

**Statement by His Excellency Dr Lotay Tshering, Prime Minister of the
Kingdom of Bhutan at the 76th Session of the United Nations General
Assembly (General Debate)
September 25, 2021, New York**

Mr. President,
Secretary General,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,

1. I bring you warm greetings from His Majesty The King, Her Majesty The Queen and the people of Bhutan, the land of Gross National Happiness.
2. I begin with prayers for all the precious lives lost to the pandemic and sincerely hope it comes to an end very soon. (pause)
3. Congratulations Your Excellency Mr. Abdulla Shahid for the presidency. I assure you my full support as you assume this role at a critical time. I also extend my gratitude to the 75th President for conducting the last session successfully.
4. I take this opportunity to congratulate Your Excellency Mr. Antonio Guterres, on your re-election as the Secretary General of the United Nations. Nobody else can give us better hope and guidance to build back from this pandemic than Your Excellency.
5. I would also like to thank Your Excellency as well as Prime Minister Johnson for organising the Leaders Roundtable on Climate Change five days ago. I spoke on behalf of the 46 LDCs and we are already excited for concrete results out of the COP26 in the coming month.
6. I would like to inform the august gathering that this year marks the 50th anniversary of Bhutan's membership to the UN. I was excited to attend the session and celebrate the milestone with you all, but the situation as you know did not favour our physical participation.

7. I thank everyone at the organization and all the members for enriching Bhutan's five decades of journey with the UN.
8. We have come a long way. The fact that we are ready to graduate from the LDC category is a clear indication that our efforts together have born results.
9. In addition to the UN and other partners, I thank the Government of India for your unconditional support all these years.
10. We will continue to work closely with all our partners.
11. Please allow me to talk a little more on the last five decades.
12. During the 50 years, the global poverty rate dropped from 52 to 9 percent. Life expectancy increased from 57 to almost 73 years. Bhutan's was just 40 when we joined the UN. The infant mortality rate decreased from 98 to 27 deaths per 1000 live births.
13. Similarly, the maternal mortality reduced from almost 400 to 200 deaths per 100,000 live births. The global literacy rate spiked from 67 to 86 percent. Without the coordinated global efforts through the UN, these progresses would not have been possible or worse, many nations could have slipped backwards. We are thankful that Bhutan has comparatively benefitted more.
14. In the last 50 years, Bhutan was blessed with three successive monarchs.
15. It was His Late Majesty the Third King who worked tirelessly to install Bhutan into the UN. It was a historic move to establish global diplomacy and harness meaningful friendship. The farsighted monarch led the country on the path of modernization, with focus on modern education and progressive techniques in all spheres.
16. When the Fourth King took over soon after, he came with the profound development philosophy of Gross National Happiness in as early as 1972.

As the term “GNH” became more pronounced over the years, the world appreciated its relevance in the sustainable and holistic format as opposed to the conventional GDP growth.

I am happy to see this concept reflected in Secretary General’s “Our Common Agenda” report, which I would like to touch upon later.

17. The nation lived through major socio-economic development, championing in conservation efforts and strengthening global ties. The world will recall that during the peak of his reign, our fourth King stepped down to offer the throne to his son and despite public resistance, he ushered in democratic transition.
18. Destined to carry forward the legacy, Bhutan received a young and dynamic monarch, His Majesty The King, in 2006. We embarked on a new chapter. Just under two decades, people of Bhutan relished the reign of a King who was caring, learned and astute.
19. For generations, Bhutanese have always loved and revered our Kings... for the simple reason that our monarchs have been selfless for the nation and the people. But when COVID-19 crisis unfolded, for Bhutan, we uncovered the true essence of our King’s leadership.
20. In him, we saw a son who ensured the old and vulnerable people were protected from the infection. In him, we saw a brother who travelled tirelessly throughout the country, uplifting the spirits of the front-liners, and working alongside to protect the people.
21. In His Majesty, we saw a parent who ensured the livelihoods of all those affected. The supports ranged from emotional to cash to food. But of all, we saw a noble being who led with science and wisdom on one hand and care and compassion on the other.
22. Complementing all the noble efforts, Her Majesty The Queen showed personal care and initiated targeted interventions for the vulnerable sections of our society with emphasis on mental health care and services in the country.

23. When the world was dealing with the unprecedented plight that questioned our survival and livelihood daily, we sailed through with a minimum scratch from the pandemic. To update, we have seen only three COVID deaths and slightly over 2,500 cases so far, most of which were imported cases.
24. Similarly, our vaccination coverage for 12 years and above is almost 80 percent, as I speak. Despite being resource constraint, we have not compromised on the quality and standards of the COVID measures.
25. Let me also mention that in the entire process of battling the pandemic, we ensured the routine health services were delivered uninterrupted. Besides the regular vaccination programs, we introduced HPV vaccines for the first time for our boys and flu shots for everyone amid the pandemic.
26. We also launched nationwide program on prevention and early detection of the three most common cancers in Bhutan-stomach, breast and cervical.
27. All these are aligned with the royal visions enshrined in the Constitution that mandates the State to provide free health and education. His Majesty tells us that quality health and education, made affordable and available to all, are the biggest social levellers.

Excellencies,

28. Just like the rest of the world, we are also looking at the pandemic as an opportunity to reset ourselves. The process to overhaul the civil service in consonance with education reform is underway. This is an unprecedented move.
A nationwide roll-out of Bhutan baccalaureate system is in progress following successful trial of a formative education system in the last ten years.
29. Knowing that the path ahead is ICT driven, we have started digital initiatives with the ultimate goal for everyone in Bhutan to have a digital ID, as a build-up for Big Data system.

30. Some other components are ICTisation of schools, Integrated Taxation System, and electronic Patient Information management.
On the other hand, our Central Bank is also piloting a project on digital Ngultrum, Bhutan's currency, using block chain technology. This is to adapt with the overall ICT transformation and harness technology for a 21st century Bhutan.
31. Here, let me share that it is as though His Majesty saw the pandemic coming. In 2011, an extensive program that engaged citizens in a greater role of nation building, calling it De-Suung, the Guardians of Peace, was started.
32. It recharged the entire spirit of volunteerism, opened world of opportunities for our youth and injected sense of purpose and responsibility. Thousands of youth were involved in the programs that created a mass societal shift.
33. When disease entered the country, the De-Suups in their orange uniform were helping guard the borders and entry points, ensuring everyone followed the COVID-19 norms and even became a part of the paramedics. This made a huge impact in efficient management of the pandemic.
34. In another unique transformative step, the De-Suups when not a part of COVID-19 related duties, are engaged in various skilling and re-skilling programs across the nation.
35. We know that the pandemic has forced many out of jobs and their basic skills have become irrelevant.
The ILO projects the global shortfall of jobs to be 75 million this year and 23 million in 2022.
This means unless we re-tool ourselves in keeping with the change, it will be difficult to find gainful employment and other opportunities for many.
36. The ongoing youth engagement programs are major steps to recover from the pandemic.

While the effects may not be immediate, down the years, it would have been one of the main reasons for us to come out of the pandemic stronger.

37. I feel when Bhutan's socio-economic transformation is reviewed later, our human development initiatives, guided by our King, will be the chapter that would have truly steered our nation into the 21st century.
38. I am highly appreciative of the fact that the UN instruments are sensitive in picking this up. A special recognition was awarded to His Majesty for his leadership in advancing human development and the wellbeing of Bhutanese people in 2019.

Excellencies,

39. We have immense lessons to draw from the pandemic, be it at national or global level. It has uncovered weaknesses and potentials of many nations and societies. But one lesson that we all must keep in mind is to be prepared with a more resilient system for future.
40. The nomenclature of SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19 clearly indicate that there will be successive outbreaks of infectious diseases. It is a matter of when. I mean nobody knows where SARS-CoV-3 is getting incubated.
41. Therefore, our focus to build back better can never be good if we don't emphasise on health and quality healthcare that is easily accessible and affordable by everyone.
42. We must also be mindful that immediate disease outbreak could be potentially from the pandemic induced starvation and poverty. The pandemic has disrupted the already weak global food system. The Asia-Pacific region alone has 90 million people pushed back into extreme poverty in the aftermath of the current health crisis.

43. I shared my concern during the UN food system summit the day before. Forget meeting the nutritional requirements, we are struggling to ensure adequate quantity.
We must coordinate clear action plans to meet the immediate food shortage and long term sustenance plan.
44. In all the discussions about food security, one immediate challenge besides the pandemic is the climate change that has tested the resilience of the food we grow as well as the patience of the growers.
45. Which is why it is time for action now. On Bhutan's part, our visionary monarchs have maintained high legal standards to safeguard our natural heritage.
46. We have a dedicated chapter on environment in our Constitution, which mandates 60% forest coverage and maintain inter-generational equity of our natural resources.
47. We have more than half the country as protected areas. In order to safeguard the health of the protected areas, and the livelihood of people living there, a Royal Charter was issued for an innovative funding mechanism called Bhutan for Life. We consider these as our eternal NDCs from Bhutan.
48. If we mean what we say about working for the next generation, we must talk about tough climate laws as a component of NDCs from all countries.

Excellencies

49. Despite being a small developing nation, as a GNH country, we always believe in global peace and harmony. Bhutan joined the peacekeeping fraternity in 2014. Since then, our involvement with UN Peace Keeping has grown.

50. We are now set to deploy a Bhutanese Quick Reaction Force for the first time this year. I thank the UN for trusting us. I am confident that our troops will live up to His Majesty's aspirations of serving with distinction and honour.
51. In conclusion, we all know that COVID-19 will leave behind a different world. But what sort of a world we want lies in our hands.
Mr. Secretary General's report titled "Our Common Agenda" offers all of us a good reference point for our collective progress.
52. For this, I thank the Secretary General for coming out with this comprehensive and bold report for a greener and safer world. Please know that Bhutan is committed to working with other Member States in advancing the ideas in the report. We have full confidence in your leadership to spearhead Our Common Agenda.
53. I want to share that it was almost as if the theme of the general debate was designed for Bhutan. It gave me an opportunity to reflect on our hope as a nation.
54. The pandemic brought out the very essence of GNH, which seeks collective happiness and not just of oneself. It calls for us to act in unity.
55. For Bhutan, everyone came forward to show solidarity to shield our country from the pandemic under His Majesty's leadership. If not, this small, resource constraint country would have been crushed in the stampede of the COVID-19 pandemic.
56. Our unique system is beyond conventional definition of progress and prosperity. A country's future is not just founded based on economic might and technological advancements but on the integral values of human bonding and respect. And in this, His Majesty is our true hope and our future.
57. I feel this is our biggest strength to come out of any adversities, just as we did this time.

58. With prayers from Bhutan to the rest of the world I thank you all for listening.
I wish the 76th session of the UN General Assembly every success.

Thank you and Tashi Delek.