**05NEWDELHI7417**

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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 007417 SIPDIS SENSITIVE E.O. 12958: N/A TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM SCUL EAID IN BT NP UN SUBJECT: BHUTAN: GOOD GOVERNANCE LEADS TO HEALTHY MOUNTAIN LIVING REF: NEW DELHI 7159 [Â¶](http://www.bhutan-research.org/us-diplomatic-cables-on-bhutan/05newdelhi7417#par1) 1. (SBU) Summary: Despite its isolation, low income and rugged terrain, Bhutan has created an effective system of state-provided medical care that is delivering a healthier population and outpacing others in South Asia. The Government continues to invest heavily in the medical sector, with donor countries and the UN readily funding projects in Bhutan because government transparency, a lack of corruption and minimal legacy investments allows noticeable improvements. Bhutan created a multi-tiered medical system consisting of 3 central referral hospitals, 26 regional hospitals and 158 local Basic Health Units (BHUs), along with a "telemedicine" program. The Government is committed to women's health issues. It has also dramatically increased the supply of clean water to its citizens, reducing the prevalence of water-borne diseases. Bhutan has successfully eradicated polio and is on the verge of eliminating leprosy, but the spread of HIV/AIDS is a concern. A Multi-Sector Task Force (MSTF) has been created to coordinate the fight against HIV/AIDS. End Summary. A Free National Health Care System ---------------------------------- [Â¶](http://www.bhutan-research.org/us-diplomatic-cables-on-bhutan/05newdelhi7417" \l "par2) 2. (SBU) Bhutan provides its citizens with free basic health care and has done an admirable job in extending this service to the farthest reaches of the country. In its 2005 report "Situation Analysis of Women and Children in Bhutan," UNICEF commended the RGOB for creating an effective multi-tiered infrastructure that delivers widespread medical care at a reasonable cost. Bhutan's medical system consists of a national referral hospital in the capital Thimphu, two other referral hospitals in central and eastern Bhutan, 26 regional hospitals in district headquarters, and 158 BHUs spread out over the countryside. Donor countries and agencies reported that working in Bhutan is a "breath of fresh air" compared to most developing countries, because they actually see results for their efforts. The Basic Health Unit: Prevention is the Cure --------------------------------------------- [Â¶](http://www.bhutan-research.org/us-diplomatic-cables-on-bhutan/05newdelhi7417" \l "par3) 3. (U) The focus of the Bhutanese health program is preventative medicine, and the key to this effort is the BHU. BHUs, employing a medical assistant, basic health worker and a midwife, are local medical centers accessible to the rural population. UNICEF reported that 89 percent of Bhutan's residents were within a three hour walk of a BHU, noting that "given the very difficult terrain in most of the country, this is a striking achievement." To push medical care out even further, there are 1,300 volunteer village health workers that provide initial diagnosis and triage to rural patients. Essential drugs are distributed to each BHU and are free of charge. The RGOB has demonstrated a strong commitment to women's health issues and UNICEF has documented that the BHUs have dramatically decreased maternal mortality ratios from 773 per 100,000 live births in 1984 to 255 in [Â¶](http://www.bhutan-research.org/us-diplomatic-cables-on-bhutan/05newdelhi7417" \l "par2000) 2000. UNICEF pointed out that Bhutan's maternal mortality ratio remains high, due to the prevalence of home deliveries, because many Bhutanese must still walk for hours to reach the midwife at a BHU. Clean Water For A Healthy Life ------------------------------ [Â¶](http://www.bhutan-research.org/us-diplomatic-cables-on-bhutan/05newdelhi7417" \l "par4) 4. (U) Another of Bhutan's major health care achievements is the provision of clean drinking water to its population. The RGOB has increased ready access to water from 30 percent of the population in 1990 to 78 percent in 2000. The coverage varies by district, with 65 percent access in the far-eastern district of Trashigang and 98 percent access in central Bumthang district. The areas with greater water access tend to be in the mountainous areas with gravity-fed water systems and close proximity to a clean source of water. UNICEF reported that most mountain streams are protected and provide clean water, even when untreated. UNICEF told us that, overall, the water situation in Bhutan has much improved over prior years. Many villages previously obtained water from local ponds, especially in the lower lying areas, resulting in widespread bacterial infections and disease. The young were always hardest hit and it was not uncommon for large numbers of children to die during each outbreak. Under the current water supply scheme, this no longer occurs. The Fight Against Disease ------------------------- [Â¶](http://www.bhutan-research.org/us-diplomatic-cables-on-bhutan/05newdelhi7417" \l "par5) 5. (U) The RGOB has successfully eradicated preventable diseases through vaccination programs, with the World Health Organization (WHO) reporting immunization coverage at 99 percent of the targeted population. The Ministry of Health (MoH) confirmed that Bhutan had its last case of polio in 1986 and is very close to eradicating leprosy. The MoH indicated that HIV/AIDS is a growing concern in Bhutan, which currently has 72 confirmed cases, and the Government is taking the problem very seriously. UNICEF and the MoH noted that, with the prevalence rate currently below 0.1 percent, Bhutan has a chance to avert an HIV/AIDS epidemic. The RGOB has implemented an extensive campaign to combat HIV/AIDS under the direction of a Multi-Sector Task Force (MSTF). The MSTF, which includes central, district and local governments, the private sector and NGOs, unifies prevention efforts under a single body. Telemedicine: A Modern Solution For An Ancient Kingdom --------------------------------------------- --------- [Â¶](http://www.bhutan-research.org/us-diplomatic-cables-on-bhutan/05newdelhi7417" \l "par6) 6. (U) The RGOB successfully extended basic medical services to small towns and villages with the BHU system, but cannot provide outlying areas with fully-trained doctors and specialists. A lack of infrastructure and rugged terrain also make it difficult for patients to travel to central hospitals with specialists on their staffs. To overcome these hurdles, the Government uses technology to improve access to health care through a telemedicine program being piloted in three hospitals in 2005, with plans to extend it nationwide by the end of 2006. Comment: International Assistance Remains Necessary --------------------------------------------- ------ [Â¶](http://www.bhutan-research.org/us-diplomatic-cables-on-bhutan/05newdelhi7417" \l "par7) 7. (SBU) The health sector provides another example of Bhutan's unique experience with trying to bring modern development to a centuries old Buddhist monarchy. Bhutan is doing an admirable job extending health care to all its citizens, but has only been able to do so with international assistance. Under Bhutan's fiscal policy, the government uses its revenue to cover current expenditures and grants and loans for capital expenditures (Reftel). Therefore, while RGOB funds pay for ongoing medical costs, such as medicine and salaries, improvements such as new hospital construction, are still funded from abroad. Without continued foreign assistance, further upgrades to Bhutan's health system would be delayed. [Â¶](http://www.bhutan-research.org/us-diplomatic-cables-on-bhutan/05newdelhi7417#par8) 8. (U) Visit New Delhi's Classified Website: (http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/sa/newdelhi) BLAKE