

Bhutan - RTM

Draft UN System Statement on ICC

(Geneva, 18 Feb. 2003)

Your Excellency, Lyonpo Yeshey Zimba, H'rble Minister of Finance
Mr. Hafiz Pasha, Assitant Administrator and Director, RBAP, UNDP
Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

May I begin by stating what a pleasure it is to address the Royal Government of Bhutan and its development partners on behalf of 18 UN organizations at this Eighth RTM. The joint statement that I am about to deliver, and that which we have prepared together for the closing session, are a direct reflection of the Secretary General's efforts to seek greater collective impact of the United Nations through better harmonization, articulation and rationalization.

The United Nations system congratulates the Royal Government on the excellent quality of its Ninth Five-Year Plan, the fine RTM background documentation, the choice of topics for discussion, and the highly appreciated time allocated for dialogue in the programme. We will return to these in our closing statement, and now turn to issues of common concern.

We extends our sincere appreciation to the Honorable Secretary of Foreign Affairs for the excellent and comprehensive briefing on major issues of common concern – and warmly congratulate the Royal Government on the progress made in the important national Constitutional drafting process and great strides in participatory governance.

We would like to begin with a few comments on the issue of armed insurgents in southeastern Bhutan and, more recently, in the southwest as well. The United Nations recognizes that this is a very sensitive, delicate and at the same time potentially explosive concern. There are no two ways about it -- the sovereignty of Bhutan is threatened by their presence. We applaud the Royal Government for its search for peaceful means to resolve

the situation, particularly the tireless efforts of His Majesty the King. These efforts are in perfect harmony with the spirit of the Charter of the United Nations – which urges member states to explore all avenues for peaceful solutions, before using force. Few countries in the world today have gone to similar lengths as Bhutan for the sake of peace and the sanctity of human life. We can only laud the wisdom of the Royal Government in its management of this situation and extend our sincerest hopes that the militants will finally honour their agreements and leave the country at the earliest possible time. In this context, the recent tripartite agreement between the Government of India, the State Government of Assam and the Bodoland Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF), which we warmly commend, may help the Royal Government in its efforts.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, may I now say a few words about the refugee issue. As all of you know, the United Nations mandate is rooted in the principles of fundamental human rights for all -- regardless of colour, race, origin – and our concerns stretch across all national boundaries.

The people in the camps in eastern Nepal have been there now for more than 10 years. Those who were children upon entering the camps are now adults; those who were babies are now close to becoming teenagers. The urgency of resolving their fate is that much more pressing given the discovery last year of sexual abuse of children, including children as young as 10 years old. This is not only a terrible tragedy for them, but also a dark day for the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The longer these people stay in the camps, the worse it gets for them and the more difficult it becomes to reintegrate them, whether in Bhutan or elsewhere. We are not calling for the return of all the people in the camps to Bhutan – that is a bilateral decision between the Governments of Bhutan and Nepal. But until the last person in the camps is satisfactorily resettled, wherever that may be, and the last gates to the last camp are closed forever, empty!, nobody will have peace of mind – not the people in the camps, nor the Governments of Bhutan and Nepal, nor their partners.

What is urgent at this time is the sorting of persons in Khudunabari camp according to recent agreements, and the start of the resettlement process. It is indeed opportune that just last week the Government of the United States of America indicated it would be willing to consider applications from certain refugees in the camps, and urged some other countries to do likewise.

Although the priority at hand is to resolve the situation of the camps in Nepal, we must also think ahead about how to avoid the very real risk of destabilisation of Bhutan and about how such situations can be avoided in future. Few countries today are immune to the rising swell of cross-border population movements. And many are struggling hard with the very same fundamental issues as Bhutan – often with much smaller proportions of immigrants.

How can people of different origins learn to live together peacefully, despite their differences? What are successful examples of harmonious multi-cultural and multi-ethnic co-existence? I am very pleased to inform you of a timely research project launched by the United Nations Research Institute on Social Development on ethnicity and governance – designed to examine the impact of public policy measures, in bi- and multi-polar ethnic societies, on inter-ethnic harmony and peaceful co-existence. It is to the credit of the Royal Government that they wish to participate in discussions on the research findings right from the start of the project.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, may I conclude by highlighting that one of the outstanding qualities of the Royal Government has been the underlying wisdom of so many of its policies. We are convinced that this wisdom will continue to guide its efforts in future. The United Nations system stands ready to support the Royal Government in its search for lasting and peaceful solutions to both major issues of common concern discussed today.

Thank you and Tashi Delek

UN Country Team in Bhutan:

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*IFAD, ITU, UNCTAD, UNEP, UNESCO, UN-
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