

**ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY  
LYONCHHEN DR LOTAY TSHERING, PRIME MINISTER OF THE  
ROYAL GOVERNMENT OF BHUTAN AT THE FIFTH BIMSTEC SUMMIT,  
30 MARCH 2022, COLOMBO, SRI LANKA**

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Your Excellency Gotabaya Rajapaksa, President of Sri Lanka and Chair of BIMSTEC,  
Secretary General Mr Tenzin Lekphell,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished Delegates,

***Kuzuzangpo and a very Good Morning from Bhutan***

1. It is my honor to convey the warm greetings of His Majesty The King, Her Majesty The Queen and the people of Bhutan to this august gathering of the Fifth BIMSTEC Summit.
2. I would like to begin by expressing Bhutan's heartfelt appreciation to President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and the Government of Sri Lanka for leading the Organisation despite disruptions caused by the pandemic. For the same reason, we are very confident that the deliberations at this Summit will be seamless and provide fresh impetus to the BIMSTEC process.

**Excellencies,**

3. I join you all in remembering the precious lives lost to the pandemic so far. As we continue with the battle, I pray that we overcome the challenges and emerge stronger from it soon.
4. For the Bhutanese people, we have been blessed with the farsighted leadership of His Majesty The King. The government and the people of Bhutan have been fortunate to receive the guidance, care and compassion of His Majesty through the course of the pandemic. The Royal intervention is the biggest reason for Bhutan's successful management of COVID-19 so far.
5. Complementing the noble efforts of His Majesty, Her Majesty The Queen realized that the pandemic will disproportionately affect the vulnerable sections of our society. Her Majesty showed particular emphasis on domestic violence and mental healthcare in the country.

Of the many initiatives during the pandemic, one such is the establishment of the Pema Center. The dedicated institute for mental health and wellbeing will be a immense benefit for generations of Bhutanese.

## Excellencies,

6. During such unprecedented times, the region has witnessed a true spirit of cooperation, as envisioned by the founding fathers in Bangkok Declaration of 1997. We have demonstrated our friendship and solidarity by reaching out to help one another.
7. In particular, I would like to thank Prime Minister Modi for sharing COVID-19 vaccine with us, a rare commodity in this pandemic. As a doctor, I know that the effects of Covishield you generously spared, runs in our body today and provides the much-needed protection from the disease.
8. At this stage of the pandemic, we have many lessons to draw - be it at the national, regional or global level. It reinforces the need to work together towards a more resilient system, for now and the future. And for these very reasons, my delegation welcomes the theme of this summit.
9. It is timely for Bhutan. Under the Royal command, we went all out to save lives with strict measures for almost two years.
10. Today, with the less virulent Omicron, with more than 90 percent vaccination coverage, and series of booster shots underway, we see this as the best window to open up. We are calling it the second phase of our response to the pandemic. However, we are mindful that omicron is milder but not “mild”, so protection of everyone is still our priority.

## Excellencies,

11. As we forge ahead, I take the opportunity to highlight new areas of cooperation. We need to channel our collective efforts and build back better by prioritising some key sectors.
12. **First, the trade and investment:** Trade and Investment are at the core of BIMSTEC cooperation. However, the intra-regional trade has seen only negligible improvement since its inception.
13. To be candid, this minimal growth could also be attributed to bilateral efforts at national or at private sector level, and not necessarily through the BIMSTEC platform. Therefore, concrete steps and initiatives, be it big or small, must be taken beyond the formality, to enhance trade in the region.
14. It is true that the landlocked countries like Bhutan and Nepal have more to benefit through such advancements. But this will also be a success story for BIMSTEC. I see a great opportunity for the region to exhibit an ideal and efficient trading system through

the BIMSTEC. It need not necessarily be in terms of trade volume, but we have an opportunity to create an exemplary network.

15. Besides our aspirations to redefine the post-pandemic economy, Bhutan is gearing for the LDC graduation. This requires us to prepare even more.
16. Hydropower is our only reliable source of revenue. So we are seeking to diversify and attract more investments, and create jobs and employment that match the needs of local as well as global markets.
17. Talking about hydropower, I reiterate the grid inter-connection MoU we all signed in 2018. We need to pursue the energy cooperation in a way that all member countries have reliable and affordable power. This is critical in transforming livelihood and bringing economic opportunities.
18. **On Digital Connectivity:** Going ahead, digital connectivity is an inevitable component of our progression. In fact, as everyone is aware, digitalization is not just an enabler but an economy in itself in today's world.

For individuals, it is not even a choice or a luxury but a minimum requirement. I always say that the conventional definition of being literate is not adequate anymore if one is deprived of ICT knowledge and skills.

19. For a landlocked Bhutan, much of our focus is on digital transformation and the pandemic further reinforced the need. We have started projects related to national digital ID system, integrated systems for health and businesses, and IC-tisation of schools. All these major initiatives are hindered by the pandemic.
20. Going forward, internet connectivity is the overriding ingredient for digital economy. Here, I see the possibility to take advantage of BIMSTEC platform that can push for not just affordable but "free internet" for everyone in the region. We might compromise on the upfront revenue a bit. But no social investment can be bigger than this.
21. It is mostly the man-made barrier that discourages most of us from tapping the full capacity of the internet. If we can break that, we will not just be closing the real digital divide but fast tracking the process of digital economy. It will be unprecedented if BIMSTEC can be the first organization to declare "free internet" region.
22. For now, I would like to thank both India and Bangladesh for the unconditional support in helping us with the ongoing establishment of the third internet gateway. It will go a long way in boosting Bhutan's internet connectivity and reliability.

## **Excellencies,**

23. **On Security:** The Bay of Bengal region faces a multitude of Security issues. We have achieved commendable progress since the first meeting of our National Security Chiefs in New Delhi in 2017. We are happy that India is leading the security component in the rationalized areas of cooperation.
24. We also welcome the progress made by the Member States in the finalization and ratification of a number of significant legal instruments today. Another milestone is the BIMSTEC Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters, which will be tabled for signature today.
25. I have no doubt that this Convention will greatly contribute to the control of criminal activities in the BIMSTEC region. Security is fundamental to our region and more so, as we embark on this journey of recovery into a safe, secure and resilient future.
26. **The next is Climate Change:** Bhutan is located in the eastern Himalayas where impacts of Climate Change are very severe. Our economy is largely dependent on climate-sensitive sectors like agriculture and hydropower. We also face rising threats from climate hazards and extreme weather events like flash floods, windstorms, forest fires, landslides and so on.
27. As a doctor, I have been comparing climate change to cancer that needs urgent treatment. By now, we must realise that it is not a choice but a priority to take collective actions. Bhutan is happy to be assigned the lead role in Environment and Climate Change under the rationalized areas of cooperation. We will push for the Regional Action Framework, as well as international obligations for a collective response to climate change.

## **Excellencies,**

28. Though virtual, I am happy that we are here today to sign the Charter, which we have been eagerly waiting for. This will definitely strengthen the institutional arrangement of BIMSTEC.
29. Finally, as BIMSTEC enters its 25th year of existence, I pray that it becomes a platform for all of us to nurture and grow together. May the spirit of BIMSTEC solidarity and integration flourish for generations.

30. I pray to see you all in person soon. As I wish the summit all the success, I also extend my best wishes to Thailand for the next chairmanship.

**Thank you and Tashi Delek!**