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Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, friends of Switzerland in India, friends of India in Switzerland,

Welcome to today's Swiss National Day celebrations, marking my country's 729th anniversary.

This year, unfortunately, we cannot be together. We are celebrating virtually and online. Let us therefore think back to our beautiful tradition of Swiss National Days on the lawns of the Embassy in Delhi. In August 2017, President Doris Leuthard launched the series of events celebrating 70 years of Swiss-Indian friendship. In August 2018, Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis marked the exact moment of the signing of the 1948 Friendship Treaty. Then there were the more intimate National Days for the Swiss community in India. We always enjoyed the close proximity with friends, the steamy summer weather, the melted raclette cheese.

Last November, the whole official Swiss network in India met at the beautiful Lalit Mangar property. We were planning the year ahead, my fourth and last as Ambassador to India, with many ideas taking shape. But, as you know, things turned out differently. Today, our countries are struggling with a pandemic, severely setting back any plans. Securing lives and livelihoods, literally matters of life or death, have become the order of the day.

Today, you would barely recognize the Embassy, bunkerized and running at half speed. Though mostly in home office, we are still very busy, for example supporting Swiss companies with supply chain issues. In April, the whole Network organized three repatriation flights for stranded Swiss citizens and residents, covering Goa, Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata and Kochi. This was an intensive and rewarding team effort, but with the perception of everything happening in reverse. The Embassy's job is usually to bring Swiss and Indian people together, not to tear them apart.

This virtual National Day Celebration is placed under the sign of the raging pandemic, the celebratory spirit is somewhat muted. Its main objective is solidarity with the victims of COVID-19 and the most unfortunate among us. In these difficult days, Switzerland, building on a long tradition, wants to support its Indian friends. Pooling different official and private funds, we are supporting the pandemic relief work across India of six Swiss NGOs, Swiss based organizations and their partners. Your joining us in this effort would be most appreciated.

At a time when there is much suffering and the horizon is so clouded, the pain of leaving with unfinished business and without properly saying goodbye is an indulgence. Nonetheless, as I will complete my mission in the coming days, let me tell you that I am leaving India with a heavy heart. It has been an incredible honour and adventure to serve as Swiss Ambassador to India for the past

four years.

Let me briefly look back on what we have achieved together and say thank you. Relationships between countries are built on common interests, common values and people who build bridges. Fortunately, when looking at Switzerland and India, at first sight such dissimilar countries, there is plenty of all three.

The common interests are evident in the economic field and the joint pursuit of innovation. The two countries are increasingly collaborating on emerging issues, such as digitalization, climate change, cleantech, smart cities and infrastructure, solar energy, health. Switzerland belongs to the top ranks of investors in India. A recent survey we conducted found over 300 Swiss firms present in India, resulting in the creation of over 130'000 jobs. Things will get even better when progress is made on free trade and investment protection: food left on the plate for my successor to tackle with more luck than I had. I am proud that the advent of automatic information in fiscal matters has put an end to the issue of black money.

Shared values are crucial. And curiosity for each other. I think of the natural affinity between the world's oldest and largest democracies, the shared respect for tolerance and diversity. I think of the belief in an international rules based system and the peaceful resolution of disputes. In Switzerland, the curiosity for Indian culture is almost limitless. Bollywood and Indian tourists are essential components of the Swiss Alps. These are the fundamentals on which over 70 years of friendship were built, a friendship that is meant to stay for many years to come.

Finally and most importantly the people, the bridge builders. I am most grateful to the many individuals and organizations, in Switzerland and India, who link the two countries through their projects and passions. They are symbolized by the 13 Friendship Ambassadors, nominated on the occasion of the 70 Years Celebrations, distinguished individuals from both countries, old and young, promising or established leaders in the most diverse fields. A special message of gratitude goes to my enlarged team, those who work for the sizeable Official Swiss Network in India, at the Embassy in Delhi, the Consulates general in Mumbai and Bangalore, the colleagues from swissnex, the Swiss Business Hub India as well as Switzerland Tourism, the Honorary Consulates in Chennai and Kolkata. Nothing would have been possible without you.

I will not forget my Indian friends and their warmhearted, gracious hospitality. I hope you will soon overcome the current plight and emerge healthy and back on the path towards prosperity. When this is over, I pledge to come back, as a tourist, to bid a proper farewell. Maybe I'll join a leg of our new school bus project across India. Maybe I'll attend the postponed "Dreaming in the Light" event, where Swiss light artist Gerry Hostettler will illuminate the Embassy building and grounds. A couple of months ago, the same artist projected the Indian flag on the Matterhorn in a show of solidarity and kinship. Dreaming and hoping is always allowed. I shall never forget you and will always remain a friend of India.