

**ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY
THRIMCHI LYONPO TSHERING WANGCHUK,
CHIEF ADVISOR OF THE INTERIM GOVERNMENT,
KINGDOM OF BHUTAN AT THE FOURTH BIMSTEC SUMMIT,
30 AUGUST 2018, KATHMANDU**

Your Excellency the Rt. Hon. Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli, Prime Minister of Nepal and Chair of BIMSTEC,
Distinguished Heads of State and Governments,
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Namaste and Good afternoon!

1. It is a great pleasure to be in the beautiful and historic city of Kathmandu, to participate in the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit. I have the honor to convey the greetings of His Majesty the King to this august gathering and His best wishes for the success of this Summit.
2. I wish to express deep appreciation to the Government and people of Nepal for the warm welcome and gracious hospitality extended to the Bhutanese delegation and the excellent arrangements made for this important Summit.
3. Our appreciation is due to Prime Minister Oli and the Nepalese government for the excellent stewardship of our organization, despite the challenges that Nepal faces in recovering from the devastating earthquake of 2015. I am confident under the able guidance of Prime Minister Oli, our deliberations will further add momentum to this regional organization to forge ahead for the benefit of our people.

Excellencies,

4. I would like to place on record my deep appreciation to the Government of Myanmar for the hosting of the Third BIMSTEC Summit at Nyi Pyi Taw in March 2014 and the Government of India for the BIMSTEC Outreach Summit in October 2016 at Goa.

5. I wish to take this opportunity to acknowledge and commend the service rendered by our first Secretary General Ambassador Sumith Nakandala of Sri Lanka and wish him every success in his future endeavors. I welcome his successor Ambassador Shahidul Islam of Bangladesh and assure continued support and cooperation to him of the Royal Government in furthering the goals of BIMSTEC.

We are meeting today following the loss of a great leader and a towering statesman from our region. The former Prime Minister of India, late Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee Ji distinguished himself in the service of his nation and will be fondly remembered for fostering friendship and cooperation in the region and beyond. The people and the Royal Government of Bhutan join the people and government of India in mourning this great loss.

Excellencies,

6. My country is on the cusp of our Third parliamentary elections. The second democratically elected government successfully completed its five-year term on 1st August 2018. In accordance with our Constitution, a new government has to be elected and formed within a period of 90 days after the dissolution of the National Assembly, the Lower House. The next elected government will be formed and in place by the end of October this year. Elections for the National Council were successfully completed earlier in June this year.

7. The people of Bhutan are indeed looking forward to participate in the upcoming elections. The successful conduct of the third parliamentary

elections will be, yet another milestone following the introduction of parliamentary democracy in Bhutan. Under the guidance of His Majesty the King, democracy in Bhutan has been established on a sound foundation and is fulfilling the aspirations of the people. Culture and values of inclusive and intelligent democracy, with constructive deliberations for the good of the nation are vigorously pursued. A free, vibrant and responsible media is playing an important role in Bhutan's democracy. More importantly, the people of Bhutan having embraced democracy, albeit reluctantly, are playing their rightful role in choosing a government that best serves the interests of the nation and people. It is therefore a matter of pride for every Bhutanese that the state of our young democracy is robust and we are firmly committed towards further strengthening the core, structural and supporting values and principles of the Constitution as envisioned by our beloved Monarchs.

Excellencies,

8. During the period from the dissolution of the previous government to the formation of the next elected government, our Constitution provides for an Interim Government led by the Chief Justice of Bhutan as the Chief Advisor and assisted by Advisors who are appointed by the Throne to ensure the conduct of free, fair and credible elections. The Interim Government is mandated only to carry out the routine functions of the Government and not entitled to take policy decisions or enter into any agreement with foreign governments or organizations.

9. Nevertheless, in view of our commitment to BIMSTEC and not desiring to cause further delay to the hosting of this very important Summit meeting, I have the privilege and pleasure to represent the Interim Government of Bhutan at the Fourth BIMSTEC Summit in Kathmandu. In this regard, I wish to express my delegation's deep appreciation for the spirit of understanding and accommodation that our member countries - led by Nepal have shown, that has enabled us to participate in the Summit on an *ad referendum* basis.

10. My delegation welcomes the theme of this Summit: “*Towards a Peaceful, Prosperous and Sustainable Bay of Bengal Region*”. It succinctly encapsulates the aspiration of our organization - our countries and our people, for there can be no prosperity without peace and stability. Peace and stability is essential for implementation of any poverty alleviation and sustainable developmental programs. It is also in harmony with the global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Bhutan’s own national development strategy based on the philosophy of Gross National Happiness – that is development with values.
11. In a highly interconnected and globalized world, robust partnership and collaboration within and amongst countries and regions are imperative for bringing about dividend from shared peace and prosperity. BIMSTEC provides a unique platform for countries around the rim of the Bay of Bengal to work together in realizing our national and collective aspirations for the benefit of our 1.5 billion people constituting 22% of the global population.
12. Last year, BIMSTEC marked its 20th anniversary. Like in other BIMSTEC countries, we in Bhutan also celebrated and commemorated this important milestone in a befitting manner. Our organization has indeed come a long way since its formation in 1997 with the Bangkok Declaration. Shared geography, history, culture and values - provide a compelling setting for us to work together for our common good. During the last two decades, our collective efforts have led to positive outcomes in political, economic, social and cultural spheres. While all of us agree that we can and must do more, we also recognize that there is a need for more coherence in our actions. In this context, Bhutan welcomes the steps being initiated to review and rationalize our institutional mechanisms and areas of cooperation on the basis of lessons learnt.

Excellencies,

13. For peace and prosperity in our region, it is my belief the following may merit our collective consideration as priority areas for regional cooperation.
14. First, we need to promote and increase trade within the region. The level of intra-BIMSTEC trade remains dishearteningly low and the full potential of intra-regional trade remains yet to be fully tapped. Without economic integration, it would be difficult to bring about shared prosperity. While we have made progress on the BIMSTEC Free Trade Area, it is imperative that we work towards finalizing the Free Trade Agreement at the earliest.
15. Second, we must promote regional digital connectivity. A strong network of digital connectivity and data democratization would enable easy access to information and diverse markets to promote greater trade and investment and, better people-to-people contacts. Strong digital connectivity would naturally help our countries prosper and fulfill important national goals. For a landlocked country like Bhutan, efficient, effective and reliable digital connectivity has become an important prerequisite to economic growth.
16. Third, for a peaceful and stable BIMSTEC region, we need to address security threats through dialogue and cooperation. In this regard, in addition to the ongoing cooperation on counter terrorism and transnational crimes, Bhutan welcomes the initiative of India to conduct a joint counter terrorism exercise MILEX 2018 later in the year.
17. Fourth, culture in my view is the foundation for regional understanding and collaboration. Given our mutual affinity through religion, rich cultural heritage and traditions - cultural exchanges besides promoting tourism must become an important avenue to promoting people to people contact. In this regard, Bhutan welcomes the offer made by Bangladesh to host the Second BIMSTEC Cultural Ministerial Meeting and BIMSTEC Cultural Festival 2018. We are hopeful that these two important events on culture will expedite an early implementation of the Paro Declaration.

18. Fifth, as a small mountainous country vulnerable to the extremes of climate change, environmental degradation and natural disasters, Bhutan's commitment to preservation and protection of the environment is reflected in the Constitution and the creation of an extensive protected area comprising of national parks, and biological corridors which comprises 51% of the 72.6% total land area under forest cover. There is a huge potential for us to share experience, learn from each other and identify ways and means to help each other - particularly during times of major natural disasters. Establishment of a Disaster Management Centre in the region could be meaningful and useful in coordinating timely support that is critical to saving lives and property.

On behalf of His Majesty the King, government and people of Bhutan – I offer my humble prayers for those who lost their lives in the tragic and devastating floods in Kerala and for the thousands who are still struggling to cope with the aftermath of the tragedy.

In concluding,

19. I remain confident that this Summit will provide the much-needed impetus for our organization to grow and become an effective regional grouping that can harness our full potential and deliver on our common aspirations. Bhutan remains fully committed to the BIMSTEC process and will continue to contribute towards realizing its objectives for shared economic growth, prosperity and happiness of our people.

20. I offer my good wishes for the success of this summit.

Dhanyabad, Thank You and Tashi Delek!
