

Address by

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At the

***Regional Conference of Parliamentarians on
“Protecting Human Health from Climate Change”***

***5-7 October 2010,
Thimphu, Bhutan***

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Excellency Lyonchen Jigmi Y. Thinley, Honorable Prime Minister, the Royal Government of Bhutan; Excellency Lyonpo Zangley Dukpa, Honorable Minister of Health, the Royal Government of Bhutan; Speaker of Bhutan Parliament; Your Excellencies, Cabinet Members of the Royal Government of Bhutan; Honorable Parliamentarians; Representatives of international organizations; honorable guests; ladies and gentlemen:

With great pleasure, I warmly welcome you all to this important conference on behalf of WHO.

At the outset, I would like to thank the Royal Government of Bhutan for agreeing to host this conference in the peaceful city of Thimphu. My thanks are extended to the Honorable Prime Minister, His Excellency Lyonchen Jigmi Y. Thinley, for graciously agreeing to inaugurate the opening of this conference.

Honorable Parliamentarians, without any doubt, the health impact from climate change is real. In order to protect human health from the adverse impacts of climate change, appropriate measures must be urgently put into action. These measures require multidisciplinary and multisectoral actions, and demand the involvement of all stakeholders and partners at both national and international levels in the most coordinated manner.

The Parliamentarians' forum can provide a suitable platform for discussing the measures to be taken against the adverse health impact from climate change and can help facilitate the required collaborations both in countries and among countries, especially at the policy level. More importantly, we are here to make our voice heard about the formidable threat to human health posed by climate change. We are here to create more political awareness; to gain more political will and commitment. The threat from climate change is steadily increasing. But worldwide, there is still an obvious lack of adequate political decisiveness and action to seriously tackle the related issues.

Several international conferences on climate change have been held during the recent past, but the health impact has not had a very high profile, and the health issues involved were only minimally discussed at such forums. Developing countries contribute the least to climate change but they are disproportionately affected by it. Even in developed countries, we still need more political will and commitment to deal with health problems contributed by climate change.

The reality of global warming due to climate change is now universally accepted. The effects of global warming are already felt in many forms:

- More frequent and more intense heat waves;
- More cyclones with more devastation;
- Unusual patterns of rain and floods in some places, and droughts in others.

Sea levels are rising, and the snow and glaciers that supply fresh water to many of our populations are receding. Climate as an important “determinant of health” is historically established. Changes in climate certainly affect human health. The change of climate alters the equilibrium of human ecosystem. Climate change threatens the basic elements of health security and human existence. As an example, in 2000 about 82,000 deaths, mainly from malnutrition and diarrhoea, could be attributed to climate change in the South-East Asia Region.

Rising global temperatures and resulting changes in the climate, if not promptly and properly addressed, will jeopardize the achievements of the Millennium Development Goals. This will be among several other development drawbacks due to climate change. Rapid glacier melt, as projected, will initially increase flooding and rock avalanches. The shrinkage of glaciers will ultimately result in reduced water supply and food sources in the larger river basins. Rising sea levels will result in large-scale migration of populations who live in low-lying coastal areas and small islands. The situation will certainly bring about social disruption, mental health problems and political turmoil.

Scarcity of water or too much water or floods will affect agriculture and sanitation. This situation will lead to health problems due to malnutrition, diarrhoea and other water- and food-borne diseases.

Recent observations indicate that species of mosquitoes transmitting malaria, dengue and encephalitis are now found at higher altitudes in the Himalayas. Nepal and Bhutan started reporting cases of dengue for the first time in 2004 and 2006, respectively. Climate change is thus aggravating the problems of vector-borne diseases. It will increasingly exacerbate the already existing public health problems in the populations.

Responding to the health impact of climate change does not mean, at least at this stage, creating new public health programmes. Rather, the available public health interventions must be urgently strengthened to ensure their effective implementation. None of the health outcomes due to climate change is inevitable. It can be modulated by appropriate policies and programmes of the relevant sectors, developed and implemented through efficient coordination and cooperation.

Health is everyone's concern; all stakeholders must get involved urgently in a synchronized manner. Health should be at the core of all responses to climate change. Awareness generation is an important first step in planning for action in this regard. In this connection, Member States need to reaffirm their commitment to the WHA resolution on "climate change and health", adopted in 2008, and to reconfirm their commitment to the New Delhi Declaration on the impacts of climate change on human health, adopted by the Health Ministers of the Region in the same year. Research is needed to assess

vulnerability, envisaged migration, adaptation options and health impact. It will have to be multidisciplinary and action-oriented research. Health infrastructure, both public health programmes and public health workforce, need reorientation, strengthening and effective back up support.

Adaptive capacity of vulnerable populations must be ensured through the implementation of priority public health interventions, which may vary according to specific situations in countries. The most vulnerable populations are the poor, small farmers, urban slum dwellers, tribal peoples and peoples living in coastal areas, small islands and mountains.

There is also a need to develop an integrated strategy for incorporating current and projected risks of climate change into existing policies, legislation, and measures of key development sectors.

This is in order to ensure effective control and containment of the adverse health outcomes. For immediate action, we need to facilitate the participation of our health sector in preparing national representation at the 16th Conference of Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change known as COP16. This conference is to take place in the coming November in Mexico. And in this connection, we have to ensure adequate inclusion of health issues as the core elements in the negotiation process at COP16. There will be a Regional High-Level Preparatory Meeting for COP16 in Bangladesh from 19-21 October 2010.

Honorable Parliamentarians ,

WHO is firmly committed to providing technical guidance and support to the Member States in building their capacity to be able to effectively carry out the health impact and vulnerability assessment. This is particularly within the health arena as well as between concerned disciplines. WHO will facilitate knowledge-sharing and networking on “climate change and human health”. Internationally, WHO is not the only agency to support Member States in dealing with the health impact from climate change; there are other international organizations, both within and outside the UN system. This Regional Conference of Parliamentarians aims primarily to increase awareness and understanding of health-related issues due to climate change, and to identify collaborative actions for the effective protection of human health from climate change in the South-East Asia Region.

Tackling health problems relating to climate change demands world-wide efforts , with contributions from many countries and regions. We now need to take a collective action for the SEA Region, which will contribute to global endeavours.

With these words, ladies and gentlemen, I wish you all fruitful deliberations, and I look forward to your valuable advice to help us move forward in this critical challenge of the twenty-first century.

Thank you.