

## Strong mechanism needed to enforce Right to Info Act

Speakers tell roundtable

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The proposed Right to Information Act, once enacted, could be ineffective if it is not interpreted correctly and a strong mechanism is not created to implement it, speakers at a roundtable said yesterday.

The objective of the act is to provide people with a legal basis to seek information from the government, non-government or corporate bodies, but it will not function properly if a lot of conditions are attached to it, they said.

The Mass-line Media Centre (MMC) organised the roundtable on 'The scope of Right to Information Act and its long-term impact' at LGED auditorium in the city in association with Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF).

"In most cases, laws become farcical if they are not implemented properly. They can even be perversely interpreted," said Public Service Commission (PSC) Chairman Dr Saadat Hussain as the chief guest.

enable the people to secure all sorts of information, but actually they might have access to nothing," he said, adding that transparency of the authorities depends on their mindset.

The authorities should not have any problem in providing information if they have honest intention, but if they have bad intention, they will put up barriers, he said.

Appreciating in-depth reporting of the media, the PSC chairman agreed with the proposed creation of a National Information Commission to settle disputes between the information seekers and providers.

Dr Golam Rahman, chairperson of the journalism department at Daffodil University, said the law alone cannot ensure the right to information unless there is a culture of providing it for public interest.

"The authorities cannot resort to rampant corruption if there is a right to information act," he said, adding that the government should also have the capacity and mechanism of preserving information.

Presiding over the roundtable, Law Commission Member Dr M Enamul Haque said there should be some reservations about providing information, but they must be justified.

Speaking as the special guest, MJF Executive Director Shaheen Anam said the main objective of the proposed Right to Information Act is to hold the government accountable to the people.

"Enactment of the law is the first initiative to this end, but surely there should be a mechanism to monitor how it is implemented," she said, adding that the means to access information should also be devised.

Toby Mendel, director (law) of Article 19, a Canada-based organisation, said free flow of information creates enabling environment to do better business, exercise democratic norms and ensures social accountability.

Appreciating Bangladesh's initiative to enact a right to information act, he said, "The people must be engaged in enforcing the law. People of all levels should be aware

of that and the civil society has a role to play in it."

An open policy-based civil service is an imperative to better manage information, which is the key to information regime, he added.

In his keynote paper, Supreme Court lawyer Barrister Tanjib Ul Alam said, "One of the major loopholes in the proposed act is the exemptions from disclosure of information, which may well be construed widely by the relevant authorities to refrain from providing information."

The law will not be an effective one without a strong mechanism to implement it, he said in the paper read out by Mir Shahidul Alam of MMC.

Aliur Rahman, senior trainer at the Press Institute of Bangladesh, said the right to information is lifeline of all rights of the people. Therefore, the government should set up outlets at the grassroots level to provide information, he added.

## Russia can be important source of foodgrains, energy: Iftekhar

UNB, Dhaka

Foreign Adviser Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury yesterday said Russia could be an important source of foodgrains and energy.

"Russia can be an important source of foodgrains and energy at a time when we need both," Iftekhar told journalists after a meeting with Charge d' Affaires of Russia in Dhaka Vladimir Dzhunkovskiy at the Foreign Ministry.

The Foreign Adviser apprised the Russian envoy about the measures being taken by the government in the wake of the devastating floods.

They also discussed various issues that may come up during the adviser's visit to Russia next month.

The Russian diplomat said, "This will be a very fruitful and ground-breaking visit that will bring the two countries closer."

Iftekhar termed Russia a historic friend and said, "There're great benefits for both of us in developing our relations."

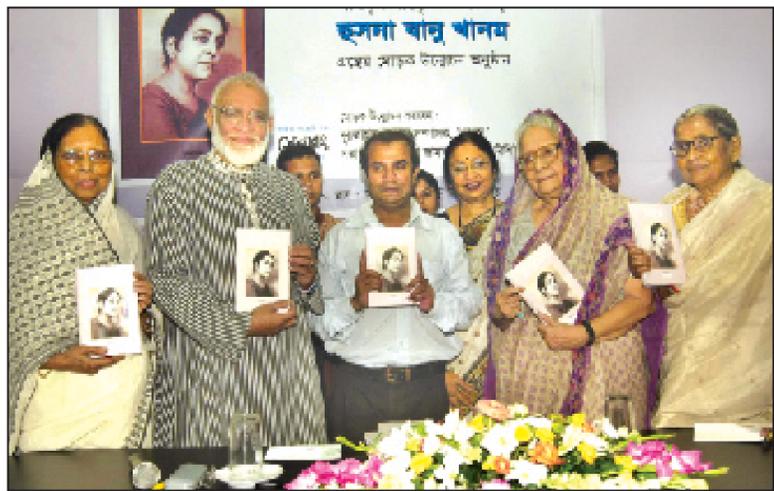


PHOTO: STAR  
The publication ceremony of a book on Husna Banu Khanam, a pioneering cultural activist, was held at the Dhaka University Senate Hall yesterday. (From left) Siddiq Kabir, Mostofa Zaman Abbasi, Kazi Hasan, Nurjahan Begum and Latifa Akand hold copies of the book edited by Samina Chowdhury.

## PERSONS WITH DISABILITY Access to ICT a must to turn them into human resources

Speakers say at conference

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Experts at a conference yesterday underscored the need for disabled persons' access to information and communication technology (ICT) in order to turn them into human resources.

They also emphasised providing logistical support to the persons with disability (PWD).

They were speaking at a conference titled 'ICT and persons with disability: The Context of Bangladesh,' at city's Brac Centre Inn.

Relief International-Schools Online (RI-SOL), a US based NGO in association with Young Power in Social Action (YPSA), Blind Education and Rehabilitation Development Organisation (BERDO), National Forum of Organisations Working with Disabled (NFOWD) and Bangladesh NGO Network for Radio Communication (BNNRC) organised the daylong conference.

The conference aimed at bringing practitioners, policymakers and

the mass of the country under an umbrella for the benefit of PWDs through providing ICT facilities, said Nazrul Islam, director of (RI-SOL), Bangladesh country office, while delivering the inaugural speech.

He added the conference also aims at disseminating information about ICT-based innovative programmes that can empower PWDs through involving them in income generating process.

Speaking as the chief guest, Prof Atiur Rahman of Dhaka University put emphasis on initiating development projects after analysing the needs of the disabled persons.

He asked for integrating the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) into local development projects for the benefit of all, including the PWDs.

He also urged the media to introduce sign language interpretation for physically challenged people to ensure access to information.

He called upon the NGOs to recruit PWDs and establish a model

to encourage other institutions to engage PWDs in various development activities.

Expressing concern over the condition of the disabled women, Anannya Raihan, director of D Net, said poverty and disability create a 'matrix' situation and make their life challenging.

Mahbulul Ashraf, member of ICT Thematic Group of NFOWD, asked for the optimum utilisation of limited resources to provide ICT facilities for PWDs and turn them into human resources.

He also suggested highlighting the success stories of the physically challenged people through the media to encourage the disabled persons.

Colleen Sullivan, programme officer, RI-SOL, Headquarters, USA, Dr Nafeesur Rahman, executive director of NFOWD, Vaskar Bhattacharya, programme officer of YPSA and AHM Bazlur Rahman, chief executive officer of BNNRC, also spoke on the occasion.



PHOTO: STAR  
PSC Chairman Dr Saadat Hussain speaks at a roundtable at LGED auditorium in the city yesterday. On his left are Law Commission Member Dr M Enamul Haque, Article 19 Director Toby Mendel and MJF Executive Director Shaheen Anam and on his right are Dr Golam Rahman and Mir Shahidul Alam of MMC.

## BCL worker assaulted by Shibir at RU

RU CORRESPONDENT

Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS) activists beat up a Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) worker at Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology on Monday night.

Sources said the ICS activists led by Hamid Hall unit President Tanvir asked BCL worker Shishir not to smoke in front of the hall's guest room.

At one stage, the ICS activists assaulted Shishir with wood sticks following an altercation between them.

When contacted, Tanvir denied the allegation and said they only requested Shishir not to smoke inside the hall.