Ho’ble Lyonpo Dr. Pema Gyamtsho, Hon’ble Lyonpo C. Dorji, Helveta’s Resident Coordinator, Dr. Walter Roder, our Swiss friends who are present here today, my distinguished colleagues on the Board, members of Bhutan-Switzerland Society, Lyonpos, Dashos, ladies and gentlemen;

A very warm welcome to this important occasion of celebration of the National Day of Switzerland and Annual General Assembly of Bhutan-Switzerland Society.

I would like to begin by extending our sincere greetings and warmest felicitations to Dr. Walter Roder, Resident Coordinator of Helvetas, and all our Swiss friends in Bhutan on the happy occasion of the National Day of Switzerland. I have already sent a message of felicitation to Ms. Marianne Frei, President of Society Switzerland-Bhutan yesterday on the occasion of celebration of the 720th National Day of Switzerland today. Please accept our heartiest congratulations and best wishes for the happiness, continued progress and prosperity of the People of Switzerland.

Dr. Walter Roder has kindly consented to speak to us on the long and rich history and significance of the National Day of Switzerland on this auspicious occasion today. I would only like to say that while visiting Switzerland in 2005 in my capacity as the minister for works and human settlement, I happened to pass by the road opposite to the Meadow of Rutli above Lake Lucerne where the historic birth of the Swiss Confederation took place. When I was told the history and the significance of the agreement signed by the first three cantons in August 1291 and how the Swiss Confederation was slowly built over a period of some 500 years, it left an indelible impression on me regarding the trials and tribulations of nationhood and nation building and lessons one could learn from its rich history. It is, therefore, an appropriate moment on this day to reflect on the importance of the National Day of Switzerland.

Since the first General Assembly and elections to the Board of our Society on this same day last year, I am pleased to report that our Society had a very eventful and successful year. I would, therefore, like to present a brief account of the activities undertaken by the Society over the last one year.

First and foremost, the Board decided to explore how we could register our Society under the CSO Act as directed by the General Assembly last year. In the process, we undertook a thorough review of the purpose, objectives and scope of the Society in promoting people to people friendship and cooperation between Bhutan and Switzerland. We even looked at the appropriateness of the name and logo of the society, and you will be pleased to know that we now have a new logo for our society. In this connection, I should express my appreciation and gratitude to Mr. Peter Schmidt, who is well known to everyone here, for his tireless effort to come up with numerous options and drawings of the logo for the Board to choose from.

Further, the Board decided to take up the task of drafting the Articles of Association, Memorandum of Association, Rules and Regulations for the Society, and Code of Conduct for its members. This was achieved in record time, thanks to my colleague on the Board, Dr. Saamdu
Chetri, who in spite of his busy schedule, took it upon himself to produce the first draft single-handed. I would, therefore, like to acknowledge the very valuable contribution he has made to this Society. These documents are at present being reviewed and finalized by a committee of our Board members. We also studied the provisions of the CSO Act and preconditions required for registration. So far we have not been able to apply for registration, but I must assure you that the process is on-going and we are making every effort to get our Society registered under the CSO Act.

As you might recall, there were a few projects planned before the present Board was elected such as the proposed visit of a team of musicians from the Khaling National Institute for the Visually Impaired to Switzerland to perform at the Reithberg Museum along with Big Senn, who had performed in Bhutan in 2008; installation of 1-2 computers in upper/lower Kheng schools with funding support from Swisscom, and support to school children of upper/lower Kheng. In this connection, I am pleased to report that a team of 3 visually impaired musicians lead by a teacher from Khaling visited Switzerland in September last year as planned. Regarding the support to a remote school under Zhemgang Dzongkhag, Tradijong Community Primary School under Phangkhar Gewog was chosen as the beneficiary school after thorough consultation with concerned authorities. It is one of the most remote schools in Bhutan at 10 hours walking distance from Gomphu-Panbang road. It has 59 students comprising of 33 boys and 26 girls studying from classes PP to V. These children walk between half an hour to two hours every day to reach the school. They have been provided with school uniforms, shoes, mattresses, blankets, CGI sheets for roofing their makeshift hostels, 4 laptop computers, 1 printer/scanner/copier and a digital camera under the project. A sum of CHF 9,400 was received from SSB which is equivalent to Nu 444,526.00 for this project. The above amount includes the CHF 5,000 donated by Swisscom for purchase of computers.

In addition to the above, the Helvetas Programme office has very generously contributed Nu 244,190 for procurement and installation of solar power system for the school so that the school can enjoy not only electric lighting but also operate the computer, printer, copier, etc. without any difficulty. So, on behalf of Tradijong CPS and BSS, I would like to express our gratitude to Dr. Walter Roder, Resident Coordinator, Helvetas Bhutan for this special gift which I am certain will make a huge impact.

As we are all aware, the past year has been a very painful and difficult year for the residents of Chamkhar town in Bumthang who suffered three successive fire disasters within a short span of seven months, between 26 October 2010 and 26 May 2011. In the process, almost the entire town was razed to the ground, and majority of the residents lost everything they had worked for all their lives thus having to face untold misery, pain and hardship. Immediately upon hearing the sad and unfortunate news of the first fire accident of 26 October 2010, in his capacity as Member of Parliament representing Chhoekhor Geog under which Chamkhar town is located, Lyonpo Pema Gyamtsho had rushed to Switzerland, cutting short his trip abroad, to appeal to members of Society Switzerland-Bhutan and other Swiss friends for help to reconstruct Chamkhar town and rebuild the lives of the victims. His personal request was strongly supported by our Society. The response to this request for humanitarian relief was not only generous but quite spontaneous in that within a short time a sum of CHF 50,000 was raised. A cheque for Nu 2.40 million for construction of sewerage system for the newly constructed houses under His Majesty’s Kidu was
handed over by Mr. Werner Kuelling to Bumthang Dzongdag on 14 March 2011. During the
handing over ceremony of the above cheque in Thimphu, the Board of BSS and Bumthang
Dzongdag jointly made another appeal to SSB to support the reconstruction of the second fire
disaster of 18 February 2011. We have since received a cheque for CHF 8,000, equivalent to Nu
420,000, to be used for construction of water supply and sewerage system for the second fire
disaster victims of Chamkhar town. Therefore, on behalf of the fire victims of Chamkhar town,
Bumthang Dzongkhag Administration and members of BSS, I would like to thank the President,
Members of SSB and well-wishers and friends of Bhutan in Switzerland not only for their
generous donation to the reconstruction effort of the Royal Govt. but also for their expression of
support and solidarity with the fire victims during the most difficult times of their lives. We are
also grateful to Lyonpo Pema Gyamtsho for his initiative and efforts made in this regard which
made a big difference.

Based on the request from the Centre for Bhutan Studies, we have also received CHF 2,000 from
Society Switzerland-Bhutan for support to the Thangka Painting Project which they have been
undertaking.

Our sister organization has also made a second donation of 250 books entitled, “Far Apart and
Close Together”, of which 200 copies are being distributed to Ministry of Education and 30
copies to READ programme. 300 copies of the book were already donated earlier to our Ministry
of Education.

In addition to the above, Bhutan-Switzerland Society had the honour of receiving visits from
many members of the Board of SSB including the President to Bhutan which facilitated close
consultation and fast decision making regarding the projects and activities. Similarly, our
counterparts in Switzerland had been kept busy in receiving many visitors from Bhutan including
Members of our Royal Family, the Prime Minister of Bhutan and many ministers of the Royal
Government in the last one year.

I would, therefore, like to place on record our deepest gratitude and most sincere appreciation to
the President and members of Society Switzerland-Bhutan for the goodwill, friendship and for
generous contributions made to various projects implemented through BSS. I can say with
confidence that we have now laid a strong foundation for people to people exchange and
collaboration between Bhutan and Switzerland. I hope that we can make further progress on this
front in the coming years.

This is also an opportune moment to record our appreciation to Lyonpo Pema Gyamtsho,
Lyonpo Ugyen Tshering, Dasho Pema Wangchuk and Dasho Tshering Wangda, for providing
the necessary leadership and contributing to the establishment and growth of this Society since
2000. And I will be failing in my duty if I did not acknowledge the dedication, commitment and
hard work put in by our Secretary, Mr. Namgyel Tshering, and Treasurer, Aum Tshewang
Chhenzom, since the inception of this Society

On the membership and fund situation of our society, I would like to report that we have today
80 registered members and a fund balance of Nu 140,405.00 raised through membership
registration and annual fees. So, there is room for further work on this front, and thus I would
like to appeal to all the registered members to help us in mobilizing more membership as well as raising funds for the Society. We will appreciate receiving your views and suggestion on this as well.

Last but not the least, I would like to thank the Programme Coordinator of Helvetas for so generously hosting this important event. The initiative taken by Lyonpo Pema and Dr. Roder last year to celebrate the National Day of Switzerland and concurrently hold the General Assembly of our Society on 1 August was a very wise and thoughtful decision. I wish to express my hope that we can continue this practice in the future as well.

I wish you all a Happy Swiss National Day and an enjoyable evening.

Thank you and Tashi Delek!