

# THE BHUTAN SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

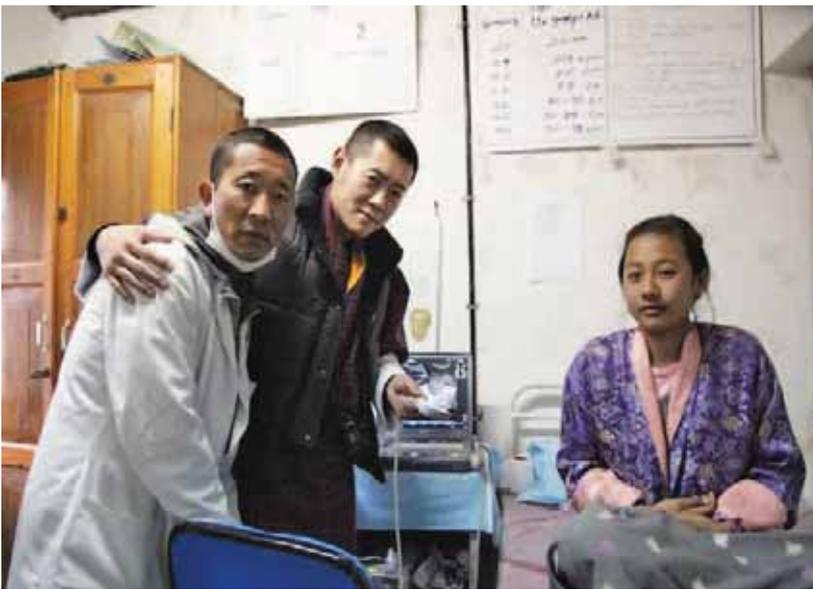


NUMBER 55

PRESIDENT: SIR SIMON BOWES LYON

SPRING 2015

## His Majesty's Tour



As part of His Majesty's Kidu, the Mobile Medical Unit accompanies His Majesty during all of His Majesty's Royal Tours. They set up camps in the most remote villages, where they provide medical check ups, endoscopy surgeries, dental and eye check ups, and clinics for obstetric problems. Dates are announced in advance and hundreds of villagers in neighbouring areas take this opportunity to use these medical services at the Mobile Medical Unit without having to travel to the hospital in Thimphu. His Majesty is seen here with Dr. Lotey, one of the doctors in the Mobile Medical Unit, and a patient from Thrimshing.

### **Diary Date**

*Join us on 1st July for a visit to the Grade 1 gardens at St Pauls Walden Bury in Hertfordshire, 35 miles north of London and the home of the Bhutan Society President, Sir Simon Bowes Lyon. The 40 acres of gardens have temples, formal landscaping and a lake, alongside a large collection of rhododendrons from the Himalayas, including some from Bhutan. The visit will include a tour of the garden, and also a visit to the house, the childhood home of Queen Elizabeth, The Queen Mother. It will be a day excursion by coach from London returning mid-afternoon. Will you please register your interest for this visit with Dorry Friesen either by email: [dorothefriesen@gmail.com](mailto:dorothefriesen@gmail.com) or by phone: 020 7351 0953 by Friday May 1st. Further details will be confirmed in due course.*

## Next meeting

### **Leatham family films and photographs of Bhutan in the 1960s**

**Speaker: Charlotte MacCaw**

**7.00 pm 26\*\* March 2015**

**The Polish Hearth Club,  
55 Prince's Gate, Exhibition  
Road, London SW7 2PN**

Following professional visits by Dr Aubrey Leatham (1920 – 2012) to Thimphu to attend the Third King of Bhutan, Dr Leatham was invited to visit Bhutan in 1964 with his wife Judith and their two girls, then aged 6 and 8. The excitement of the King arriving by helicopter, building an extension of Thimpu Dzong, the King's dancers and riding the King's yaks to Chomolhari base camp were beautifully recorded by Judith - in colour on 16mm cine film with a sound track. The British Film Institute has kindly digitalized the cine. It captures a magical moment in time which immediately transports you back into the medieval kingdom of Bhutan a decade or so before the country opened its borders to tourism. Charlotte (then the six year old daughter) will give a short introduction to the film.

Further accounts of the adventure can be read from [www.bhutanheartslife.co.uk](http://www.bhutanheartslife.co.uk)

\*\* Please note this date is one day later than that given in Newsletter 54

# SOCIETY NEWS

## Supporting the disabled in Bhutan

Support for disabled people in Bhutan has been relatively slow to be established, but is gaining impetus now as a result of the efforts of a small number of Bhutanese including Dr Sanga of Thimphu Hospital and Jigme Wangmo, founder of Drakstho. A survey of disabled people recently carried out has found that there are at least 7000 moderately or severely disabled adults and children in the country. The Disabled Persons Association of Bhutan (DPAB) is now in the process of setting up a register of those people.



Many organisations around the world help provide equipment for the disabled. Much of this comes from recycling materials which would otherwise be sent to landfill every year. This can provide a vast range of equipment for disabled people, especially children. In the UK, the charity Physionet was recently responsible for the collection, inspection, packaging and organisation of such a shipment of equipment, worth nearly £9,000, to Bhutan. Harry Franks who established Physionet SW has been responsible for co-ordinating the shipment in collaboration with Peter Thompson head of

Physionet UK. The organisation was initially established in 2005 and collects items from as far north as Inverness to Falmouth and normally sends about 6 forty foot containers a year – so far to 17 countries. It works with the Margaret Carey Foundation and HM prison workshops to ensure that the equipment is in good condition. The Trust Fund of the Bhutan Society has generously funded the delivery of this container load of wheelchairs and other equipment for disabled people in Bhutan. Funds were also provided by the Persula Foundation. The container of over 550 items arrived in Thimphu on the 15th January and was handed over to the DPAB by Michael Rutland in his capacity as UK Honorary Consul. In addition to Michael Rutland, another member of the Bhutan Society has been involved with the shipment. Sue Gross, senior NHS physiotherapist travelled around Bhutan with Dr Sanga, to oversee the selection of equipment - for example ensuring that the wheel chairs had solid tyres to bypass the likelihood of punctures!

### A link with the past

The visit my daughter and I paid to Bhutan recently as guests of HM the Queen Grandmother had its origin over 100 years ago. My grandfather was assistant to John Claude White, the Political Officer in Sikkim, who was a friend of the First King of Bhutan. Our family became acquainted with the royal family of Sikkim and in particular with Prince Sidkeong Tulku, who would come to play tennis, and with his sister Princess Choni. Sadly, Sidkeong died in 1914, but the friendship between Choni and my grandmother continued after the Princess married Tobgye Dorji, the Bhutan agent in Sikkim, and started a family. I inherited interesting letters and photographs my grandmother received from Choni, describing learning to bake and to play the piano and meeting the Prince of Wales, later Edward VIII. Learning that Rani Choni's daughter Ashi Kesang had married the Third King of Bhutan and was now Queen Grandmother, I thought she would be interested in her mother's letters, and sent copies, through the kind mediation of Anna Balikci at the Gangtok Institute of Tibetology. Her Majesty was indeed pleased and moved to see the letters and wrote very kindly, inviting me to visit Bhutan. I could not refuse such a wonderful opportunity and that is how my daughter and I came to enjoy the Queen Grandmother's generous and thoughtful hospitality and see something of her unique and beautiful country.



*Joan Schneider*

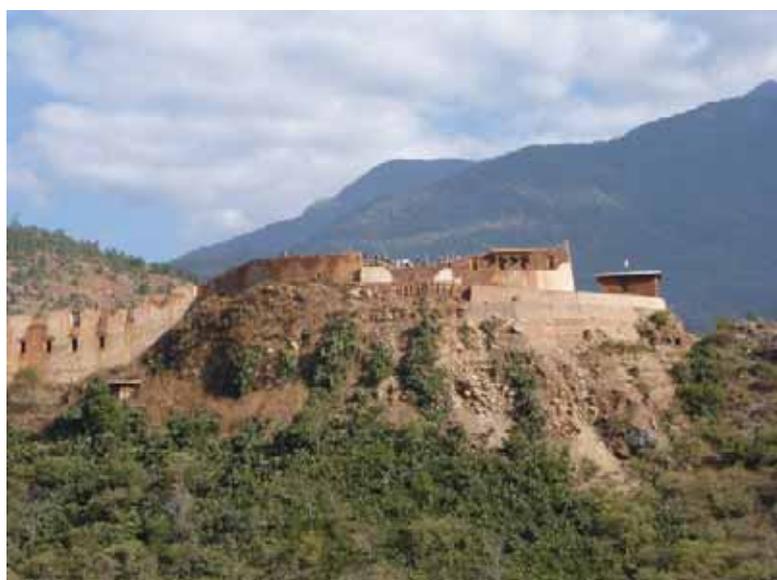
## Five Dzongs on World Heritage list

**Dzongs in Wangduephodrang, Punakha, Paro, Trongsa and Dagana have been nominated for the first ever World Heritage tentative list of Bhutan. The submission to this list was announced during a workshop on structural issues related to traditional Bhutanese buildings held in Thimphu last December.**



*View of the Wangduephodrang Dzong courtyard (taken by JC White in 1905)*

stated that it is placing high importance in retaining the existing walls left by the fire and in order to rebuild the dzong at the original location, it will be rebuilt over the existing surviving walls. "Therefore, it is critical to examine the strength of the remaining walls and look into appropriate and feasible measures to strengthen and reinforce the dzong's stone



*Recent view of the Wangduephodrang Dzong (taken by Michael Rutland in December 2014)*

masonry walls in the manner of respecting traditional materials and techniques," she said. Experts from Italy, Japan, Australia, Switzerland, UK, Portugal and India were invited to present recommendations and to identify measures for the remaining wall as well as new walls that needed to be constructed. The reconstruction works are already underway and are expected to be completed in 2018. At the end of the reconstruction, the dzong is required to house 15 shrines, living spaces for around 100 monks and office spaces for more than 30 different sectors of the Wangduephodrang administration.

In the meantime construction of new religious structures has been frozen for the next two years. The decision was made after the Department of Culture announced it faced difficulties in managing and maintaining the existing religious structures, which are considered more significant than newly constructed ones. Chief architect, Nagtsho Dorji, said it was necessary to take stock of the needs of reconstructing existing religious structures. "We have to get a clear idea on how many religious structures need reconstruction," she said. "There are already thousands of existing religious structures that required huge resources in terms of manpower, time and finance, for maintaining, renovation and reconstruction and this work has been exacerbated by the earthquakes in 2009 and 2011."

The Government funds 90 per cent of these costs with other funding coming from the dzongkhags and securing financial support has been an issue. It expects that this review will be completed within two years. In the meantime it is hoped the freeze on new constructions will help secure financial support for maintaining older religious structures.

Chief architect with the Department of Culture, Nagtsho Dorji, said that UNESCO has encouraged the identification, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritages around the world. "The five dzongs witnessed significant political events and cultural development throughout the history after the unification of the country," Nagtsho Dorji said. "However, the dzongs are on the tentative list and currently we are deliberating with experts from World Heritage and reconstruction on this issue."

Also discussed was the restoration of Wangduephodrang dzong. "Cautious measures and strategic planning are necessary during its reconstruction," Nagtsho Dorji said. The Department has

present recommendations and to identify measures for the remaining wall as well as new walls that needed to be constructed. The reconstruction works are already underway and are expected to be completed in 2018. At the end of the reconstruction, the dzong is required to house 15 shrines, living spaces for around 100 monks and office spaces for more than 30 different sectors of the Wangduephodrang administration.

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## Thimphu to Trashigang in a day - but not quite yet!



Work on widening about 200 miles of the East-West highway from Thimphu to Trashigang is underway and will be completed within three years. Works and Human Settlement Minister, Dorji Choden said, "When the road improvement works are completed, we're looking to shorten the travel time from Thimphu to Trashigang to a single day".

The Minister said the dilapidated road was severely damaged, narrow and dangerous. He said, "The existing highway requires better alignment, while the curvatures along some stretches pose dangers. The rock cuttings on vertical cliffs will also be challenging as will managing the traffic flow."

The East-West highway when completed will be a double lane road. The works have already started

with the widening of the Semtokha-Dochula highway and work on the Wangdue stretch will start very soon. Surveys for the remaining segments have also been completed. From Wangdue, the widening works would continue along the 53 miles stretch to Chuserbu. The third segment of 27 miles is from Chuserbu to Trongsa. While another segment of 34 miles continues from Trongsa to Nangar, the final segment of 85 miles extends from Lingmithang to Trashigang.

Apart from the East-West highway, the Minister also said the Government would maintain and blacktop about 560 miles of other roads across the country. All the improvement works are being carried out with Government of India funding.

## Visit Bhutan Year 2015

**The tourism industry looks forward to a good year ahead, with 2015 being declared as Visit Bhutan year, to commemorate the 60th birth anniversary of His Majesty the Fourth King.**

Tour operators have started developing various packages to attract more visitors this year and their counterpart agents around the world have been informed and similarly will be actively marketing Visit Bhutan year. The Visit Bhutan year highlights a series of tourism events across the country and will also serve as a platform to promote domestic tourism. The Visit Bhutan year website ([www.visitbhutanyear.com](http://www.visitbhutanyear.com)) and the calendar of events for 2015 were launched last November. The website also provides information on planning trips and how to get in touch with tour operators. Visitors can also choose the itinerary packaged by local tour operators.

The Visit Bhutan year 2015 is accompanied by the tagline, 'Celebrate Happiness.' One tour operator said, "We expect a better year ahead and the response, so far, has been good." Others are also looking at promoting the lean season months of summer to attract more visitors during that period. One special promotional event taking place in Thimphu in early February is an international "Adventure travel and responsible tourism conference and mart".

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The event is being organised by the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA), for tour agencies from Bhutan and other participating countries to help create new business opportunities in the tourism industry.

However, some tour operators feel that, without any special financial support for the Visit Bhutan year, it won't be any different. One tour operator said, "During a recent promotion with Thailand there were discounts on airlines, hotels and the daily tariff, but there are no such discounts for the Visit Bhutan year."

The Tourism Council of Bhutan (TCB) officials have confirmed that there will be no change in the daily minimum tariff of USD 250 and 200 a day for tourists visiting this year. "We are also unsure how the Visit Bhutan year would help us attract more tourists as the announcement came late," said one tour operator. Officials however believe that 2015 would be another good year because of the increasing perception of Bhutan as a high-end destination. "Moreover, having declared 2015 as Visit Bhutan year, there are more reasons to promote Bhutan, thus being able to create more awareness of Bhutan," the official said.

Meanwhile, records with TCB show a total of 44,424 regional and 43,714 international tourists visited Bhutan up to September 2014.

# KINGDOM OF BHUTAN

## External debt growing at 9.5 per cent

The country's stock of outstanding external debt saw an increase of 9.5 per cent between June 2013 and June 2014. In three months alone, from June to September 2014, debt swelled from 101 per cent to 108 per cent of the GDP size which means the total debt now exceeds the size of the economy by eight per cent.

The Royal Monetary Authority's (RMA) annual report revealed a growth of 10.6 per cent in rupee debt, which constitutes 64 per cent of the total debt. This was mainly on account of disbursements of rupee loan for the on-going hydropower projects. Hydropower loans now account for 83.4 per cent of outstanding rupee loan as of June 2014, against about 70 per cent in 2013. This was because rupee loan through the overdraft facility from India has been either liquidated or not renewed. According to an audit report on public debt management published in April last year, hydropower debt is projected to reach Nu 211B by the end of eleventh Plan, accounting for around 81 per cent of the total external debt.

Although the government, both the former and the current, has stressed that hydropower debts are self-liquidating, some pointed out that loans undertaken for hydropower projects are susceptible to time and cost overruns, thereby increasing the debt burden.

Almost all the other debt, in the form of convertible currency debt (USD 629M), is concessional loans that the government availed to finance various socio-economic development projects. But interest payments on convertible currency debt also increased from USD 7.2M to USD 8.7M. Besides the government of India, the largest creditors were the Asian Development Bank and the Austrian government.

## Street view service launched

Over 2,000 miles of 360 degree panorama imagery of Bhutan is now available for viewing on Google Maps Street. You can now stroll through Paro or Trongsa without leaving your laptop.



Google Inc. launched its street view service for Bhutan in Thimphu, in late October. As with other locations the viewer can navigate scenes by looking up or down, and sideways, and move to different spots, almost as if standing in the middle of the scene being displayed. Travel agencies are also able to utilise the service to explain their tours in more detail to potential clients. The service is also useful to Bhutanese, who wanted to explore their own country and Bhutanese businesses could benefit by embedding such maps onto their web sites.

As always the biggest challenge for the service was not to compromise people's privacy. As a result, faces and vehicle number plates have been blurred and all images have been taken in or from public areas.

The images are not displayed in real time as many of the images for Bhutan were taken during May 2013. However an update or refresh of the images will occur within five years depending on how fast changes occur on the ground.

## National Geographic Anniversary Celebration



**Directors of the National Geographic Magazine were in Thimphu in November 2014 to celebrate the centenary of their first publishing John Claude White's article on Bhutan.**

**Her Majesty The Queen of Bhutan is seen here at the reception with the directors of the National Geographic Magazine.**

## A dog show with a difference

To conserve the native Tibetan mastiff the Department of Livestock last week conducted dog shows at Lingzhi and Soe in northern Thimphu. Although no survey has been done to ascertain its population, it is said numbers have reduced over the years because of cross breeding with other dogs, especially stray dogs. These dog shows were the result of a royal command to conserve the bloodline of the breed. The purpose of the shows in Soe and Lingzhi was to identify the native Bjopchi breed through its physical characteristics and behaviour. To ascertain the real breed, livestock officials put the dogs inside a ring, and watched carefully for more than five minutes.

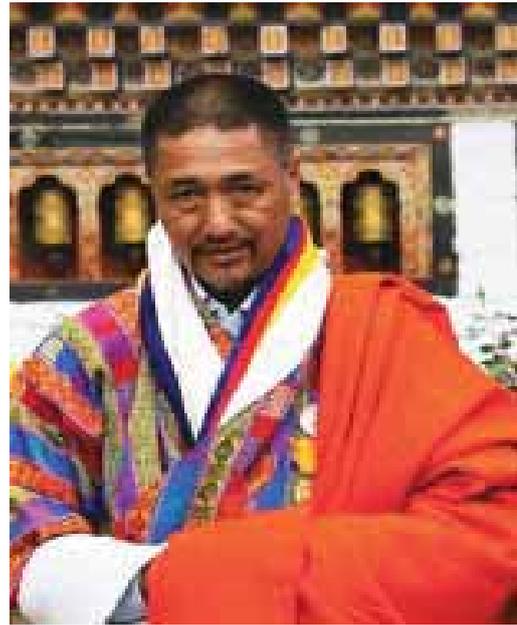
The Tibetan Mastiff is an aggressive well-built dog with a broad head and muzzle and nose. Its V-shaped ears hang forward close to the head. It measures from 61 to 76cm in height and weighs between 48 to 82kg with thick fur around the neck and shoulder. It lives up to 10 to 14 years and is primarily reared in Bhutan to protect livestock from predators.



Of the 100 dogs brought to the Lingzhi centre, livestock officials identified around 70 that possessed true breed characteristics. In Soe around 10 of the 36 dogs were selected. The best ones were awarded a trophy worth Nu 1,000. While all owners got Nu 100 each, the dogs were given an anti-rabies vaccine and a de-worming tablet.

One livestock officer said the programme would go on to promote the Tibetan mastiff population in the country, through educating on the importance of the breed. The Livestock Department also plans to organise similar dog shows in the Trashigang area. At national level, a programme will be set up so that the breed can establish a good number of dogs that will be for sale both within and outside the country.

## New Supreme Court Chief Justice



### **Justice Dasho Tshering Wangchuk has been appointed the new Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Bhutan.**

Dasho Tshering Wangchuk, 51, is one of the youngest chief justices in the region. According to the Constitution, the chief justice is appointed from among the drangpons of the Supreme Court or from among eminent jurists by the Druk Gyalpo, in consultation with the National Judicial Commission. The term of office of the chief justice of Bhutan is five years or until attaining the age of sixty-five, whichever is earlier. The Supreme Court, which comprises the chief justice and four drangpons, is the highest appellate authority to entertain appeals against the judgments, orders, or decisions of the High Court and has the power to review them. Popularly known as 'Stanley' since his college days, Dasho Tshering Wangchuk from Thimphu was awarded a red scarf by His Majesty the King during the National Day celebration last year. Chief Justice Wangchuk took over from Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye who retired in November having attained the age of 65. In an official farewell ceremony attended by justices of Supreme Court and High Court, 20 dzongkhag and 15 dungkhag courts, Her Royal Highness Princess Sonam Dechan Wangchuck expressed her appreciation to Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye for serving with unwavering loyalty and dedication to fulfil the vision of three successive monarchs for the past 23 years. During a visit to the UK in 2013, Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye was elected an Honorary Bencher of the Inner Temple. Dasho Tshering Wangchuk also visited London in 2013 as a member of Lyonpo Sonam Tobgye delegation.

## National Symbols of Bhutan - The Blue Poppy



The Blue Poppy (*Meconopsis Grandis*) is the national flower of Bhutan. It grows on rocky mountain terrain found above the tree line of 11,500 - 14,500 feet. It is a hardy perennial flowering plant, is herbaceous and blooms in summer. The flowers are huge and are about 4 to 5 inches in diameter. Its plants can be two feet tall and can grow in sunny to partial shade areas. The beautiful blue flowers have shades of violet and look magnificent. They have a velvet or fuzzy texture and its germination and aftercare can be quite challenging.

At one time the flower was likened with the myth of a yeti because its existence had not been confirmed, but blue poppies can be found along high mountain passes from the far eastern parts of the country across to the west. It is one of the rarest flowers in the world and its stems normally have 4 to 5 flowers.

It was discovered in Bhutan in 1933 by a British Botanist, George Sherriff in a remote part of Sakteng in eastern Bhutan although legendary mountaineer George Mallory is said to have discovered the plant in the Himalayas in late spring of 1922 during his second Everest expedition. The flowers were introduced with much excitement at the Royal Horticultural Society's spring show of 1926. Thirteen types of endemic blue poppies have been identified all over Bhutan, strewn over the alpine region across the country and four types of blue poppies have been specifically identified at the Chelela Pass. They used to grow there abundantly and in the Paro Valley, but recently their growth has been severely depleted and they have become quite rare. According to the Royal Society for the Protection of Nature in Bhutan, about 150 blue poppies were spotted here in the 1990s but the numbers depleted to only 11 in 2002. The depletion has been mainly attributed to the people from the neighbouring districts removing these plants for their own gardens. Blue poppies do not produce opium and are known locally as '*Euitgel Metog Hoem*'.

### New Birds in Bhutan

At least one new water bird species known as the Common Moorhen (*Gallinula Chloropus*) was discovered in Bhutan's nationwide annual water bird survey, published recently. It was spotted around Kurichu dam site in Mongar by a researcher working for the Institute for Conservation and Environment (UWICE). The bird was seen whilst scouring the river bank.

The Common Moorhen is the third water bird species discovered in Bhutan after the maiden water bird census was conducted in February 2014 to study bird diversity and distribution. The Long-tailed duck (*Hyemalis*) and Lapland's Spurwing were also discovered in Bhutan during that survey. The Long-tail duck was spotted close to Wangdiphodrang and the Lapland's Spurwing in the Trashiyangtse area.

With these discoveries UWICE bird list now records at least 692 species. The water bird census will be conducted each January for a few years to record migratory routes of such birds from South East Asia as they pass through Bhutan.

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January was chosen as a good time to see the birds before they start migrating back to their summer roosting grounds. Such an annual event would also create awareness among locals who can become involved

with conservation of the species and its habitat. The census will also help experts determine how many birds migrate from the northern to southern hemisphere using Bhutan as their migratory route. The Institute expects to discover the water birds' response to climate change and impact of changing weather patterns on migration, population and habitat. In total, international experts estimate the existence of over 770 bird species in Bhutan.

## Number of flights to be capped

**Given its inability to expand the area where aircraft are parked and unloaded or loaded at Paro international airport, the department of Civil Aviation (DCA) is considering limiting Drukair and Tashi Air flights.**

The current capacity for five aircraft was already exceeded in August and with Drukair adding another aircraft in March, this will result in seven aircraft operating to and from the airport. Given the terrain, flight movements at Paro airport must be limited to daylight periods only, so they have to operate within a short time frame. This is further shortened during the monsoon and windy seasons when flights are often delayed or cancelled. "There may be times where Drukair and Tashi Air may have to reduce flights," said DCA chief administrative officer, Karma Wangchuk. He added that the option of spacing out the flights would raise further problems for airlines, as they would have to obtain corresponding slots at the other international airports to where they travel.

DCA has been unable to expand the airport's apron as an Indian Air Force (IAF) camp is located on the area required. Talks to reacquire the area by relocating the camp have been going on since 2008 but the issue remains unresolved. Paro airport was originally constructed by the Indian army in the 1960s.

Concerns have also been raised about the resulting congestion on the apron caused by aircraft and service vehicles and equipment which may eventually lead to an accident. As a temporary solution, DCA has chosen to demolish a building used for cargo and convert the space into a parking area for service vehicles and equipment. He also announced that the Agriculture Ministry has in principle allowed the present animal and plant quarantine facility to be used for cargo services.

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## Challenging driving!

Being a taxi driver in Bhutan can be challenging in more than one way. They claim that if they stay on the right side of the rules they lose passengers, but if they break them, passengers will continue to use their service.

One particular point of conflict concerns where a child sits in a taxi, another is the use of seat belts. The Road Safety and Transport Authority (RSTA) states that according to Road Safety and Transport Act 1999, a child is not allowed to sit in the front seat and seat belts should be worn at all times. This is creating a problem as passengers just don't wish to comply. One taxi driver said, "The awareness campaign that RSTA conducts to update the traffic rules should be given also to the public, not just to the students, taxi and truck drivers." However another driver said he believed that wearing a seat belt in hilly areas was risky when accidents occurred, as it was easier to get away if not wearing one.

By the end of February the RTSA will have trained about a thousand taxi and student drivers. This is an annual event, but is becoming more relevant as roads get more congested by the day. The lack of traffic sense among Bhutanese motorists is a well-known and much discussed fact!

## CONTACT LIST

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### NOTE

*If you have not already done so, we would appreciate you sending your latest e-mail address to the Membership Secretary at:*

**[rosieglazebrook@hotmail.com](mailto:rosieglazebrook@hotmail.com)**

*who will then add it to the database. There is no plan for the Society to go 'paperless' but there are times when it could be very convenient to communicate information electronically at short notice.*

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