

**Address by Honourable Jigmi Y. Thinley, Prime Minister of Bhutan,
at the Inaugural Session of the Sixteenth SAARC Summit,
Thimphu, Bhutan.**

28 April, 2010.

Your Excellency President Mahinda Rajapaksa, Your Royal Highnesses, Excellencies, Heads of States and Governments, Secretary General of SAARC, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Twenty five years ago, inspired by the common desire to build a harmonious and prosperous community through regional cooperation, our wise predecessors crafted a charter that embodies the enduring hopes and dreams of South Asia. Since then, we have come together on a regular basis to build consensus on how the ideals enshrined in this sacred document may be furthered. As we begin yet another endeavour in Thimphu, I have the distinct honour to extend a warm welcome on behalf of His Majesty the King, the people and the Royal Government to the Heads of State and Government and their distinguished delegations.

This Summit is a historic event for the people of Bhutan. Not only are we hosting the most important regional event for the first time, we have the additional privilege of being the proud host on the occasion of our Association's Silver Jubilee.

Before I proceed further, I would like to place on record the sincere appreciation of all the Member States to His Excellency President Mahinda Rajapaksa and the Government of Sri Lanka for providing exemplary leadership during their tenure as the SAARC Chair. I would also like to thank Dr. Sheel Kant Sharma, our Secretary General, and his able team at the Secretariat for their hard work, professionalism and valuable advice.

It is with great pleasure that I recognize in our midst this morning, the presence of high level Observer representatives from the Peoples' Republic of China, the European Union, Iran, Japan, Republic of Korea, Mauritius, and the USA. We accord a special welcome to the distinguished representatives of Australia and Myanmar, who join us as Observers for the first time. We deeply value the interest and goodwill of the Observer countries and look forward to working together to bring about a mutually beneficial and satisfying relationship.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am deeply grateful to all my illustrious colleagues for having kindly accepted Bhutan's proposal to adopt climate change as the focus of our business. I believe your acceptance is less a gesture of courtesy towards the host and more a reflection of the worrying degrees of adverse impacts of climate destabilization on all our people and the compulsion to search for solutions. Even as we have the moral right to demand more from those who have been irresponsible on their path to prosperity and have condemned us to share the predicament of an ailing planet, the way out lies neither through finger-pointing nor by claiming the right to our own share of emission. It calls for urgent action with innovation, courage and sacrifice with a sense of responsibility for future generations and, indeed, to ourselves for it will be in our lifetime that the mounting consequences of our failure to act will strike us. We need to act in concert at the international, regional and national levels. We need to motivate, persuade and support positive thinking and action at the sub-national levels.

Those of us who live in the low lying islands, the coastal areas and the fragile mountain ecologies, and those of us who generally live off the land are the ones most vulnerable to the devastating and often silent impact of climate change. It is the poor among us who are hit the

hardest by the resultant shortage of water, crop failure, decreasing fish stocks, extreme weather conditions and epidemics. They are the ones who are rendered landless and homeless by floods, landslides, earthquakes, rising sea levels, monsoon failure, drought and the fury of wind. It is the poor who suffer most the emotional and psychological agony of lives lost to the consequences of climate change. All the while, adaptation and mitigation costs are rising in ways that we know will ultimately be beyond not only the capacity of individuals, communities and developing nations such as ours but all of mankind. The truth we all suspect and, in fact, do know, is that the capacity of the planet to sustain life is fast diminishing.

In ecologically fragile Bhutan, where livelihood depends on the rhythm of the seasons, the impact of climate change is visibly alarming. Snowfall has become rarer, retreating glaciers are releasing higher volumes of melt water into lakes that are threatening to burst and cause untold damage to life and property in Bhutan and in the lower riparian countries of India and Bangladesh. Winters have become warmer, crop yields are fluctuating, high altitude crops and plants are succumbing to sub-tropical diseases, water levels in almost all our rivers and perennial streams have receded and we are experiencing more extreme weather events. A flash flood in May was inconceivable and yet that was what caused widespread damage and destruction through much of the country last year. Likewise, crop and property destruction by cyclones on the scale that we experienced was beyond living memory until the last two years.

Bhutan's mitigation efforts include a number of eco-supporting policies and steps to promote responsible behaviour. These have yielded a national forest cover of 72%, dedication of 50% of the land area as natural reserve, and a programme to promote Bhutan as an organic brand. Furthermore, we have begun collaborating with India to rapidly harness the green energy potential of our rivers and, in this regard, we have successfully registered one hydroelectric project as a trans-boundary CDM project. In the same vein, we have embarked on a deliberate and methodical plan to build Bhutan into a world class service economy supported by an IT competent knowledge society. Plans are now afoot to transform urban populations into healthy bicyclists while all schools have pledged to become zero-waste, green campuses. Through such measures, we hope to preserve our fragile Himalayan ecology and remain forever a carbon neutral country as pledged at the COP 15 Summit in Copenhagen. I do believe such intentions are shared by many citizens of South Asia and I applaud and express my admiration for the many inspiring examples shown by governments, business and non-governmental organizations as well as individuals in our region.

The Sri Lankan delegation deserves our highest appreciation for having raised a SAARC voice in Copenhagen. While we have been deliberating on environment as a priority issue for a number of years, it will be a sad commentary on SAARC if we cannot present a well negotiated unified position at COP 16. This we must undertake on behalf of 1/5th of humanity. To this end, Bhutan will be most pleased to host a meeting of the Inter-governmental group on this subject.

In this regard, I am most pleased to note that we will be able to place our signature on a Regional Convention on Environment at this summit. It is with no less pleasure that I welcome the signing of the SAARC Agreement on Trade in Services.

SAARC's journey has not been one of astounding successes. But there are achievements of which we can justly be proud. While the more significant and visible may be obvious, I would like to cite the less tangible but, perhaps, the more meaningful accomplishments. Each interaction in the 25 years among political leaders, officials, jurists, business representatives, academics, youths and such like have helped create and enhance the SAARC identity and the

acceptance of a common future as compelled by geography, culture and history. These are manifest in the many agreements and enabling instruments that we have established on the basis of the principles of sovereign equality, mutual respect and commonality of interests. Even if we have failed to act on many of the commitments we have made, the diversity and depth of the legal and regulatory frameworks for cooperation in key areas are impressive. These will serve their well-intended purposes as we make progress on reducing the trust deficit among ourselves.

The faith of my country in SAARC has never faltered. We have always believed in the goodness of the South Asian people and their wisdom to overcome the differences of the present for the promise of a secure, confident and thriving community. Every South Asian knows that a discordant family cannot be happy and that fractious and quarrelsome neighbours do not make a prosperous community. We know very well also that where one prospers in a divided neighbourhood, that prosperity is short-lived. In a globalizing world, where shrinking space and time cause collisions – often conflicts – dialogue and discourse are indispensable. SAARC has proved vitally useful in this regard.

But these should not make us complacent. The unrestrained proliferation in the areas of cooperation, requiring close to 200 meetings a year, is not matched by results. SAARC is losing focus. I would humbly propose that we direct the Secretary General to conduct a study and present a report on rationalizing the SAARC process to the next Council meeting. He may wish to extract the most practical aspects of all the previous reviews, including those of the Group of Eminent Persons and the Integrated Programme of Action. Fresh parameters could include substantial reduction of activities and meetings. While this sounds like regression, sometimes it is necessary to move backwards in order to find our way forward.

As economies become increasingly knowledge-based, investments in learning institutions of all types and levels as well as facilitating of cross-border learning and institutional linkages must receive high priority. In this regard, the establishment of the South Asian University (SAU) has been a major achievement of the SAARC process. I am excited at the prospect of our youths studying and living together; conspiring to bring harmony and prosperity to South Asia.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our region continues to be plagued by the evil of terrorism. No cause can be enhanced or served through acts of terror nor is it in any degree deserving of sympathy and support. Any act of violence that maims and kills innocent civilians desecrates and defiles even the noblest of causes. Those who are responsible for the perpetration of such heinous crimes against humanity must know that they will be brought to justice in a world where nations are acting together and their individual and collective capacity to apprehend the guilty is growing. Let us make full use of the SAARC Convention on Suppression of Terrorism and its Additional Protocol and ratify the Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Of late, Bhutan has acquired the distinction of being associated with happiness. To say that we are a nation that has achieved happiness would be a gross exaggeration. But it is true that for over three decades, our development process has been guided by the philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH). Conceived by our former king, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, it is, in fact, an articulation of the single most important desire of his subjects.

GNH establishes happiness as the ultimate purpose of development. In regarding happiness as a state of being to be realized by fulfilling equally the dual needs of the mind and body, successive five-year development plans have been guided by the goal of creating social, economic, political and environmental conditions that will enable our citizens to consciously pursue happiness. GNH is a holistic development paradigm emphasising sustainability.

Interest in GNH has been slowly but steadily growing in various parts of the world. More and more development experts and policy makers are searching for alternative approaches in the face of irrefutable and mounting evidence that the conventional GDP-led development model is fundamentally flawed. Driven by our own experience and conviction in the soundness of GNH and encouraged by growing world interest, we have developed tools and indicators to enable measurement of GNH progress and to guide policy making. We have already begun piloting a screening process whereby every policy, programme and project will be assessed in terms of its negative, positive or neutral GNH value. These have emboldened us to introduce GNH in our own regional forum. We do so with humility and in the spirit of contributing to a quest for an alternative development paradigm in which the bottom-line is not material progress alone but the genuine happiness of the people within a peaceful and sustainable environment. Should my esteemed colleagues think it useful, Bhutan will be most happy indeed to organize an appropriate seminar on the subject for SAARC member states at an early date.

Before I conclude, I would like to once again express our deepest appreciation to the member states for giving us this opportunity to host the Thimphu Summit. It is our sincere hope that our eagerness to fulfil a long-deferred obligation is not coming at the cost of your comfort. We hope that the fresh mountain air and the genuine warmth and affection of our people for all our honoured guests will compensate for the modest facilities and arrangements. Above all, it is the wish of His Majesty the King, the Royal Government and every Bhutanese that over the next two days, our bonds of friendship and brotherhood are further strengthened. Where a spirit of kinship prevails, no challenge is insurmountable.

Tashi Delek
And
Thank You