

Statement by

Mr. Zahir Uddin Swapon, Hon'ble Member of Bangladesh Parliament on "Progress in Education, Women's Empowerment, HIV/AIDS & other Health Issues - Assessing the Challenges Ahead"

Wednesday, September 14, 2005

Mr. President,

I most warmly congratulate the Parliamentarians for Global Action for organizing the 2005 Parliamentary Briefings on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Freedom from Want. It is my firm conviction that the deliberations of this meeting will see fruition.

Hundreds of delegates from across the world are now in the premise of the UN. The history of mankind never saw such a huge assembly of the heads of states/governments for any event of interest to the World. The leaders are undertaking comprehensive review of the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals. There is no denying that parliamentarians and law makers have also critical role to play in the implementation of the goals and targets as set in the Millennium Declaration as well as in the Millennium Review document that is agreed yesterday afternoon (Tuesday) by consensus in the general assembly after intensive, down-to-the-wire negotiations.

Since Millennium, solid progresses have been achieved in the economic and social fields in some countries. The rest are continued to be marginalized. Inequality within and among the nations persists or rather widened.

Mr. President,

Every child is entitled to have a free and good quality education. But throughout the world, there are still over 100 million children out of school, including 58 million girls. We must do all we can to tackle this challenge. Education has wider and divergent ramifications over other socioeconomic factors.

In Bangladesh, education remains the major thrust sector of our development strategy. The gross primary school enrollment rate, which was only 61% in 1980, increased to 97% by 2004. Improvement in the enrolment rates was due to increase in the Government's budgetary allocation for girls' education, free primary education for all and secondary education for girls, massive stipend programmes at primary and secondary levels, and the food for education Programme. Individually, this sector enjoys the highest resource allocation, which is 15% of our total national budget. NGOs have played an important role in promoting basic education in Bangladesh.

Mr. President,

Women are disproportionately represented among the worlds poorest. Seventy percent of 1.2 billion people living in extreme poverty are women. They have relatively higher unemployment rate than men in virtually every country. They also make up the majority of the lower paid, unorganized informal sector of most economies. A reaffirmation of

the centrality of gender equality to poverty eradication and development is needed now more than ever.

Gender equality is guaranteed by the Constitution of Bangladesh. A new policy matrix has been designed for ensuring gender-balanced sustainable development in our new PRSP. Gender mainstreaming, and empowerment of women have helped us create a vibrant and progressive society. Under Fourteenth Amendment in the Constitution, we have exclusively reserved 45 seats for women in our national parliament. This Act will not preclude a woman from being directly elected to any seat from the 300 constituencies. Bangladesh has achieved gender parity in primary and secondary schooling. At the secondary level, there are already more girls enrolled than boys and the ration is 53:47.

Micro-credit programmes, in Bangladesh, are simultaneously addressing both poverty alleviation and women's empowerment. More than 12 million women are now self-employed through successful utilization of micro-credit facilities. Many of them have become leaders, instigating change in social practices and relationships. Access of women to the labour market has significantly widened. Over 1.8 million women are now employed in the garment industry. The World Economic Forum (WEF), in its first ever gender gap study, has ranked Bangladesh 39 out of 58 nations of the world in women's empowerment index and top among Muslim countries and also among South Asian countries covered by the study.

Mr. President,

A mother dies every minute in childbirth, millions of women and children have no access to healthcare or life saving medicines across the globe. The world has never been richer, yet the number of people living in extreme poverty is on the increase worldwide. HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases pose severe risks for the entire world and serious challenges to the achievement of development goals. These diseases and other emerging health challenges require a concerted international response through increased and predictable resources and technical know-how.

Though AIDS prevalence is extremely low in Bangladesh, yet we are in a high incidence zone. It is estimated that the prevalence rate of HIV infection among adults (15-49 years) is less than 0.1 percent. As of November 2003, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare reported a total of 363 cases. We formed National AIDS Committee (NAC) to support policy and promote multi-sectoral effort on HIV/AIDS. The government, in collaboration with other partners, has set up the National Strategic Plan (NSP, 2004 - 2010) that details priorities to address HIV for the next six years. The key issue now is to mobilize adequate resources for implementation of our programmes.

Infant and Under-Five Mortality rate has fallen rapidly, reaching from a level of 125 by 1984-85, to 66 currently. The decline has been most rapid during the 1990s. Indeed, not only has infant mortality fallen much more rapidly in Bangladesh, but the level of infant mortality is now lower than most of the countries at comparative millue. Bangladesh has made tremendous progress in expanding child immunization coverage over the last two decades. MDG 4 indicates that under-five mortality rate must be reduced from 151 deaths per thousand live births in 1990 to 50 in 2015. To offset the challenges, supplementary immunization activities have been introduced by the government.

Despite substantial decrease in maternal mortality, the rate is still very high in Bangladesh. The Government is giving priority to the promotion of safe motherhood from the grassroots level upwards, through antenatal care, safe delivery, pre-natal care, essential obstetrical care and family planning. Several measures have been taken to address these problems.

The Government is implementing a programme titled "Health, Nutrition and Population Sector Programme" (HNPS) for 2003-2006 with an outlay of US\$1.5 billion. Consistent with our PRSP and HNPS the government has allocated US\$700 million in health sector for the current fiscal year. The government will increase 10 percent allocation every year from 2005 to 2010 in the Health Nutrition and Population Sector Programmes.

Human Development Report 2005, that is launched last week, in many ways recognizes Bangladesh's enduring successes in its socio-economic progress. The report says "since 1990 Bangladesh has recorded some of the developing world's most rapid advances in basic human development indicators. Child and infant mortality rates have been falling at more than 5% a year, the fertility rate has fallen sharply, and malnutrition among mothers has fallen from 52% in 1996 to 42% in 2002".

Mr. President,

2005 World Summit is billed as one of the largest single gatherings of world leaders. The Secretary-General has called it "a once-in-a-generation opportunity" to forge a global consensus on development, security, human rights and United Nations renewal. Looking ahead to the next 10 years, we still feel that if governments across the world and international institutions have the political will, the Goals can be achieved. It is our conviction that the global community will devote their full efforts to seize this opportunity.

I thank you.