is safe, until everyone is safe”.

# WHAT DOES IT TAKE FOR ‘LEARNING’ TO STOP?

## Yeshe Choden

Asst. Protocol Officer  
Department of Protocol

Due to the second national lockdown in the country, I could not physically report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 1st January 2021, as would have been the case otherwise. I received my appointment order and sent my joining letter via email. 1st February 2021 was my first day as a civil servant with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and towards the end of the day, after having met and talked with many of my senior colleagues who seemed to be effortlessly maneuvering their way around their work, I was reassured in my faith that there is no substitute for experience, and experience runs on the gift of time. So, if time is what it takes, I told myself, it is time that I will give. But then again, I knew that time alone was not going to make consequential difference, if at all. J.R.R. Tolkien wrote that we must decide “what to do with the time that is given to us.” I know with certainty that my seniors at MFA did not simply wait for the time to pass and the experience to happen.



“Being a small nation makes us a smart nation, this is not out of choice but out of necessity. Technology is an indispensable tool that will be necessary to realise this aspiration.”

Few things stimulate the mind like the thrill of new enterprises, but attached to the thrill is also the feeling of trepidation that comes with entering an unknown territory. As apprehensive as I was about being a first-time civil servant and that too with an agency as formidable as MFA, I knew also that it was not without a silver lining. For instance, being a novice at MFA meant I had the privilege of learning; starting at the lowest rung of my career ladder meant that the only way to go is up. And the sooner I started, the better it was going to be. As recommended by some of my senior colleagues, I signed up for the online class on “Global Diplomacy: Diplomacy in the Modern World,” in the hope that I would gain some introductory insights into the concept of diplomacy as a profession. Offered by the University of London via Coursera, the course is spread over a span of 5 weeks and



# Friendship Associations

## Friendship Associations abroad

### 1. Austria

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President: Mrs. Liselotte Waldeheim-Natural  
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### 2. Austria

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### 5. Denmark

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### 16. Poland

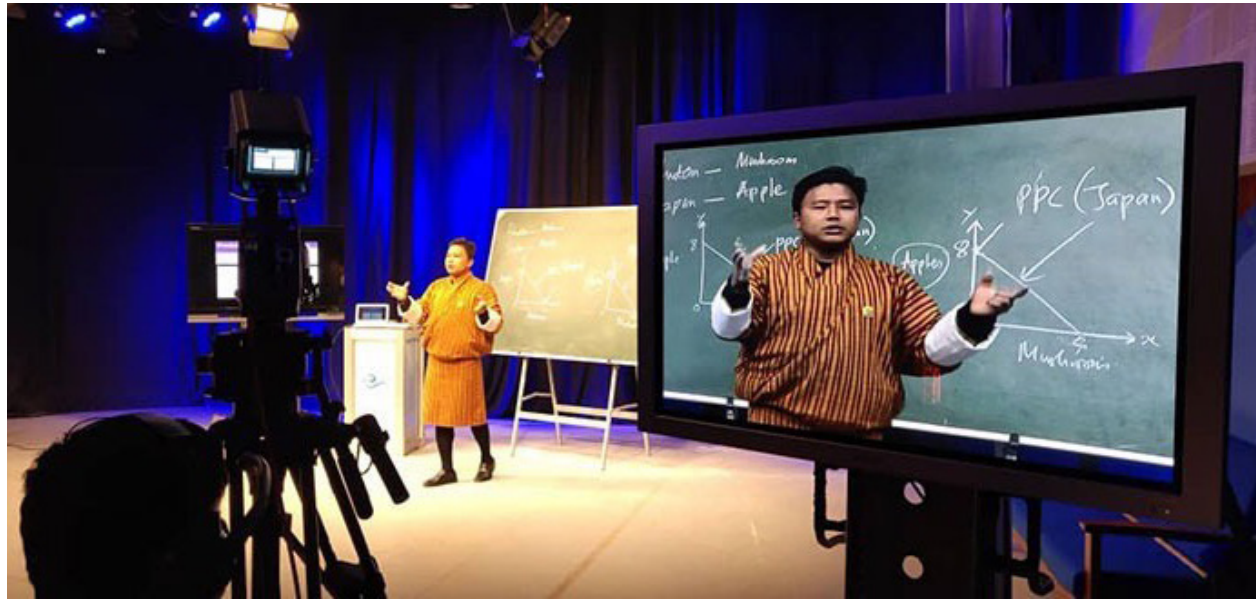
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A teacher delivering his lesson via BBS, when schools were closed in March. Picture courtesy: Kuensel

boasts an amalgamation of learning resources such as recorded interview videos, reading materials, peer-graded assignments, and reviewing peers' assignments.

I would like to go off on a tangent here and highlight some takeaways from the course woven with opinions of my own:

*Diplomacy is as much an art as it is a science, of initiating, fostering, and promoting goodwill between nations at the macro level and between individual entities at the micro. In this digital age of fast-paced globalization, diplomacy is the fulcrum upon which any country can leverage the benefits of interdependence and cooperation. A good diplomat embodies integrity, in that they can be entrusted with the noble task of protecting and promoting national interests. A good diplomat sells what can be sold but the better diplomat goes a step further by convincing the other party that they too stand to gain from the transaction. While an individual may be born with attributes such as tact, perseverance, and patience, the same attributes may also be 'learnt' to a considerable extent, which is why an extensive body of research and their findings on diplomacy continues to guide and facilitate aspiring and established diplomats alike, to continually learn, unlearn, and relearn their ways in and around their professional spheres.*

Upon completion of the online course, besides the satisfaction of having invested my time in something substantive, I also registered in myself a feeling of awe for the ease of access. In the pre-internet days, much of learning involved the physical entity of a tutor-pupil duo, and learning resources were no doubt difficult to procure. All that changed with the advent of the internet when the world began to see that global connectivity was both instantaneous and rewarding. When my mother, who never went to school, faces little problem using WeChat to keep in touch with her cousins in far-flung places like New York and Perth, it is both intriguing and terrifying to think about the ways in which someone adept in Information and Communications Technology could harness its potential. His Majesty The King enunciated in 2019 that "being a small nation makes us a smart nation. This is not out of choice but out of necessity. Technology is an indispensable tool that will be necessary to realize this aspiration."



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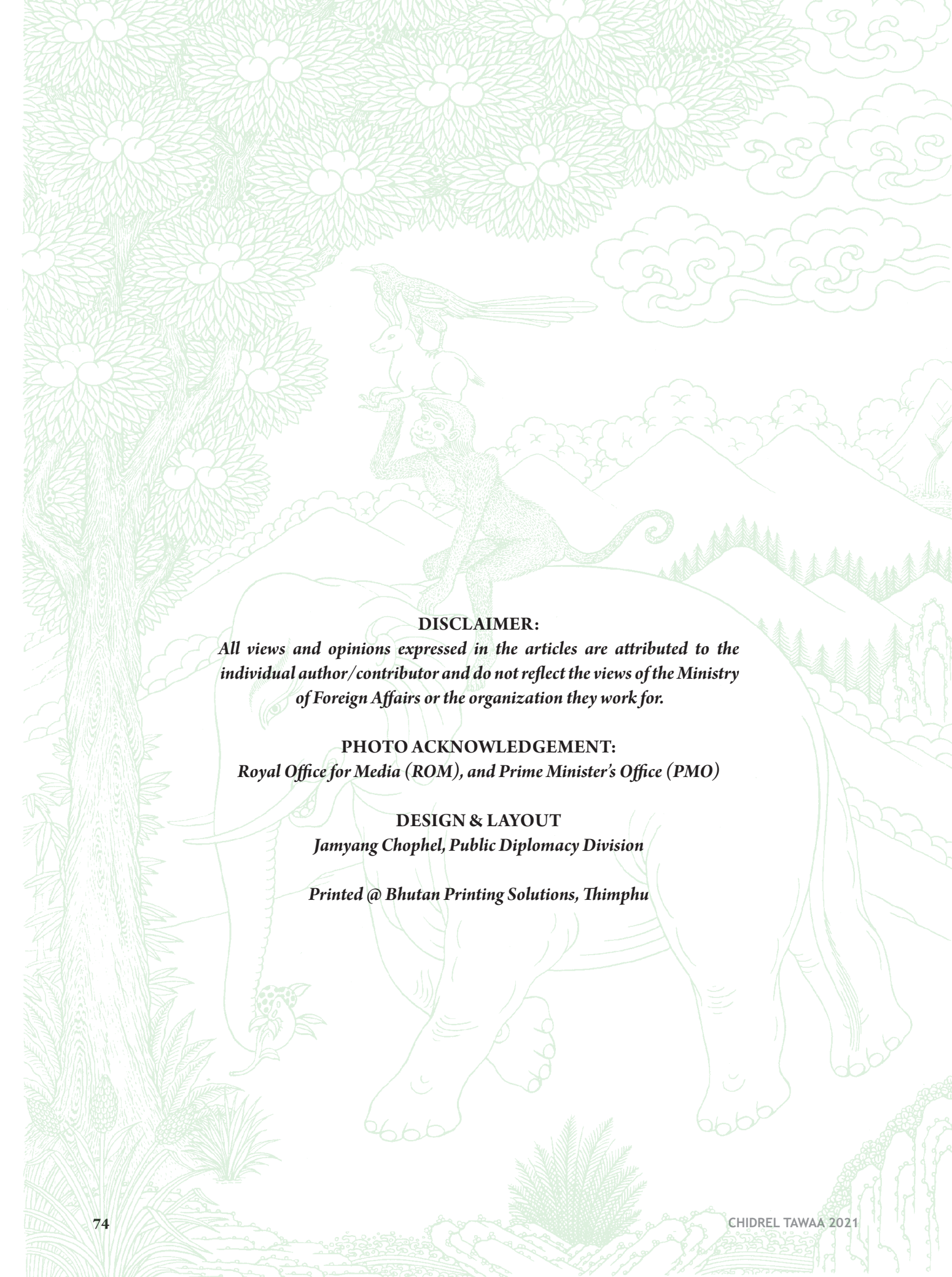
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