STATEMENT BY HON’BLE PRIME MINISTER DURING THE INAUGURAL SESSION OF THE 77TH SESSION OF THE ESCAP COMMISSION ON 26 APRIL 2021

(Time limit: up to 5 minutes)

Theme: “Building back better from the crises through regional cooperation in Asia and the Pacific”

Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. I would like to convey the warm greetings of His Majesty the King, Her Majesty the Queen and the people of Bhutan, from the land of Gross National Happiness.

2. We join the region in expressing solidarity, as we continue to battle with the pandemic. Our hearts and prayers are with all the families who have lost their loved ones.

3. I am pleased that the 77th ESCAP commission is being held at this critical time. It offers us a platform to share experiences and help redirect ourselves as we move on.

Excellencies,

4. I am grateful for the partnership and support we have received under ESCAP. At this stage, we are also reflecting on the journey so far, on how we are fighting the pandemic, so that we are better prepared to deal with similar eventualities.

5. Drawing lessons from here, we are also looking at the improvement of overall health delivery. For Bhutan, the biggest challenge we face is the lack of capacity to produce within the country. Simple gears like gloves, test kits, PPEs and even syringes have to be imported. These essentials will always be in short supply whenever the global need is acute. So we are asking, how do we solve these issues hereafter? Everything related to health is urgent. This fact has to sink in, rather than just reacting only during crises.
6. Being a small, resource constraint country, we are faced with numerous hurdles. However, for decades, our biggest strength has been our leadership who has always inspired us to make the best of our smallness.

7. We have a 21st century King who guides us with modern, empirical knowledge. But he also stands as a symbol of benevolence, whose care and compassion for the people brings everyone together in solidarity and unity.

   It is for this reason that we are able to make evidence based decisions and implement effectively on the ground.

8. And under the leadership of His Majesty, we embraced a non-compromising strategy to save the lives of the people first.

   So far, we have recorded only about a 1,000 COVID cases with just a single death, that too with underlying comorbidities. We have vaccinated almost 95 percent of eligible population. Here, I would like to thank the government of India for your generous support with the vaccines.

Excellencies,

9. Guided by the development principles of Gross National Happiness, Bhutan has always given a special focus on the social sectors. It is also the GNH guided policies that ensured free healthcare and education for all Bhutanese.

10. Our monarchs always stressed on strengthening these social sectors, saying it is an investment and not expenditure. Which is why Bhutanese need not worry about expenses in health and education for generations to come. This, perhaps is the most sustainable social security ensured for the people of Bhutan.

11. Similarly, this pandemic, in addition to the conventional, government initiated fiscal and monetary measures, our King took upon himself the sacred duty to safeguard the livelihood of the people. In doing so, numerous interventions and incentives were introduced. This included job opportunities, skilling to prepare our youth for the future, unemployment benefits and in fact, it goes to the extend of paying 50 percent of the loan interests for all Bhutanese. Just recently, these incentives have been extended until June 2022, giving people the opportunity to plan and readjust.
12. This would be the most striking feature that would have helped in not just slowing the downturn, but would have provided the much-needed cushion to bounce back faster when we reassess the economic curve later on.

13. In keeping with GNH values, our Constitution mandates ensuring 60 percent forest cover at all times and to maintain inter-generational equity of our natural resources. When nations are talking about gearing for carbon neutral by 2050, Bhutan is already carbon negative. We sink 2.5 times the carbon dioxide we produce.

14. I feel this pandemic brought out the very essence of GNH that seeks wellbeing of not just yourself but everyone and everything around us. It has also reminded us about the importance of investing in what really matters— the health and wellbeing of our people. It has taught us to remain within the limits, and this is exactly what GNH is about.

Excellencies,

15. I am sharing the story of Bhutan as an experience that could be considered, while we all seek the obvious in “building back better”. The concept of “development with values” could be an integral component of the “new normal”. Falling back on basic human values is equally important as advancement in technology. We may not have the economic strength to influence, but I feel our story will mean something, a different concept for us to consider.

16. On this note, I would like to thank the Executive Secretary for personally showing concern and reaching out to smaller and vulnerable nations during such difficult times. I thank you and your team for successfully organising this virtual session. I look forward to listening and learning from you all.

Thank you and Tashi Delek!