

STATEMENT BY AUSTRALIA – 14th RTM MARCH 2019

Honourable Co-Chairs, Your Excellencies, Secretaries, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Australia is privileged and deeply honoured to be represented at this important 14th Round Table Meeting. On behalf of the Australian Government, I thank the Royal Government of Bhutan for its excellent convening of this meeting, to commence implementation of the all-important 12th Five Year Plan which will guide Bhutan's graduation to middle-income status by 2023. I also thank the Royal Government for the exceptional hospitality extended to all the delegates. Special mention must also go to the Protocol Officers, whose support for each of the delegations is to be commended and has helped make our time in Bhutan all the more enjoyable. Many thanks.

On a sadder note I also offer, as did the Honourable Prime Minister in his address last night, sincere condolences to our United Nations family who lost colleagues and friends in the recent plane crash. We are saddened by the loss of so many people who were doing life-changing work in developing countries.

Australia and Bhutan have long enjoyed a warm, friendly and productive relationship. Diplomatic relations were established in 2002, but the foundation for our partnership dates back to 1962 when Bhutan was invited to be an Observer at the Colombo Plan meeting in Melbourne. Ashi Tashi Chodzom Dorji led an all-female delegation to this meeting, which saw Bhutan become a member of the Colombo Plan and laid the foundation for the strong friendship between our countries. For this, and for her efforts in opening Bhutan to the international community, Ashi Tashi was given an Honorary Order of Australia – which is Australia's highest award – in July 2018.

Australia commends Bhutan on its balanced approach to development under the philosophy of Gross National Happiness, which we have heard has also been a very significant contribution to the global development discourse. We welcome the Royal Government's visionary 12th Five Year Plan – underpinned by key principles of leaving no one behind, narrowing the gap between the rich and poor, and equity and justice for all. Positive signs for taking

the Plan forward include Bhutan's continued successful transition to full democracy, demonstrated by national elections in 2018, and sustained and impressive development gains in health, education, and poverty reduction.

We congratulate the Royal Government on its achievements, and note that the 2018 Voluntary National Review, presented at the United Nations General Assembly, showed the country is on track to meet the Sustainable Development Goals. We also commend the Royal Government on its frankness in articulating the challenges Bhutan continues to face as it moves toward graduation: regional poverty disparities; rising youth unemployment; private sector development; dependence on hydropower; last mile challenges in the health and education sectors; and vulnerability to climate change.

Australia is proud that we have been able to work with Bhutan to help meet these challenges. Our collaboration has been centred on the education sector, and since 2007 hundreds of scholarships (both short-term and long-term) have been offered to Bhutanese tertiary students. Many senior officials, career bureaucrats and other influential Bhutanese who have been educated in Australia have returned to Bhutan and are making a strong contribution to achieving its development objectives.

While education has remained a key focus of our relationship, Australia's contribution has broadened in recent years to building human resource capacity in different sectors in response to Bhutan's changing needs. The Australian Volunteers program works alongside the Australia Awards Masters-level scholarships to help strengthen the workforce. Our long-term assistance to the Royal Institute of Management has helped enhance the Bhutanese tertiary education sector. An increased focus on Australia Awards short courses has meant that even more people can benefit from exposure to Australian institutions, workplace practices and skills.

The Bhutan-Australia relationship continues to be strengthened through building people-to-people linkages that will maintain the relationship between our countries over time. The Australia Awards alumni network will play a significant role, as will the increasing number of Bhutanese – currently around 2000 people – who are studying at Australian tertiary institutions.

To help address youth unemployment and trade skill shortages, we will shortly commence a two-year project to build capacity in Bhutan's Technical and Vocational Education and Training sector, led by TAFE Directors Australia. And, for intake 2020, in line with the Royal Government's objectives, Australia Awards scholarships are being offered for vocational, as well as Masters level, education.

Bhutan's increased focus on educational policy and reform, outlined by the Honourable Prime Minister yesterday, is applauded by Australia and is critical to Bhutan achieving its future aspirations. In line with this, several recipients of Australia Awards Masters-level scholarships, who commenced study in Australia in January this year, are undertaking study in primary and special education. This will contribute to improving quality in these sectors and in turn equip students for secondary education and skills development.

Gender equality is an important priority across Australia's development program, and Bhutan's commitment to enhancing the status of women resonates strongly. Australian support is continuing to build the capacity of the NGO RENEW, whose advocacy campaign aims to decrease the level of gender-based violence and contribute to the economic empowerment of women across the country. The support RENEW offers to vulnerable individuals and families across the country can have a positive impact on the broader capacity building efforts of Australia and other development partners.

The Honourable Prime Minister, and many other speakers have noted that Bhutan is highly vulnerable to climate change. We commend the recognition of this in Bhutan's 12th Five Year Plan, and the efforts being made to build resilience to minimise impact on livelihoods and sustainable development.

For example, springshed management has been prioritised as a major activity to address the issue of drying springs for better water security for mountain communities. Australia is pleased to support this work, implemented by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD). ICIMOD's efforts are complemented by those of SNV Netherlands, which, under our Water for Women Fund is collaborating with the Royal Government to achieve equitable and universal access to safely managed water, sanitation and hygiene services in rural areas of Bhutan.

Australia also contributed to the recently launched Hindu Kush Himalayan Monitoring and Assessment Programme (HIMAP) report, developed by ICIMOD with inputs from over 350 scientists, that confirms the region's vulnerability to global warming. We commend the Royal Government's commitment to environmental protection, which can help mitigate these impacts and have a positive effect on more than a billion people who live in downstream regions in the Hindu Kush Himalaya.

Stability and prosperity across the Indo-Pacific region, including Bhutan, are important priorities for Australia. As Bhutan moves forward with graduation to middle-income status by 2023, from Australia's perspective, it is important that Bhutan remains outward-looking, and continues the process of political and economic reform including development of the private sector. Implementation of the 12th Five Year Plan presents an opportunity for all development partners to coordinate their efforts to support Bhutan's graduation and contribute to increased peace, prosperity and security in our region. Australia looks forward to playing its part in this.

On behalf of the Australian Government, I would like to reaffirm Australia's ongoing and sincere commitment to assist Bhutan in achieving its aspirations. We look forward to continuing our fruitful and close partnership and friendship for many more years to come, and will continue to be happy ambassadors and advocates for Bhutan.

Thank you, and tashi delek.