



PERMANENT MISSION OF THE KINGDOM OF BHUTAN
TO THE UNITED NATIONS



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**Opening Statement
of
H.E. Lyonpo Thakur S. Powdyel, Minister of Education
&
Chairperson, National Commission for Women & Children
Royal Government of Bhutan
during the Presentation of Bhutan's Second Periodic Report
to
the Committee on the Rights of the Child,
Geneva, 22 September 2008**

Madam Chair and distinguished members of the Committee,

1. Almost three decades ago in 1979, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the Fourth King of Bhutan, in his message on the occasion of the International Year of the Child said, "Children are our treasures. They hold the promise of the future and, therefore, it is only right that they should be given every opportunity to develop their physical, mental and spiritual potential to the fullest extent in an environment free of want and free of fear." This remains the guiding principle of my Government in addressing the needs and concerns of children in Bhutan. The Royal Government is committed to creating and expanding opportunities for all the people of Bhutan based on the ideal of equity and justice within the broad framework of our developmental philosophy of Gross National Happiness.
2. As an educationist by profession, I have worked with young people for over two decades. It is a matter of great pride and satisfaction for me to assure the Committee that the well being of children in Bhutan is accorded the highest priority and attention by the Royal Government. In my capacity as the Minister of Education and the Chairperson of the National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC), it is an honour to present Bhutan's Second Periodic Report under Article 44, 1(b) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Madam Chair,

3. Today, our delegation engages with the Committee as representatives of a full-fledged democracy, indeed one of the newest democracies in the world. The newly elected government will continue to strive with determination and commitment to give full effect to the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
4. Following the presentation of our initial report in 2001, the Royal Government accorded the valuable recommendations of the Committee our most serious attention, and used these as a basis to structure and initiate programs to promote and protect child rights in Bhutan. Within the financial and human resource constraints of a small, landlocked and least developed country, we have invested our sincere efforts to carry forward the recommendations in collaboration with relevant agencies, both governmental and non-governmental, and with the cooperation of our development partners. While we take great pride in the achievements reached thus far, we recognize that much remains to be done and we are prepared to commit our efforts and resources in addressing existing challenges.

Madam Chair,

5. Bhutan has since 2001 adopted significant measures in the field of child rights, particularly on legislation relating to children. Bhutan's first Constitution, the overarching legal framework was adopted on 18 July 2008. While children's rights are pervasive throughout the Constitution, three of the 35 Articles relate specifically to children. In addition, the adoption of the Civil and Criminal Procedure Code in 2001 and the Penal Code in 2004 along with other relevant legislation has enabled the harmonization of domestic laws with most provisions of the Convention thus ensuring child-friendly procedures and taking into account the "best interest of the child".

6. A Child Care and Protection Bill has also been developed to institute a comprehensive child justice system and to address remaining gaps in existing legislation. Simultaneously, the Legislative Taskforce formed to review and develop woman and child friendly legislation has Bills on adoption and domestic violence in the pipeline.
7. As submitted in our report, the Royal Government's establishment of the National Commission for Women and Children (NCWC) replacing the erstwhile CRC Task Force in 2004 is the reflection of our firm commitment to put-in place appropriate mechanisms to implement the Convention. In August 2008, the Cabinet granted NCWC fully autonomy thus giving it enhanced impetus to promote and protect the rights of women and children. The extensive advocacy and sensitization activities of the NCWC in the past four years has led to increased attention to and clearer focus on the rights of children and women.
8. Our efforts to implement the Convention have been complemented by the various activities of NGOs that have emerged in Bhutan over the past few years. The Youth Development Fund, the Tarayana Foundation and RENEW pursue targeted programs that have favorably impacted the lives children and youth. We are optimistic that the adoption of the Civil Society Organization Act will encourage the growth of a vibrant and dynamic Civil Society in Bhutan that will help advance greater awareness and the full implementation of the Convention in the country.

Madam Chair,

9. As the national machinery for coordinating Bhutan's implementation of the Convention, the NCWC has been at the forefront of the government's efforts to translate the Convention's principles into practice on the ground. A series of broad based and inclusive training workshops, consultations, and advocacy campaigns, many targeting children themselves, conducted in collaboration with various partner agencies have proven particularly effective in promoting greater awareness of the provisions of the Convention. Such initiatives have involved the judiciary, law enforcement authorities, education system, monastic institutions, the media, and individual parents. Some specific outcomes of such efforts include school sensitization campaigns such as "Know the Law to Protect Your Rights", involving the judiciary, institutionalization of women and child friendly police procedures with the establishment of the Women and Child Protection Unit in the Royal Bhutan Police, and launching of the Complaints and Response Mechanism of the RBP in the capital, scheduled for national expansion by 2013.
10. With approximately 23 percent of our population living in poverty and a large number of this percentage being children, we are refocusing our interventions to ensure that children in the most vulnerable groups, particularly poorer segments, are reached with services and facilities.
11. As in the past, the government continues to allocate almost a quarter of its annual budget to health and education. In education, our focus has been on expansion and upgrading of existing educational facilities, and targeting increasing number of children, especially vulnerable groups living in remote areas and children with special needs. In health, we have established a Multi-Sectoral Task Force in all the 20 districts to raise awareness of the risks of emerging issues like HIV/AIDS and substance abuse with particular focus on adolescents and children.

12. Bhutan is well on target to achieve the Millennium Development Goals before 2015. The decline in U5MR and infant mortality rates – 32% between 1990 and 2000, infant mortality from 123 per thousand live births in 1990 to 40 per thousand in 2005 and the improved access to primary education, primary health care and other social services as well as improvement in girls' enrolment are indicative of that commitment.
13. We have planned several initiatives to improve child rights in future. In the education sector, the activities in the pipeline are expansion of the continuing education programme and child friendly schools, active career guidance and counseling in schools and the special education unit for children with disabilities. We are also targeting universal primary enrolment by 2013. The Tenth Five Year development plan of the country, which came into effect from July 2008, has for the first time integrated child protection issues under the activities of NCWC. As a reaffirmation of our commitments to the rights of children, the government signed the two CRC Optional Protocols in September 2005.

Madam Chair,

14. While Bhutan is fully committed to the Convention, as a small, landlocked and least developed country, we are faced with a range of difficulties in its implementation. These challenges constrain us from undertaking many activities that could considerably improve the situation of children. The lack of financial resources is the first of many constraints, which has resulted in inadequate infrastructure to fully cater to the needs of our children. In addition, our harsh mountainous terrain and highly dispersed settlements continue to escalate our development costs and pose considerable challenges in the delivery of social services.
15. Likewise, our limited human resource capacity has also hindered efforts to improve the well being of children. We have an acute shortage of teachers and professionals with experience and technical expertise to deal with children with special needs. There is also a dearth of professionals to handle emerging problems of substance abuse as well as cases of children who come in conflict with the law. The limited resources to collect and analyze necessary data coupled with the fast changing social and economic situation in Bhutan pose a serious challenge in understanding the needs of children today.
16. Despite these difficulties and limitations, we remain steadfast in our efforts to overcome constraints and challenges in order to promote a greater realization of child rights.

Madam Chair,

17. Allow me to briefly touch upon the profound political changes that have taken place in Bhutan, a culmination of the relentless efforts of our Fourth King to empower the Bhutanese people through a steady process of democratization. The transitional phase gained real momentum in September 2001 with His Majesty the King's command to launch the drafting of Bhutan's first Constitution through a broad based drafting committee. The draft text of the Constitution was completed in March 2005 and copies distributed extensively throughout the Kingdom to individual households and all national establishments, including schools. Both the Fourth and Fifth Kings convened direct public consultations over the ensuing two-year period in all 20 districts. His Majesty the Fourth King withdrew from the

Throne at the age of 51, transferring the sovereign authority to then Crown Prince, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, after successfully putting in place all institutional arrangements and instruments for a vibrant democracy.

18. Bhutan became a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy when in March 2008, based on the draft Constitution, 79.4% of eligible voters participated in the first-ever historic democratic elections for parliament. International election observers from India, Australia, Canada, Denmark, Japan, the United States, the UN and the EU were present during the elections. This historic transition was both smooth and successful, and accomplished under the leadership and guidance of His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, the fifth King of Bhutan.

Madam Chair,

19. With regard to the issue of the people in the UNHCR administered refugee camps in Nepal, the Committee is aware that Bhutan, in its efforts to find a durable and just solution, has been engaged since 1993 in bilateral talks with the Government of Nepal.

- First and foremost, I must emphasize the fundamental reality that as recognized by both Nepal and Bhutan, there are four categories of people in the camps including non-Bhutanese. It is, therefore, factually incorrect to identify all the people in the camps as Bhutanese.
- Bhutan has been consistent in its efforts to engage constructively with the Government of Nepal in order to advance a solution to the humanitarian plight of the people in the camps. This has yielded important progress, including the harmonization of positions of the two governments on the four categories of people in the refugee camps in February 2003 as well as the completion of the verification of one of the camps in December 2003. Unfortunately, the implementation of the results of the Joint Verification was derailed by the regrettable violent attack perpetrated in the camps against Bhutanese officials on 22nd December 2003, as well as the climate of insecurity that was permitted to prevail thereafter.
- Despite such serious threats to the integrity of the bilateral process, Bhutan, in an attempt to break the impasse, committed in September 2005, to take back bonafide Bhutanese of the four categories of people living in the verified camp, if, on the basis of informed consent, those eligible opted to do so. Dramatic political developments in Nepal in April 2006 however, overtook events, and the Royal Government found itself unable to pursue any meaningful dialogue in the absence of a stable government in Nepal.
- Now that there is a new government in Nepal, we are hopeful that the bilateral process will receive the necessary political support and determination critical to enabling forward movement. Bhutan for its part remains fully committed to resolving the issue through the bilateral process in keeping with agreements reached with Nepal.

20. Such difficulties notwithstanding, it is significant to note that the channels of communication have always remained open, with regular contact at the ministerial level. More recently, our Prime Minister met with the former Nepalese Prime Minister during the 15th SAARC Summit in Sri Lanka last month, and our two Foreign Ministers also met on the sidelines of the 10th BIMSTEC Ministerial Meeting in New Delhi. On both occasions, the two

governments agreed to resume discussions in order to resolve the problem as quickly as possible.

Madam Chair,

21. While we stand committed to resolving this humanitarian problem, the Royal Government is faced with serious security challenges arising from the formation of extremist groups in the refugee camps in Nepal. They have demonstrated their intention to disrupt the peace, security and stability of Bhutan through violence. Since January 2008, these groups have carried out 14 bomb blasts inside Bhutan and they have been recruiting and training members, and disseminating Maoist propaganda in the country.
22. As a small and peace loving country, Bhutan does not have the means to deal with the terrorist threats posed by the militants. We believe that any act of terror will pose a grave security threat to Bhutan and, if unchecked, has the potential to destabilize the region. At such an important stage in its history, when the country is focused on consolidating parliamentary democracy, it needs the full cooperation and understanding of the international community to ensure that such acts of terrorism do not undermine the success of democracy in Bhutan.

Madam Chair,

23. We have made much headway in reaching out to the un-reached and in expanding opportunities for all segments of Bhutanese society on the basis of equity and justice. We appreciate the advice and support that we have received on issues affecting our children, our greatest national asset. As we enter a new phase in the history of our country, the best interest of the child will continue to serve as one of our main guiding principle for state action.
24. I would like to conclude by reiterating Bhutan's full commitment to the Convention and would like to express the readiness of my delegation to interact with the Committee in a most constructive manner.

Thank You and Tashi Delek!