

**Statement by H.E. Ambassador Daw Penjo,
Permanent Representative of Bhutan to the United Nations
at the High-level Meeting on a
Comprehensive Review of the progress achieved in realizing the
Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS and the Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS
10-11 June 2008**

**Mr. President, Mr. Secretary General, Honorable Ministers, and
Distinguished Delegates,**

I would like to express my delegation's appreciation to the President for holding this important and timely high-level meeting on the comprehensive review of the progress achieved in realizing the 2001 Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS and the 2006 Political Declaration. I also thank the Secretary General for the comprehensive update report. This High-level Meeting by itself, and in light of the Mid-term review of the MDGs, is an opportune moment for international solidarity to commit fully and unequivocally to the intensification of the essential interventions required to address the threat of HIV/AIDS.

We associate ourselves with the statements made by Antigua and Barbuda on behalf of the Group of 77 & China, and by Bangladesh on behalf of the Least Developed Countries.

Mr. President,

The commitments made in 2001 and 2006 are a clear and ready recognition that the AIDS epidemic was a global emergency and one of the most formidable challenges to human life and dignity. Yet, the **number of HIV infections keeps rising** and has **caused devastation to the lives of millions** around the world.

As made evident by the Secretary General's report, progress in response to HIV/AIDS has been uneven, and the epidemic is **most acutely felt by the most vulnerable sections** of society. Also, any progress towards achieving the **2010 target for universal**

access and the **2015 MDG to halt or reverse the spread of the disease** will fall short if we do not make progress in reducing poverty and hunger, and ensure universal primary education.

Further, **cost barriers** hinder access to first and second line antiretroviral drugs, and **patent barriers** continue to be the major obstacle to the provision of treatment to those requiring it. In order to overcome the expansion of the epidemic, we must recommit ourselves in taking concrete actions that **ensure universal access** to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support to those who need them most. Specifically, **ensuring universal access to affordable or free treatment** and care must be made a top priority.

Mr. President,

Bhutan had drawn up a strategic plan in 1989, about 4 years before the first case was detected in the country, **as a cautionary measure** in terms of prevention, capacity building, establishing testing facilities and case detection. The Royal Decree on HIV and AIDS issued on May 24, 2004 by His Majesty the Fourth King reflects the deep concern over the threat of HIV/AIDS, and the Royal Government of Bhutan has accorded a high priority to addressing this issue. The response to HIV and AIDS in Bhutan has also been guided by the principle of Gross National Happiness.

Still, Bhutan was not spared HIV/AIDS. The first case of HIV/AIDS was detected in 1993. Since then 144 people were infected with both sexes being almost equally affected, and 25 deaths have been reported among the infected.

The most common route of transmission is the heterosexual route followed by mother-to-child transmission. The first mother-to-child transmission in Bhutan was reported in 2001 while the first case of HIV infection acquired through intravenous drug use was detected in January 2006.

Almost 60 percent of Bhutan's population is below the age of 25 years and as shown by global and local experience they are most vulnerable to HIV and AIDS. It is possible that increasing globalisation, together with Bhutan's growing unemployment and rural-urban migration, significantly increase high risk behaviours among the youth.

Mr. President

The absolute number of detected cases in Bhutan remains small, but given the exponential rate of increase of the disease with regard to our small population, HIV/AIDS epidemic presents a **critical development challenge** to our nation, and the potential for a widespread epidemic remains a real threat. Experience from countries around the world shows the devastating social and economic impact caused by the HIV and AIDS epidemic.

Mr. President,

Bhutan is now looking at ways to contain the spread of a full blown AIDS epidemic and the new government has endorsed a ***National Strategic Plan for the Prevention and Control of STIs and HIV/AIDS***. In order to maintain the low HIV prevalence status, intensifying preventive measures and interventions among the vulnerable populations is of greatest priority. Some of the major activities under this strategic plan to stem the spread of HIV/AIDS are promoting greater public awareness on the disease, establishment of surveillance systems, mandatory screening of blood donors, training of health workers, decentralizing HIV/AIDS activities, and 100 percent access to antiretroviral therapy.

The focus will be on youth, sex workers, substance abusers and mobile and migrant population. Youth friendly reproductive health and counselling services, incorporating reproductive health and life skills education, including negotiation skills on condom use in schools and institutes, are some of the strategies.

To effectively implement the National Strategic Plan, resources have to be identified and mobilized for these strategic interventions:

- i) mainstreaming activity through in-service training;
- ii) care, treatment and health interventions for STIs and HIV;
- iii) procurement for health products;
- iv) target interventions for vulnerable population groups;
- v) capacity building for all partners including programme management;
- vi) research and strategic information; and
- vii) other programme interventions.

Mr President,

The **scarcity of resources is a critical constraint** for the full realization of the **National Strategic Plan** for prevention and control of STIs and HIV/AIDS. With only **two years to the target date** of achieving universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care, and support, resources thus far mobilised for Bhutan's interventions have been encouraging. The gaps, however, between available resources and actual needs is still wide, and unless greater advances are made in reaching those who most need essential services, the burden on our fragile demographic will continue to increase.

Any funding shortage of Bhutan's HIV/AIDS programme may result in a gap in the implementation of STI and HIV prevention programmes. We thank our development partners for their invaluable support and look forward to their continued financial and technical assistance. With the much needed and timely support, Bhutan is confident that we will successfully implement the interventions identified in our national plans, and improve our capacity in preventing a full blown pandemic that could devastate our small population.

I would like to express Bhutan's support to the increased role of the United Nations in this endeavour.

Thank you.