

World Population Day on 11 July, 2010

Venue Tarayana Centre, organized by RENEW and UNFPA

### **Statement by the Hon'ble Minister of Health**

*Hon'ble Members of Parliament, Dashos, Representatives from UNFPA, UNICEF and other development partners, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen.*

As we observe the World Population Day with the rest of the world, I feel that we reflect deeply on the complex issue of population and development. Population-issues are often characterized by a diverse intermix of challenges often subjected to myriad interpretations. I am delighted to be here today to share some of my thoughts and concerns.

The world population stands at 6.8 billion at the moment, 10,564 babies born every hour of the day. It is projected that the world will have 8 billion people by 2030, challenging the earth's ability to sustain this explosion of the population. The concerns of Thomas Malthus and his advocates on food production not being able to keep pace with the population growth do not appear as grave as predicted. However, Population explosion coupled with human greed has changed the pattern of the ecosystem through rising level of atmospheric carbon dioxide, global warming and pollution, posing the threat of food scarcity in the world.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

What is the right size of population *vis-a-vis* sustainable socio-economic growth is a question that draws our attention. Does population growth reduction guarantee sustainable development? Does halt in population

growth signify sound population policies? Do we need growth? These are all equally important considerations.

This brings me to an interesting case. The Government of Singapore, in order to contain rapid population growth, introduced the “Stop At Two” Policy in 1969. It was a measure to encourage couples to limit their babies to two through state-sponsored incentives and disincentives. The policy was so successful that population growth hit negative and issues related to ageing population began to emerge. The concerns became prominent when official statistics projected that one in five Singaporean would be over 65 years by 2030. Policies like “Three Or More, If You Can Afford It” and “Population Rejuvenation” were subsequently launched as corrective measures. The Government also realized that many educated men and women chose to remain single. A Marriage bill was, therefore, passed to encourage inter-marriages among bright and intelligent persons. While a growth in population has been regained, the problem of ageing population still remains.

Scandinavian countries, Japan and much of the developed world present a similar case. An explosion in ageing population has led to significant challenges to the health and social security systems. It is estimated that the elderly will use between three and five times more health care services than that of the younger population.

Ladies and Gentlemen, What are the lessons for Bhutan?

As of 2010, Bhutan's population stands at 695,822 persons. The annual population growth rate is registered at 1.8 percent, a significant decline from over 3 percent in the early 90s. This is a laudable achievement attributable to the aggressive family-planning programs of the 1980s and early 1990s which were primarily, though not exclusively, motivated by concerns about population growth and its possible negative implications on socio-economic development.

As a result of the successful family planning programme coupled with the improvement in the health care service, the demographic profile is changing. Although the present population structure is a broad based pyramid depicting a higher proportion of the population in the younger age groups, the proportion is projected to change with the increasing life expectancy over the years. Taking 65 years as cut off point, there were 60,000 old people in 2005 representing about 10 percent of the total population. Aged population pool is projected to rise to 200,000 by 2020 with geriatric issues already emerging. Besides its implication on social services, ageing population as is evident even now, poses significant challenges to the health system. Rapid increase in health care costs and the system's capacity to absorb the change in disease profile are among the prominent concerns.

Urbanization is another significantly associated issue. Young people are attracted to urban centres leaving behind older people in the villages, often

on their own. This is affecting the much cherished values of extended family system. In the urban areas, nuclear family structure is increasingly visible. The rural-urban migration is straining urban infrastructure and amenities such as housing and schooling while the school enrollment in rural areas is declining.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Where does such a scenario lead us to? What policy implications are heralded? Taking cues from the experiences of the countries I mentioned, we need to urgently develop comprehensive population goals and strategies. A reduction or increase in population cannot be suggested on theoretical grounds alone and should be pragmatic, realistic and based on sound evidence. What is crucial for us is that our policies are balanced and in conformity to the noble approach of “Middle Path.”

While we are in the midst of this important issue that could make an interesting policy discourse, I should not forget to emphasize on the critical role of population related data for development. Such an important priority is manifested in this year’s theme “Everyone Counts,” that emphasizes the importance of reliable population data and seeks to encourage people to participate in census and other data collection efforts. I deem it absolutely essential that this pursuit be religiously followed. In this regard, I am happy to learn that the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs is working on the Birth Registration system, which will strengthen the management of

population data for informed policy decisions. I am also happy to note the introduction of a course on Population Studies at Sherubtse College with the support of UNFPA.

Today, as we observe the world population day, I wish to express my deepest acknowledgement for the unstinting support and cooperation from UN agencies and other development partners. The Government fully commits to accord highest priority to pragmatic and evidence based population policies and strategies.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We need to move forward and move quickly. Let us commit our joint efforts to develop a sound and comprehensive population policy which is harmonized with our cherished goal of Gross National Happiness.

Tashi Delek !