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**Address by**  
**Hon'ble Tshering Tobgay,**  
**Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Bhutan at the**  
**Inaugural Session of the**  
**Eighteenth SAARC Summit,**  
**Kathmandu, Nepal, 26 November 2014**

**Mr. Chairman**

**Excellencies**

**Distinguished Delegates**

**Ladies and Gentlemen**

I have the honor to convey the warm greetings and good wishes of His Majesty King Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck, the government, and the people of Bhutan to this august gathering and to the friendly people of Nepal.

Nepal is a country of breathtaking beauty. As the birthplace of Lord Buddha, it is a country of spiritual affinity to all Bhutanese and millions of people all over the world. Nepal is also home to an institution of great diplomatic significance for all South Asians - the Secretariat of our Association. We are indeed happy and privileged to be here in Kathmandu for the 18<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit. I would like to convey my sincere gratitude and appreciation to the Government and people of Nepal for the meticulous arrangements and the warm hospitality extended to us.

**Mr. Chairman,**

My delegation expresses our warmest felicitations to you on your election as the Chair of SAARC. We have no doubt that SAARC will be greatly strengthened under your wise and able stewardship. I assure you of my Government's full support and cooperation.

I would also like to convey my deepest appreciation to H.E. President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom for the sterling manner in which he discharged his responsibilities during his tenure as our Chairman.

Let me also congratulate Mr. Arjun Bahadur Thapa on his assumption of the post of Secretary General of SAARC. I am confident that he will utilize his rich experience in international affairs and proven diplomatic skills for the benefit of SAARC. We also owe our gratitude to the former Secretary General, Mr. Ahmed Saleem, for his dedication and diligence in advancing the goals of SAARC.

**Mr. Chairman,**

My delegation welcomes ‘Deeper Integration for Peace and Prosperity’ as the theme of the Eighteenth SAARC Summit. We believe that whether we do so now, on our own terms, or later, under compulsion- forces are at play, which can only be adequately addressed through the collective endeavors of all nations. Such united, coordinated responses are imperative in order to tackle cross border crimes like terrorism, trafficking in humans and drugs, as well as to address wider common challenges like climate change, poverty alleviation and indeed to realize our dreams of prospering together through increased intra-regional trade.

**Mr. Chairman,**

Protecting our environment even as we pursue economic growth is a decision which Bhutan made from the beginning of its development history around 50 year

ago. We have consistently taken many initiatives to promote eco-friendly policies and have made a constitutional commitment to maintain at least 60% of our land area under forest cover. We have also pledged to remain carbon neutral for all time to come. And we have designated more than half of our country as protected areas. We know that as a tiny country, our actions may have minimal impact in the world. We also know that we are sacrificing growth while larger and more developed nations continue to do less. But we will continue to do the right thing.

Sadly, we are already living with the consequences of climate change. Snowfalls have become less frequent not just in the valleys but even on mountain peaks. Glaciers are retreating, crop yields are fluctuating, water levels in our rivers and streams have receded and we are experiencing more extreme weather. Flash floods and landslides have become recurring events, causing widespread damage and destruction in our countries.

The increasing frequency of devastating floods each season is an alarming trend that we can no longer afford to ignore. We must redouble our efforts in accelerating action to avert potential dangers from environmental degradation. Our region should exert itself to fulfill regional and international commitments to protect the environment and build resilience against climate change. National actions must spur even greater collective action at the regional and international levels. In this regard, I would like to draw attention to the latest report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change which was summarized by the influential US magazine Mother Jones in 3 simple sentences earlier this month: “It’s getting hotter. We are causing it. And we have to act now.”

**Mr. Chairman,**

Bhutan welcomes the closing of three Regional Centers and merging of four related centers into one, as the “SAARC Environment and Disaster Management Center.” The establishment of this new center will reduce costs, avoid overlapping of activities and contribute to making the programs more effective. Bhutan offers its support and cooperation to the Centre in fulfilling its mandate.

**Mr. Chairman,**

Poverty alleviation is our region’s unfinished task. We cannot claim to be the custodians of the world’s great civilizations and yet allow so many among us to go hungry and exist in dehumanizing levels of want and deprivation. Our region is blessed with abundant natural resources but we need to ensure that the bounty from these is used optimally and redistributed more equitably. But, it is our human resource that is our greatest and most precious asset. We have one fifth of the world’s population. That population, with a young demographic dividend, can transform the socio-economic landscape of the region. But our young population need to be provided not only with better education and skills development but also with enabling policies to unlock their unlimited potential. Our poverty alleviation strategy must, therefore, be aimed at making optimal use of both- the abundant natural resources and the rich human resources we have in our region.

**Mr. Chairman,**

I am pleased to report that in Bhutan, we have made good progress in improving the living conditions of our people. 94% of the population has access to safe drinking water; primary health coverage is 90%, and net primary school enrolment stands at 98.5%. However, poverty in the midst of growing prosperity remains a great challenge for us, as 12% of our population still lives below the poverty line. As a small and least developed country that promotes Gross National Happiness, my government is committed to reducing poverty and improving the socio economic wellbeing of all our people.

**Mr. Chairman,**

The most obvious path to a more prosperous South Asia is through increased intra- regional trade. At present this is dismally low due to the many barriers that have been holding back meaningful economic cooperation in our region. In this context, we welcome the progress towards finalization of the SAARC Agreements on Motor Vehicles, Regional Railways and Intergovernmental Framework for Energy Cooperation. Once these agreements are signed their implementation will contribute to removing barriers and deepening economic integration of our region.

**Mr. Chairman,**

Terrorism has spread across all borders, to all regions of the world, including our own. The adoption of the SAARC Convention on Suppression of Terrorism and its Additional Protocols and other SAARC anti terrorism initiatives bear

testimony to the commitment of SAARC to prevent, combat and eliminate terrorism in all its manifestations. We are pleased to know that the SAARC Home Ministers have been meeting annually. Such important forums provide an opportunity to further strengthen the existing regional mechanisms to collectively address the menace of terrorism that increasingly threatens the peace and security of our peoples.

**Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

South Asia is a region with vast potential. But our concerted effort is needed to tap this potential for the benefit of our peoples. Let us give substance to the theme of our Summit, “Deeper Integration for Peace and Prosperity” by giving a strong commitment to remove the barriers that have held back meaningful economic cooperation in our region. Other regional groupings have done it and their peoples have been enjoying the benefits. Let us exercise our political will and take the necessary steps to make it possible for the people of South Asia to also reap the full benefits of close regional cooperation.

I thank you for your kind attention.

**Tashi Delek!**