

***Lyonchhen Tshering Tobgay's Statement at the Bhutan-ICIMOD Day  
celebrations on Friday, 10 October 2014, Thimphu  
Venue: NRDCL Conference Hall***

Lyonpo Kinzang, Former Prime Minister of Bhutan,  
Lyonpo Yeshey Dorji, Minister of Agriculture and Forests,  
David Molden, Director-General of ICIMOD  
Christina Carlson, Resident Coordinator of the United Nations  
Representatives of our international agencies,  
Hon'ble Secretaries,  
Representatives of our NGOs and  
My colleagues in the government.

Good Morning. I am afraid that David has outlined everything about our region very well and there is a very little else to be said. But I have been thinking; what makes the Hindu-Kush Himalayan Region special? This morning, I thought of 10 special reasons, the 10 most special reasons, that make the Hindu-Kush Himalayan region *special*.

Number 10: We are the '*roof of the world*.'

Head and shoulders above the rest, we have the world's tallest mountain, Mt. Everest standing at 8,848 meters above the sea level. Mr. Molden just said *Karakoram* is also a part of the Hindu-Kush region, which means that K2 is also a part of the region, which had I known, I would have done some more research of these many highest mountains that call the H-K region their home. But I do know that we have 100 mountains at 7,200 meters above the sea level. Outside Asia, the tallest mountains are something like 6,000 meters. The 10<sup>th</sup> reason why the Hindu-Kush Himalayan region is special is because; *it is the roof of the world*. No region calls itself the *attic of the world or the penthouse of the world*. We are so high above the rest that we are undoubtedly the roof of the world.

Number 9: We have '*high*' but '*young*' mountains.

The entire region is young. Our mountains were formed 55 millions of years ago when the Indo-Australian tectonic plates collided with the Euro-Asian plates and therefore, our region was formed. Only 55 million years ago. Our Earth is estimated to be 4.5 billion years old. Compared to that, the H-K region is not even a *teenager*, it's not even a *toddler*, it's still a *baby* and we're still growing. *Growing*, indeed we are. Our mountains are growing at 5 millimeters per year. That makes us special. Very special.

Number 8: We have '*tall*' mountains but we have '*virgin*' mountains.

I think that's a very very special reason. In Bhutan alone, we have 20 virgin peaks and the world's tallest virgin peak is *Gangkar Phuensum* on the Bhutan-China border. At 7,570 meters above sea level, it is the 40<sup>th</sup> highest peak in the world, still unclimbed and hopefully god willing will remain unclimbed for all time to come.

Number 7 is '*Landscape*'.

The Hindu-Kush Himalayan region is *simply spectacular*. The mountains are different than the plains, yes, we are very different. The plains are boring; it is just flat, there is no character and there is no feature. We mountain people are enamored by the sea, actually not the sea but the beach, which is just a thin strip. The sea is interesting but not as interesting as the mountains. Our mountains from the lush forests to the high snow-bound alpine regions, to the glaciers, to the alpine deserts, to the Great Tibetan Plateaus, to the glacial lakes; there's no place on Earth that is anywhere near as spectacular in its landscape as the Hindu-Kush Himalayan region. We have mountains, we have valleys, we have pastures, and we have deserts. Point a camera in any direction and you will be guaranteed *National Geography photograph*.

Number 6 is our '*Biodiversity*'.

The elevation in our region ranges from under 50 meters above sea level all the way to above 8,000 meters above sea level. That is a huge change in elevation. If this range were located anywhere closer to the poles, it would be snow-bound throughout the year. We are lucky to be located near *the Tropic of Cancer*. We are lucky and the world is lucky because this range in elevation combined with the proximity to the Tropic of Cancer allows for a huge range in biodiversity. Hence the *hotspots*. We have many hotspots and we have hidden treasures for the world. Our hotspots, whether they are the tropical jungles or the high Himalayan pastures, still have the secrets to some of our diseases. Our biodiversity features in at number 6.

Number 5: '*Shangri-La*'

In 1933, James Hilton wrote his world famous novel the "*Lost Horizon*" and described Shangri-La. He described a place in the Hindu-Kush Himalayan region. Shangri-La exists. We have to look hard enough to find Shangri-La. Shangri-La exists in the region, among the people, and in all of us. Shangri-La, is an extension, is a description of the values and traditions celebrated by the mountain people of the Hindu-Kush Himalayan region. Our spirituality, our values, our priests, our monks and our way of lifestyle are timeless; the Shangri-La.

Number 4 is one of my favorites, the '*Yeti*'.

The Yeti exists in the Hindu-Kush Himalayan region. The Yeti exists; it is just not found. Perhaps, it's not meant to be found. But every people along every part of the region have independent stories about the Yeti. The Yeti exists and this is what makes our region special. But along with the Yeti, we have the elephants in the plains and the foothills to yaks in the mountains, the elusive snow leopard and the Royal Bengal tiger making its home 4,000 meters above the sea level. We have the black-necked crane, the white-bellied heron and many species of insects and butterflies, plants and orchids and many waiting to be discovered by our own people.

Number 3 is '*Water*'.

The Hindu-Kush Himalayan region is more or less landlocked besides the small strip in Myanmar, we are *landlocked*. Yet, we store the second most amount of

fresh water outside the two poles. We have around 15,000 glaciers storing 12,000 cubic kilometers of fresh water. This fresh water by ICIMOD's reckoning supplies water and supplies life to 1.3 billion people living downstream. I think we need to recalculate it, it's more than 1.3 billion, 1.3 billion is just the Indian Subcontinent. The Yellow River, the Yangtze River flowing into China, the Irrawaddy flowing into Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, if those populations are calculated, our river systems, the water towers of Asia would be quenching the thirsts of many more. We have 15,000 glaciers and 10 major river systems providing water to 1.3 billion people and that water provides drinking water and has the potential to provide clean renewable energy that many of our own people but more importantly, people living downstream require. So *energy* features in at Number 2.

My *most special reason* that makes the Hindu-Kush Himalayan region so important and featuring in at Number 1 is *its 'people'*, that 210 million people speaking 1,000 languages, from the handsome Afghans to the sturdy Sherpas, all of us *resilient* and all of us calling the Hindu-Kush Himalayan region *home*.

These 10 reasons, to me, make the Hindu-Kush Himalayan region very special. The region is rich, as it is diverse and as it is varied. It is a region that is integrated and you cannot separate one mountain from the next. As tall as our mountains may be, you cannot separate one valley from the next. It is an area that is integrated in its beauty and its wonder. We have combined opportunities and we have combined hopes.

We also have problems. Our population is exploding and we have some of the poorest regions in the world. To make matters worse, in addition to the fact that though we are already poor, our population is expanding. To make matters worse, we have to fight climate change. The Hindu-Kush Himalayan region is fragile. This is why we need *unique* solutions.

In Bhutan, our answer is *'Gross National Happiness'*. A development philosophy that places the focus of development on people fully aware that focus must be balanced with preserving our unique culture and protecting our pristine but fragile ecosystem. *Bhutan's answer is GNH and the region's answer is ICIMOD*. The principles of ICIMOD are largely similar to the principles of GNH. ICIMOD is therefore important to the region, to our mountains and to our people. I would like to congratulate ICIMOD for celebrating ICIMOD Day and I must also congratulate for taking ICIMOD Day to a different location, to a different part of the region every year. I thank you for bringing ICIMOD Day to Bhutan today. I thank ICIMOD for your support to Bhutan and congratulate you on 30 years of successful partnership with all our people and with all our governments within all our countries.

In Bhutan, ICIMOD has been an important partner and ICIMOD's partnership has been all the more valuable because it has been consistent with the ideals of *'Bhutan 2020'*, our overarching vision. It is also consistent with the overall objectives of the 11<sup>th</sup> FYP and like I said, just a while earlier, it is consistent with the principles of GNH.

On behalf of the government and the people of Bhutan, I would like to thank ICIMOD and through ICIMOD all the development partners who have contributed financially and provided other forms of support to ICIMOD. I would like to wish all the participants here success and happy deliberations. The success of this workshop will determine whether my 10 special features will be protected and will survive for many generations to come. If ICIMOD would realize its vision, men, women and children of the Hindu-Kush Himalayan region would enjoy improved wellbeing in a healthy mountain environment. I for one, will be happy, content and rest assured that the 10 special features, that make the Hindu-Kush Himalayan region important for me, will survive.

Thank you and Tashi Delek.