

KINGDOM OF BHUTAN

Statement by H.E. Lyonpo Sangav Ngedup Minister for Health and Education and Leader of the Delegation of the Kingdom of Bhutan **to the Twenty-Sixth Special Session of the General Assembly on HIV/AIDS** New York, 25 to 27 June 2001

Mr. President, Mr. Secretary General, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to begin by commending the efforts of the Secretary General, Mr. Kofi Annan in placing HIV/AIDS on the international agenda. I wish to join other speakers in thanking him for bringing the battle against this devastating pandemic to the forefront of world attention.

Mr. President,

It may have taken us twenty years since AIDS was first recognized to realize the gravity of the situation but I believe that we have now opened our eyes to the fact that humanity is under siege by this scourge. Not only have millions already died from the disease but millions are infected with this incurable affliction and millions continue to be endangered by it. It has defied man's scientific capacity and forced us to examine our fundamental values of life.

And, even as we discuss HIV/AIDS as a global priority, we are confronted with many questions: how can we overcome different mindsets, which traps us in the past? Are we willing to transcend professional competition to share medical innovations? Are we ready to back our words with political commitment? Can we raise adequate resources? In other words, can we be more humane?

While we know that there is much to be learnt about HIV/AIDS, there is also much we do know already. We know that we need courage to support the helpless, to protect the young and the innocent, to counsel those already infected, and to comfort those who lose their loved ones.

Today, HIV/AIDS has reached the farthest corners of the earth. Even we in the remote Himalayas cannot escape it. While the number of lives lost and those infected with the virus in my country Bhutan is relatively small, we are acutely concerned about its implications on our small population, located as we are in a region where the epidemic is spreading at an alarming rate.

Mr. President,

Bhutan's National STD/AIDS Control Programme, started in 1988, adopted a multisectoral initiative involving -all sections of our society. The programme is integrated into our decentralized national health system. Education and awareness on HIV/AIDS has been taken to the rural community. Information on HIV/AIDS has been inculcated into our education curriculum and our Health Ministry's information education activities maintain a sustained momentum in the awareness campaign.

We have given the strongest political commitment to fight this challenge. Under the guidance of His Majesty the King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the government of Bhutan has accorded top priority to HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention activities. Her Majesty the Queen Ashi Sangay Choden Wangchuck, the UNFPA Goodwill Ambassador, has been instrumental in creating greater awareness about HIV/AIDS and reproductive health among all Bhutanese people, especially women and children.

With more than 25 percent of the government's total budget allocated to the social sector, health and education are provided free in Bhutan. The government tries to fulfill the rights of every citizen to good health and full education, leaving no community or section of society unreached.

Mr. President,

Bhutan fully supports the creation of a Global Fund for AIDS and Health. We would like to emphasize that this fund be realized through integrated primary health care approach, giving equal emphasis on both the preventive and treatment aspects of the disease. In this connection, I would like to urge the international community to draw inspiration from the success being achieved by the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI), whose no-nonsense approach, has re-ignited hopes for millions of children the world over to life and quality lives.

We believe that only through the combined strength of all nations can we effectively fight this "global emergency". International cooperation and funding is vital to our success. As the future of our succeeding generations is at stake, I call upon all nations to show their strongest political commitment to fight this scourge of humankind
Thank you.