



Speech by Dr. Andreas Baum, Ambassador of Switzerland to India and Bhutan, on the occasion of the Swiss National Day and the launch of the friendship bus “Swiss Films on Wheels” in Bhutan on August 01, 2019 (Check against delivery)

Excellencies, honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for joining us for the Swiss National Day celebrations today in Thimphu, marking my country's 728th anniversary. I am most grateful to see so many of you. I am just as grateful to the Royal Bhutan University for hosting us. We just watched the Swiss film “Heidi”, together with many schoolchildren of the Thimphu Valley. Heidi, the story of a mountain girl – I cannot imagine a better country to share this movie with than Bhutan.

The story of Heidi has become part of the Swiss cultural heritage. The story was written in the 1880s and many films have been made about it since. Heidi shows an idealized version of Switzerland, becoming a kind of national epos. But it also illustrates the hard side of life. It is about growing up, family, the opposition between rural and urban lives, the rebellion of a free spirit against conservative norms. These issues remain relevant in our societies today.

Just minutes ago, we have sent off the film-bus. Over the next 22 days, the bus will tour throughout Bhutan and bring Heidi to schools in valleys and villages. We hope it will bring joy to children – and adults. And by doing so, it will further strengthen the friendship between our two countries.

This *Swiss Films on Wheels* project is only one highlight of Switzerland's engagement in Bhutan this year. A second one, implemented in early June, was the first ever Swiss Business Delegation to Bhutan. Twenty businesspeople representing seventeen Swiss companies spent four days in Bhutan to learn about the country, about business opportunities and the potential for increasing economic ties between Switzerland and Bhutan. They represented sectors such as retail, infrastructure, health, education and logistics. I am personally most thankful for the impressive hospitality awarded to the delegation throughout their stay. We had the honour to interact with the Prime Minister and no less than six Cabinet Ministers – many of whom I am most grateful to see again today –, the Governor of the Royal Monetary Authority, and met with various private sector actors. One of the main feedbacks from delegation members was how friendly and welcoming the Bhutanese people are. Many thanks!

Of course, it is now up to the individual companies to decide on whether and how to engage. We have solid feedback from several participants and are thus optimistic to see the economic ties between our countries grow – for the mutual benefit of both Bhutan and Switzerland. I know that one big retail company

plans to come back, for example, in order to find partners in sourcing, while another company from the health sector is seriously considering opening a technical and vocational program.

The Business Delegation and Heidi are just a glimpse into the rich relations between our countries. In spring, Swiss Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis welcomed His Excellency Foreign Minister Tandi Dorji – our honoured Chief Guest today - for talks in Berne. In the last days of May, a delegation of Bhutan's National Land Planning Commission visited Switzerland for a study trip focusing on spatial planning in mountainous regions. And the Embassy is supporting two Bhutanese civil society organisations. Concretely, with Loden Foundation we are promoting young entrepreneurs and for RENEW we financed a training for service providers to victims of domestic violence.

The fabric of the Swiss-Bhutanese friendship is woven by many hands. Directly after me, the Swiss Honorary Consul Lyonpo Kinzang Dorji will speak. Switzerland is proud to have such an esteemed Honorary Consul, a former Prime Minister, a highly respected personality and, for the past 9 years, the President of the Bhutan-Swiss Friendship group. This group, along with its Swiss counter-part, the Swiss-Bhutan Friendship group, whose President Marianne Frei is with us tonight as well, are essential and passionate pillars of the relationship.

Also present today is Mr. Mario Fehr, member of the Government of the Canton of Zurich and a long-time friend of Bhutan. The Canton of Zurich is another important Swiss actor engaged in Bhutan. It does so by supporting fire fighters and traffic police, two institutions indispensable for the safety of the people.

Let me not forget to mention that we have among us the former head of Helvetas, Mr. Werner Külling, proud recipient of the "National Order First Class of Merit in Gold", who continues to be engaged and active in Bhutan, as is of course Helvetas.

The last speaker on the program today is Dr. Urs Duersteler, Chairman of the Bhutan Middle Management Hotel Program, who will present its 10 year anniversary publication. Congratulations to them! To focus on professional development, thus giving young people a sound formation grounded in practical experience is a typical Swiss approach and one we are happy to share with Bhutan.

In fact, just this afternoon I had the privilege to participate in the launch of a new training partnership. The renowned Swiss *Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne* – the Hospitality School of Lausanne – is partnering with the Bhutan International School of Hospitality and Tourism and now offering three diploma courses here in Thimphu.

As you all are surely aware, the friendship between our two countries started with a friendship between two outstanding individuals. Over the years, it has evolved from one country helping the other into a multifaceted partnership between equals, a friendship that is here to stay for many years to come. Indeed, Bhutan and Switzerland are linked by a rich history – and thanks to all of us present today this friendship will have a great future. Thank you, and happy Swiss National Day.