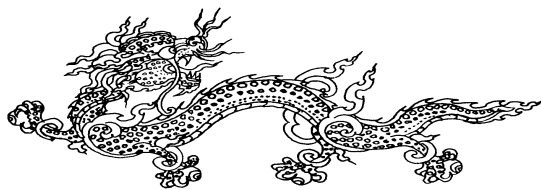


THE BHUTAN SOCIETY



NEWSLETTER

Number 28

President: Lord Wilson of Tillyorn, KT GCMG FRSE

January 2004

* **STOP PRESS** *

Bhutan acts against Indian separatist fighters

Page 2: Bhutan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement to the Bhutan Friendship Societies in Europe

Page 4: Summary of the conflict

Latest News (Dec. 29th)

Bhutan plans militant mop-up operation

After driving out Indian militants from all known hideouts in its territory, Bhutan is planning a mopping-up exercise to wipe out the last vestiges of militancy. A senior official in Thimphu said the operation would trace the militants who were trying to 'melt into the immigrant pockets' of the Kingdom.

The Indian army shares Bhutan's anxiety over small groups of militants staying put in the Himalayan kingdom to fight another day. A source said the fleeing militants of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) were probably trying to find their way into Nepali and other settlements in central Bhutan to avoid capture.

The Bhutanese official said the royal government was hopeful of completing the flushout soon and added that Bhutan was considering making a formal request to Delhi to maintain the 'minimum level of alertness' along the international border to prevent militants from sneaking into its territory again. 'The possibility of the militants returning will always remain. We will maintain constant vigil on the border to ensure that we do not face the same problem in future,' he said.

As operations in Bhutan entered the last lap, another NDFB militant 'top gun' surrendered to police in Assam, while two key ULFA fighters were captured while they tried to enter Assam from Bhutan.

Bhutan mourns Her Majesty Ashi Phuntsho Choden, the Royal Grandmother



Her Majesty Ashi Phuntsho Choden, affectionately known to the Bhutanese people as Gayum Angay, passed away peacefully at her retreat residence in Dechenchholing on the morning of 24th August. She was 92 years old.

Ashi Phuntsho Choden was born in 1911 and at the age of 15 was enthroned as the Queen of the second Druk Gyalpo, King Jigme Wangchuck. In 1928 she gave birth to the third Druk Gyalpo, His Majesty King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck.

Her Majesty possessed a deeply ingrained spirituality and actively pursued Buddhist studies. This formed the foundation for her important role in maintaining and strengthening Bhutan's rich Buddhist heritage. She built a legacy of religious institutions, established spiritual learning centres, and did much to preserve the core of Bhutan's religious history.

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The Society's website is at www.bhutansociety.org and carries information about the Society, news and events, an archive of previous Newsletters and a selection of interesting Bhutan-related links.



News from Bhutan



On 16th December 2003 Bhutan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued the following Statement to all Bhutan Friendship Societies in Europe:

Today, Bhutan is faced with the most difficult period in its recent history, as its security forces have launched operations to flush out the militants from the country.

1. Many are aware that three armed separatist groups from India, namely the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), and Kamtapur Liberation Organization (KLO) have clandestinely entered and established camps in the dense forests of southern Bhutan.
2. The three separatist groups are scattered across Southern Bhutan bordering Arunachal Pradesh in the east to Sikkim in the west, thereby covering the entire stretch of Bhutan's southern boundary with India. Bhutan is particularly sensitive to India's security concerns in this region. The separatists use their camps in the dense forests to train their cadres, store arms and ammunition, and to launch surprise attacks inside India. The ULFA has 13 camps, the NDFB 12 camps, and the KLO 5 camps.
3. Development and economic activities in Bhutan have been seriously affected by the presence of the militants. Works at large industries such as the Dungsam Cement Project have been suspended. Educational institutions in vulnerable areas had to be closed down. Trade, agriculture production, and other commercial activities in several districts of the country have been disrupted.
4. Innocent peoples in Assam, West Bengal, as well as in Bhutan, have been victims of threats, coercion, and extortion. Unprovoked attacks by the militants against Bhutanese nationals inside the country, as well as while travelling through Assam have resulted in tragic loss of innocent lives. It has become unsafe for Bhutanese to travel and transport goods through the traditional and more convenient routes in India.
5. The presence of the militants, who entered Bhutan clandestinely 12 years ago and established their camps initially without our knowledge, has become a direct threat to Bhutan's sovereignty and national security. Their long-term presence has undermined the peace, stability, and socio-economic development enjoyed by the Bhutanese people, and threatens the very sovereignty of the country. Of particular concern, are the misperceptions surrounding their presence and the implications on the excellent bilateral relations with India, which is of the highest importance for the Royal Government and the Bhutanese people.
6. Given the magnitude of the security threat posed by the armed militants, the issue has been regularly discussed in the National Assembly of Bhutan. It has also been one of the central issues raised in all major public fora, including the regular meetings of the local bodies.
7. Despite the seriousness of the threats and the immediate need to rid the country of their presence, Bhutan as a Buddhist and peace-loving nation, committed itself to finding a peaceful solution and pursued a series of dialogue with the separatist groups since 1998. Every effort was made by the Royal Government to bring about their peaceful departure from the country. In this regard, the fraternal and good neighbourly relations between the Bhutanese people and the people of Assam have always been the primary concern and has, in fact, been a major factor in the Royal Government's decision to ensure that every effort is made to resolve the problem peacefully.



News from Bhutan



8. It was with much regret and frustration that the Royal Government was unable to report any successful outcome of the talks to the successive sessions of the National Assembly. Finally, during the 81st Session of the National Assembly held from June 28 to August 18, 2003, the Royal Government was mandated to make one last attempt at persuading the militants to leave the country. The resolution was clear in that, should the talks fail, then as a last resort, the Royal Bhutan Army would have to be given the responsibility of removing the militants from Bhutan.

9. Based on the above, the Home Minister, who is also the Prime Minister of Bhutan, invited the leaders of the three separatist groups to Thimphu for talks. Despite Bhutan's request that the top leadership attend the talks, the two militant groups, namely the ULFA and NDFB, sent mid-level representatives, while no response was received from the KLO. Nevertheless, because of the sincere effort on the part of the Royal Government to find a peaceful solution, the Home Minister met separately with the ULFA in October 2003, and the NDFB in November 2003, and engaged in lengthy, substantive discussions. During the talks, the militants were told, with great restraint and patience, that the Royal Government cannot tolerate their presence any longer. They were reminded that their entry into Bhutan was no different from a foreign invading army, and their conduct showed no regard for our laws. It was made very clear to them that they were not refugees seeking humanitarian protection, and that their refusal to leave would result in a senseless and fratricidal conflict. They were also told that the senselessness of a confrontation lay in the fact that Bhutan has nothing to do with their hopes and aspirations. Every life lost in the foreign soil of Bhutan for them would be a waste. They were advised to engage in serious reflection and consider the wisdom of continuing their armed struggle. They were also advised that the moment had arrived when they should try to find a solution within the constitutional framework of the Republic of India.

10. Conducting dialogue with the militants has never been easy, but as a peace-loving nation, Bhutan has been tolerant and patient in seeking a peaceful resolution of the problem. After six years of consistent and strenuous efforts to find a peaceful solution, the process of peaceful dialogue had been fully exhausted, and the Royal Government was left with no option but to give the Royal Bhutan Army the responsibility of removing the militants from Bhutan.

11. It is ironic that Bhutan's success with environmental conservation, in particular, conservation of the dense sub-tropical forests along the southern border, has rendered the country a favoured hiding place for the separatist elements from India. The predicament for Bhutan is that of a country feeling the life threatening pains of a problem that lies elsewhere. In this regard, the National Assembly of Bhutan has noted with appreciation the multi-pronged efforts made by the Government of India to resolve the problem. These include administrative, economic, political, and military initiatives.

12. Under the circumstances, Bhutan seeks the continued understanding and support of the Government and people of India, particularly the bordering States of Assam and West Bengal. It is our hope that the compulsion of flushing out the militants from Bhutan will promote peace, stability and economic development in our region, and further strengthen the age-old friendship and cooperation among our peoples and governments.

13. Bhutan also seeks understanding and support from its many other development partners and friends among the international community.

* * *



News from Bhutan



Military action against Indian separatist fighters decisive and successful

(Article summarised from newspaper, BBC and other sources)

After six years of fruitless negotiations, aimed at persuading more than 3,000 Indian separatist fighters who had set up some 30 illegal camps in Bhutan to leave the Kingdom's territory peacefully, Bhutan was forced to initiate military action against them on 15th December with the aims of closing their camps in Southern Bhutan and forcing them to leave the Kingdom.

The separatist fighters were heavily armed with modern weapons and their camps were very well fortified. They belong to three different organisations which are all fighting the Indian Government for either separation from the Union of India or for separate states within the Union. The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) is fighting for complete independence from India, while the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) is fighting for the creation of a separate Bodo state within the Union of India. The KLO (Kamtapur Liberation Organisation), based in West Bengal is a relatively recent arrival on the scene, also fighting for a separate state in the north of West Bengal. It is important to emphasise that these separatist terrorists are Indian nationals, NOT Bhutanese, and their fundamental argument is with the Government of India, not Bhutan.

Bhutan had been under ever increasing pressure from India to take action against the separatists, who over a number of years had infiltrated from India across the 160 mile border. The Bhutan Government had hoped, in vain, that it would be possible to persuade the separatists to leave without recourse to military action. Speaking on December 15th in the Indian Parliament the Indian Prime Minister said 'The Government and people of India stand firmly and solidly behind the Royal Government of Bhutan at this critical juncture and would provide all necessary support as requested, until the task has been completed'.

It is reported that up to 24th December eight Bhutanese soldiers have been killed, and over 60 wounded, though official casualty figures have not yet been released by the Bhutan Government. A military funeral was held in Thimphu on 19th December for the first two casualties of the action. It was attended by HRH The Crown Prince with all the Royal Family and by the Prime Minister (Lyonpo Jigme Y. Thinley), the Chief Justice, the Speaker of the National Assembly, Cabinet Ministers and senior Government officials, as well as thousands of citizens.

Within the first week of the conflict the Royal Bhutan Army and Royal Bodyguard Regiment, numbering in total only about 6,000 personnel, were successful in destroying most of the separatists camps which had been illegally established in Southern Bhutan. The problem continued, however, because the Indian Army has sealed the southern border on the Indian side, thus preventing the separatists, who are Indian nationals, from leaving Bhutan and returning to India. 'We are sealing the border on our side so

that anyone who is trying to escape this side can be apprehended,' said the Indian army chief, who also described the border as 'watertight'. However, in a later statement India said that the ULFA and Bodo fighters were welcome to return to Indian territory provided they agreed to surrender. One fear was that some of the estimated 3,000 militant separatists, with no way out back into India, would try to remain in Bhutan and cause significant instability in the Kingdom. The hope is they will eventually surrender to the Bhutanese or Indian forces, and some reports suggest that around five hundred have already done so.

Latest reports say that the Bhutan forces captured seven senior separatist leaders and five others are reported to have been killed. On 26th December it was announced that Bhimkanta Buragohain, who founded the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) in 1979, had been captured by the Bhutan Army and handed over to India. Buragohain was shown by the Indian army in Assam, where he urged his supporters to lay down their arms and begin talks with the Indian Government. 'I think from my side, the path which we led is wrong. Armed rebellion cannot bring independence,' the 78-year-old rebel leader said.

It is clear that the action by the Bhutan Armed Forces has been decisive, efficient and highly successful. It has broken the backbone of both ULFA and KLO and has therefore been of immense help to India in their dealing with insurgency in Assam. Meanwhile, the Bhutan Army has commenced the difficult task of pursuing those separatist fighters who have now dispersed and are hiding in the jungles of Southern Bhutan. Reports suggest their numbers may not be as large as was feared.

The King was with the Armed Forces and directed the military actions. The Crown Prince had been keen to join the troops but was commanded by the King to remain in Thimphu with the specific task of attending to the needs of the people, a duty which he, along with other members of the Royal Family, has carried out with conspicuous dedication. The King has now returned to Thimphu, and The Crown Prince has taken over in the South.

This is the first time Bhutan has been involved in military conflict since the Duar War of 1864-5, and it is regrettable that the Kingdom was been forced into this situation through a problem, the widespread insurgency across all India's North Eastern States, which is not its own. Now that the militants' camps have been destroyed and most of the militants have been removed from the Kingdom, it must be hoped they will not return. Bhutan has requested India to maintain suitable security on its side of the India-Bhutan border to prevent this happening.

It should be emphasised that the military problems are confined mainly to the South Eastern jungles of Bhutan, and elsewhere everything is as peaceful as usual. Therefore nobody should have any concern about travelling to Bhutan either on holiday or otherwise! These days Bhutan still remains one of the safest and most secure places to visit – please reassure anyone who asks you about visiting Bhutan!



News from Bhutan



Bhutan mourns Her Majesty Ashi Phuntsho Choden (cont.)

An early project was the renovation of the Kurje Lhakhang in Bumthang. Her Majesty later established the National Memorial Chhorten in Thimphu which she built in memory of her son, His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, for the well being of the nation and the people.

Her Majesty Ashi Phuntsho Choden was the precious link between the first Druk Gyalpo Gongsar Ugyen Wangchuck and the present Druk Gyalpo. She will be deeply mourned and affectionately remembered by the Bhutanese people.



*Hon. Secretary
Michael Rutland
signs the Book of
Condolences on
behalf of the Bhutan
Society of the UK*

Football: Bhutan's 'learning experience'

The Bhutanese football team recently returned from three weeks of Asia Cup qualifiers in Saudi Arabia in positive mood, despite not winning any matches. The experience gained in playing against some of Asia's top teams was a victory in itself say the players.

'We all thought that we might do worse,' said one of the players. 'We were extremely happy with our play against Saudi Arabia, the number three team in Asia. The Saudi Arabians are tall and their game really good.'

Bhutan lost 6-0 in the first match and 4-0 in the second match against Saudi Arabia. Against Indonesia, Bhutan managed to keep the score at 2-0 in both matches. National goalkeeper, Jigme Singay, was declared 'man of the match' in the second match against Indonesia. Bhutan later took a beating from Yemen conceding eight goals to nil in the first match.

'Because Saudi Arabia had thrashed Yemen we thought we could beat them and changed our play to an attacking strategy. But they counter attacked and easily scored.' In the second match Bhutan reduced the goal margin to 4-0.

Dinesh, a veteran of the national team, says that the Saudi Arabia experience reinforced the need for the Bhutanese national team to play more matches and keep practising.

New Appointment for Dasho Bap Kesang

Bhutan's former Ambassador to the UN in Geneva, Dasho Bap Kesang, has returned to Thimphu, where he has been appointed Secretary of the Royal Civil Service Commission.



*Dasho Bap Kesang speaking at the
Convention of European Bhutan Societies 2002*

This highly responsible post has become even more important with the new status and role of the Commission which was commanded by HM The King following this year's National Assembly. The Commission, formerly a part of the Government machine, has now been made totally independent and a new set of members appointed representing a wide variety of interests in the Kingdom. One particular task it has been given is to fight any forms of corruption which may emerge in the Government system. As a member of the Commission, and Head of its Secretariat, Dasho Bap Kesang carries a heavy responsibility and the Bhutan Society wishes to offer our very good wishes in his new post.

Dasho Bap and his wife Aum Sangay have been regular and honoured guests at Bhutan Society Dinners and ardent supporters of the Society. We shall miss them both at our functions, but have no doubt they will be glad to be back home in Thimphu with their families.

Druk Air to fly to Gaya, India

Druk Air is introducing a direct flight from Paro to Gaya (close to Bodhgaya), starting 11th November. Bodhgaya is one of the holiest sites for Buddhists all over the world.

The one hour ten minute flight will initially operate once a week. Druk Air is hoping to attract Bhutanese pilgrims wishing to avoid the hassles of the long road or train journey to Bodhgaya (2-3 days from Phuentsholing).

'More than 30,000 Bhutanese travel to Bodhgaya every year. Getting 20 to 30 percent of those people to travel by Druk Air would be a good deal,' said Namgay Wangchuk, Druk Air's General Manager.



Bhutan's officials attacked in UNHCR Camps

On 22nd December 2003 the Bhutanese members of the Joint Bhutan-Nepal Verification Team working in one of the UNHCR Camps in South East Nepal were attacked by occupants of the camps. If, as a result of this attack, there are delays in continuing the Verification Procedures in the camps, it should be clearly understood that it was the camp occupants who attacked the Verification Team. The responsibility for any consequent delays is clear.

The following Press Release about the incident was issued by Bhutan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs shortly after the incident. As a result of the attack, the Bhutanese members of the JVT have been withdrawn back to Bhutan.

The 15th Ministerial Joint Committee (MJC) meeting of the Royal Government of Bhutan and His Majesty's Government of Nepal was held in Thimphu in October 2003. The meeting, *inter alia*, agreed that the terms and procedures for repatriation/reapplication/application for Bhutan and Nepal will be as prescribed by the two countries as per their respective laws, which will be mutually respected. The MJC also agreed that the Bhutanese Verification Team (BVT) and the Nepalese Verification Team (NVT) will brief the people on the terms, procedures and facilities applicable in Bhutan and Nepal respectively. The Joint Verification Team (JVT) met in Damak, Nepal, and began its work on 1st December 2003.

On 22nd December 2003, the BVT members began the process of briefing camp residents of Sector A of Khudunabari camp. The MJC considered it important to brief the camp residents for transparency and to enable them to make informed choices in exercising their voluntary option to return to Bhutan or stay in Nepal. The briefing took place in a semi-permanent bamboo hall. Despite the agreement that only Sector A residents were to be present, the BVT members were surprised to note that the hall was surrounded by the entire residents of the camp.

During the course of the briefing, the camp residents appeared agitated and verbally abused the members of the BVT. This was followed by physical assault upon surrounding the BVT members. Meanwhile, the camp residents from outside the hall broke down the wall and joined in attacking and beating the BVT members. One member collapsed on the floor on being struck on the head while the other members continued to be battered with blows and stones.

The camp residents then tried to trap the members of the BVT inside the hall and set it on fire. While escaping with injured colleagues, they were pelted with stones from all directions and were beaten with bamboo rods. In the process, three members sustained severe injuries. Upon reaching their vehicles, they were subjected to further stoning and physical abuse. The windows of all the vehicles were shattered. The three to four armed policemen who were present outside did not intervene.

Under the Terms of Reference of the JVT, the host country is required to provide full security arrangements. However, despite requests made by the BVT, and the risks foreseen by the NVT, there were no proper security arrangements and on this occasion only one policeman in plain clothes accompanied the BVT.

This unprovoked act of violence against the BVT who were only carrying out the directives of the MJC is highly regrettable. It is even more disturbing because the entire episode was not spontaneous but pre-meditated. The events that took place were well planned and well orchestrated, enabled by the other residents of the camp who should never have been there.

The Bhutan Government is deeply shocked and concerned by this bizarre act of violence planned and perpetrated by the camp residents. It is further concerned by the absence of adequate security measures. Such an act cannot be explained or justified under any circumstances. It undermines the efforts and agreements reached between Bhutan and Nepal after long and difficult negotiations to find a just and durable solution to the complex problem. Besides risking everything that the two governments have achieved so far, it also endangers the lives of the very people entrusted with the smooth implementation of the agreement.

It is most unfortunate that this should have happened as we approach the last phase of the process leading to a durable solution to the problem of the people in the camps.

Given the serious injuries sustained by our officials they are no longer in a position to continue their work. Further, they and their families in Bhutan are understandably worried over the serious risk to their lives. The Royal Government has, therefore, permitted the BVT to depart from Nepal in the early hours of 23rd December 2003.

Subsequently a statement by the Nepal Ministry of Foreign Affairs regretted the incident and attempted to blame the Bhutanese delegation for its occurrence. In spite of the fact that there were far more people present than had been agreed, the statement said the attack was not pre-meditated, but spontaneous. In their statement they said that they had provided adequate security (though no details were given) and expressed surprise that the Bhutan delegation had found it prudent to leave!



News & Updates from the Bhutan Society



The Society's 11th Annual Dinner



The 11th Annual Dinner of the Bhutan Society took place on Friday 24th October, 2003 at the National Liberal Club, Whitehall Place, London.

Our President, Lord Wilson of Tillyorn, presided, and more than 80 Members and their friends were joined by six Bhutanese students studying in the UK. It was a lively and most enjoyable evening, with much time spent catching up with old friends... and making new ones!

The Society would particularly like to thank those Members who generously sponsored a ticket for the Bhutanese students to attend.

World's largest book features Bhutan!



A new book about Bhutan has been published in America – but it is certainly not suitable for bedtime reading! Entitled *Bhutan: A Visual Odyssey Across the Kingdom*, it is a photographic account of a journey undertaken by Michael Hawley, a scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Nothing unusual in that, you might think, except that the book's 122 pages are two metres wide and it weighs an amazing 60 kilograms! Unsurprisingly Guinness World Records has certified it as the biggest book ever published.

Published in a limited edition of 500 copies, the book costs US\$10,000, with all profits going to 'Friendly Planet', the charity founded by Mr. Hawley. Friendly Planet is involved in building schools in Cambodia and Bhutan.

New book by Bhutan Society Member

Sikkim Himalaya: Travels in the Cloud Kingdom

by David Lang

Pomegranate Press 2003; £29.95

Hardback, 200 pp. inc. 330 colour photos & 6 maps

ISBN: 0-9533493-7-3



A mountainous country of incredible beauty and abundant wildlife, Sikkim is home to three distinct peoples, the Lepchas, Bhotias and Nepali. This small, formerly independent kingdom is now a state of India, but its snow-covered peaks, flower-filled meadows and gorgeously decorated Buddhist temples remain unknown even to many who live within easy reach of its borders.

In this unique celebration of Sikkim's history, geography, flora and fauna, David Lang writes evocative accounts of four eventful treks he make in the mountainous northern parts of the country – exploring valleys which no western botanist had visited for 150 years. The book is beautifully illustrated with more than 300 colour plates plus archival photos and watercolours.

In addition to maps, a bibliography and a glossary of Sikkimese terms, *Sikkim Himalaya* includes a specially commissioned article on the forest orchids of Sikkim by International Orchid Committee member, Mohan Pradhan. The book is an essential companion for anyone intending to discover this wonderful country at first hand.

David is happy to supply the book to Members for £30, inc. postage and packing. Tel: (01273) 400446 or write to: 1 Oaktree, Barcombe, Lewes, East Sussex BN8 5DP

Deaths

The Bhutan Society very much regrets to announce that the following Members have passed away during 2003:

The Earl of Limerick, KBE
Mr. Martin Allard
Mr. Tommy Steele
Mr. Toby Gooch



Bhutan Connections



The National Women's Association of Bhutan

Founded in 1981, the National Women's Association of Bhutan (NWAB) is engaged in improving the socio-economic status of rural women throughout Bhutan. In collaboration with the Royal Government of Bhutan and several international donor agencies, NWAB's activities have included non-formal education, credit schemes and the establishment of several training centres for weaving and handicraft production.

Women are often viewed as the recipients rather than the generators of knowledge and there is a tendency for women's local innovations and knowledge systems to remain largely invisible. NWAB recognises that Bhutanese women have a unique knowledge of local ecosystems acquired through centuries of practical experience, and are the traditional caretakers of genetic and species diversity in agriculture and medicine. Selecting and storing seeds has been, and continues to be, a woman's skill. Women are also active in natural resource use and management.

These vital roles must be recognised and the innovative capacities of women must be tapped to the maximum. There is an urgent need for the fullest participation by women at all levels in our society, in policy making and implementation of programs and projects.

The typical 'project' approach to development and assistance has often failed to recognise women's role in the sustainable use of resources. NWAB seeks to find alternatives to providing and increasing women's opportunities, including wider access to credit and help in establishing and managing enterprises in their own communities. Women need to be considered as integral partners in development, as key agents of change.

Ongoing Activities

The National Handloom Development Project (Khaling) trains rural weavers and supplies yarn on credit, then buys back the finished products, which are sold through the Government Handicraft Emporium in Thimphu. Weaving continues to be one of the most important sources of income for rural women in Bhutan, and NWAB has helped women to use traditional weaving practices to create products for the international market.

The Weaving Training Center (Pema Gatshel) trains approximately 40 young rural women every year in traditional weaving techniques and product design. Non-formal education classes supplement to the program.

Women In Environment (Panbang) is a community development project run with WWF Bhutan on the border of Royal Manas National Park. It seeks to relieve human pressure on the park's forest resources through alternative, income-generating activities, a rural credit scheme, non-formal education and conservation activities. The project encourages the production of cane and bamboo handicrafts, and has established cane and bamboo nurseries to ensure that production is sustainable.

A Report from the British Council Youth Summer Camp, Wales, Summer 2003

by Dechen Wangmo

Coordinator of the Phuentsholing Women's Association Network

As a member of the Bhutanese group that participated in the British Council youth summer camp in Wales in June 2003, I can say that we feel really proud and privileged to have attended. I personally feel that such programmes help young people appreciate the value of their culture by giving them the opportunity to share and exchange views with others from all over the world.

Bhutan too has a 'Youth Problem'. Our problem appears minuscule when compared with other countries, but the problem does exist, particularly among our educated youth, and it has become the serious concern of the Nation as it could threaten the goal of Gross National Happiness. As Bhutan looks to meeting present and emerging challenges, we must adopt ideas and practice from the experiences of those who have trodden the path of development before us. Therefore, the Phuentsholing Women's Association Network feels strongly that we won't be able to solve this major problem without support and guidance from the young people of the world.

In Bhutan, as in all countries of the world, without meaningful employment and career opportunities the expectations of youth create a breeding ground for poverty, disease, crime, violence and civil unrest, undermining political stability, national security and the effectiveness of capital investment. One of the main aspirations of our King is to provide gainful employment to all the Bhutanese youth. Accordingly, the Royal Government of Bhutan is taking up the challenge of solving the youth unemployment problem.

The summer camp was a golden opportunity to learn how we can reach out to young people and create more awareness about their involvement in the community and how they can change the world. We exchanged and shared various views regarding striving to open access for young people, local professionals, activists and other interested parties who can really contribute to the positive role of 'Youth in the Community'.

In Bhutan our Network's achievements have included organising a 'Cleaning Campaign' involving young people with the aim of inculcating the spirit of volunteerism and positive youth development. In the same spirit we organised an HIV/AIDS awareness campaign to help disseminate useful information. In both cases the response from the youth was remarkable.

We are greatly indebted to the British Council and the various organisers who made it possible for our group to attend the summer camp and we look forward to having the opportunity to participate such programs in the future.