

SOUTH ASIAN REGIONAL CONFERENCE BEGINS

Call to stop violence against women in politics

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The third South Asian Regional Conference kicked off yesterday with a call to stop all forms of violence against women in politics and to promote their participation in political decision-making.

South Asia Partnership International (SAP), an integral part of South Asian Civil Society, organised the three-day conference titled 'Democracies without violence: Engendering politics, policies and actions' that began at Brac Centre Inn in the city.

Women politicians, human rights activists, lawyers and members of the civil society from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are taking part in the conference.

Addressing the inaugural ceremony of the conference, the speakers said South Asia has been classified as the worst region in terms of indicators with the highest rates of different forms of violence against women.

In South Asia, the concept of power and authority are ascribed to certain characteristics determined by the male

privileged groups to exclude women, they said, adding that women normally are not given the opportunity to hold positions of power in politics.

Being powerless and marginalised, women in South Asia are at great disadvantages and experience injustice in the political domain, they added.

They also said that gender-based violence discourages women from actively participating in politics and almost all forms of gender-based violence are used as tools for harming women through physical, psychological or social intimidation.

Chaired by Rajesh Tandon, chairperson, SAP-International, the inaugural ceremony was addressed by Rasheda K Chowdhury, former adviser to the caretaker government, Dr Fazle Hasan Abed, chairperson and founder of Brac, Kumari Balasuriya, governor, Southern Province, Sri Lanka, Meenakshi Gopinath of India, Hina Jilani, advocate and human rights activist of Pakistan, Chandni Joshi, advisory group member and former regional programme director, UNIFEM, Nepal, Masuda Jalal of Afghanistan, Rohit Kumar Nepali, executive director, SAP-

International, and Syed Nurul Alam, executive director, SAP-Bangladesh.

"I believe that increasing representation is only part of the answer and merely electing women into political roles will not bring about changes in the status of women in our society," Fazle Hasan Abed said as the chief guest.

"Women's issues need to be addressed in mainstream politics. Greater gender sensitivity is required within parties and within parliaments," he added.

Rasheda K Chowdhury said, "We should give attention how to get rid of violence from the entire politics."

Kumari Balasuriya said rape, misconduct and physical abuse are rampant for women, both voters and candidates, in the elections.

She also said that men use character assassination as a tool to force women politicians to quit their political career.

Meenakshi Gopinath said that paradoxically, the cases of violence against women in politics are rarely highlighted.

The first and the second regional conferences on 'Violence against women in politics' were held in Nepal in 2007 and 2008.



PHOTO: STAR

All-Party Garment Sramik Oikya Parishad brings out a procession from Muktangan in the city yesterday demanding trial for the killings at Nippon Garments, arrest of its owner and withdrawal of false cases against workers and compensation for the casualties.

Leprosy a major health problem

5,000 cases detected last year

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Leprosy is still a major public health problem in Bangladesh, as more than 5,000 cases were diagnosed last year, according to a study.

Rajshahi division has the highest number of leprosy patients -- about 45 percent of all cases -- followed by Dhaka with 33 percent of cases. In the last 20 years, more than 186,000 cases were detected, the study said.

The Leprosy Mission International (Bangladesh) revealed the figures at a national advocacy seminar titled 'Leprosy is curable, free treatment is available, there is no place of social discrimination' at the IDB Bhaban conference centre in the city yesterday.

Experts at the seminar said the number might be higher as social stigma associated with leprosy is still prevalent in society, which is a major obstacle to self-

reporting and early treatment.

They said that integration of leprosy treatment in general hospitals is urgent. Currently there are only 40 beds available for leprosy patients in government hospitals. In private hospitals, there are another 324 beds available, which is inadequate.

Presenting the keynote paper, Rev. Martin Adhikary, programme director (hospital), said the disease is more prevalent in Nilphamari, Gaibandha, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Bandarban, Khagrachhari, Rangamati, Dhaka and Chittagong metropolitan areas.

Leprosy is an airborne communicable disease. The first outward sign of leprosy is a patch on the skin, usually associated with loss of feelings, caused by impairment of the functions of nerves. However, it is curable with the intervention of modern medicine. If not treated, leprosy can cause disability.

In 2008, over 296,000 new cases were diagnosed around the world with over 800 being diagnosed every day.

State Minister for Cultural Affairs Promode Mankin said that with misconception still existing in society, rights of the leprosy patients are still violated. They are isolated by society, even their own families abandon them.

Lawmaker Asaduzzaman Noor said the Lepers Act 1898 is posing barriers toward ensuring the rights of leprosy patients. A new and modern law should be enacted, he added.

Minister for Social Welfare Enamul Haque Mostafa Shaheed said it is necessary to conduct further research to find out why leprosy is more prevalent in certain part of the country.

Dr. James Tejosh Dash, country director, and Richard Labio Bala, director, administration of leprosy mission, also spoke.

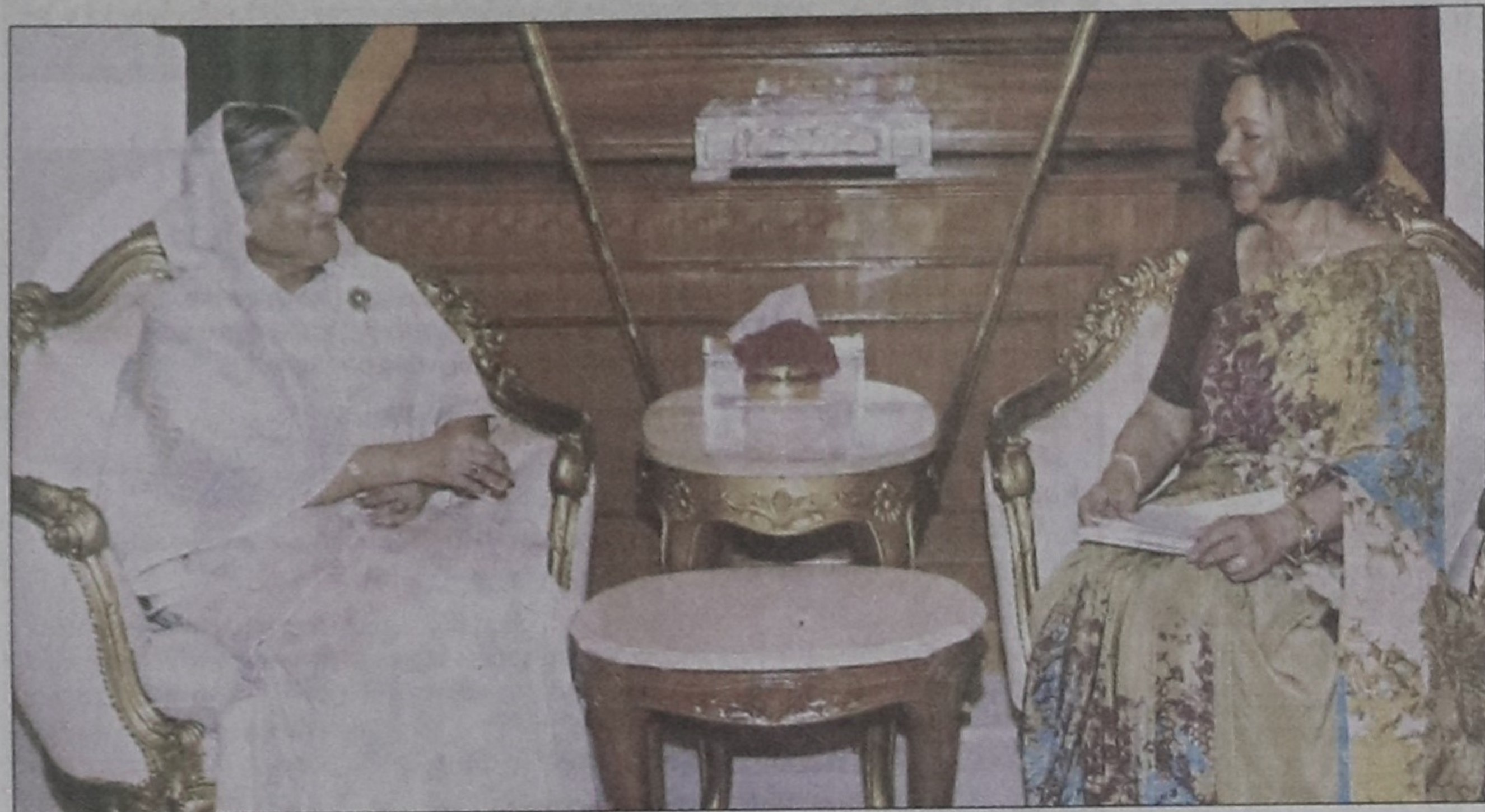


PHOTO: PID

Special Envoy to the UN Secretary General for HIV and AIDS Dr Nafis Sadik pays a courtesy call on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at the Prime Minister's Office in the city yesterday. (Story on Page 5)

UN wants Dhaka to use own fund for family planning

Says UN spl envoy Dr Nafis Sadik

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The United Nations (UN) wants Bangladesh to increase funding from its own resources for family planning programmes urgently, saying that slower population growth can better help the country for adaptation to climate change and sustainable development.

Slamming collapse of overseas funding for family planning, UN Secretary General's Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS Dr Nafis Sadik yesterday said, "Bangladesh cannot afford to wait on overseas assistance. The government should increase funding out of its own resources for family planning programmes as a matter of urgency."

Support for family planning has collapsed from 55 percent to eight percent of the total funding for sexual and reproductive health at a time when its demand is increasing in Bangladesh and elsewhere, she added.

Dr Sadik was addressing a national symposium organised by United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in collaboration with the government at a Bangabandhu International Conference Centre in the city

to mark the 15th anniversary of International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD).

Bangladesh's population growth now is 1.48 percent annually which is a significant achievement. Still, almost one-fifth of all married couples want to use family planning, but have no access to it. Some 12,000 women die each year of pregnancy-related complications while some 120,000 children die annually before they reach their first year, according to a UNFPA data.

"Continued lower birth rates and slower population growth in Bangladesh will offer all its people more room for adaptation to climate change and progress towards balanced and sustainable development," said Dr Sadik, also former executive director of UNFPA.

Stating that it will be difficult to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by cutting extreme poverty by half because of the global economic downturn, the development expert said closing the gap between the richest and the poorest people in the world is essential to avoid the worst impact of recession.

"But, Bangladesh must find a way to meet the MDGs, if not by 2015 then as soon

as possible," Sadik said.

She said it is the human development and security that should be priorities, not the global business and profit. "Let us be clear: the situation will not improve in the long term unless priorities change."

UNFPA Representative in Bangladesh Arthur Erken said the ICPD Programme of Action taken in 1994 in Cairo had a major influence on population and development issues worldwide. Almost all the countries now have comprehensive reproductive health programmes.

Bangladesh now has the total fertility rate of 2.7 percent while 56 percent women and men use some form of contraception against 45 percent 15 years back. Under-five and maternal mortality rate decline and free education for girls up to class 12 introduced.

A lot is yet to be done, Erken said, adding, "We cannot build a nation of healthy and prosperous people if women cannot go through pregnancy and childbirth safely."

UN Resident Coordinator Renata Lok Dessalieu and Additional Secretary to Health and Family Planning Ministry BD Mitra also spoke at the symposium where Tauhid Alam of UNFPA made a presentation.

BDR CARNAGE HC grants bail to contractor Delwar

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court yesterday granted ad-interim bail to Delwar Hossain Khokan, a contractor of old Dhaka, in the BDR carnage case.

The High Court bench of Justice AFM Abdur Rahman and Justice Md Emdadul Haque Azad granted him bail till submission of the police report in the case to the court.

Deputy Attorney General (DAG) Kazi M Ejarul Haque told The Daily Star that Delwar was arrested on charge of staging demonstration and encouraging the BDR men to commit crimes during the February 25-26 BDR mutiny at its headquarters.

He recently filed a petition with the High Court seeking bail in the case, the DAG said. A petition has been filed with the Supreme Court against the HC order of bail and hearing of the petition would be held today, he said.

While asked whether Delwar is the first to get bail in the BDR carnage case from the higher court, he said earlier a student got bail from this court.

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Suman, a boy with disabilities, poses with Abdus Sobhan, president of Karmir Hath, Gaibandha, and Lt Col (ret'd) MAS Akbar, now an expatriate living in the US, who donated a wheelchair to him yesterday. The boy, who lost both of his legs in a train accident some five years ago, sells popcorn to commuters to earn a living, as he hates to be a burden on others.

With his meagre income, Suman, an orphan, also supports his grandmother and younger sister. Abdus Sobhan and Lt Col (ret'd) Akbar came forward to help the boy after The Daily Star published a photo of Suman selling popcorn near the FDC at Karwan Bazar in its October 20 issue.



PHOTO: STAR

Demonstration on firefighting at army HQ

METRO DESK

Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence Department conducted a demonstration on 'Firefighting and earthquake' at Army Headquarters at Dhaka Cantonment yesterday, says an ISPR release.

Army Headquarters organised such demonstration for being capable and sharing knowledge on techniques from Fire Service and Civil Defence to avoid casualties and damages of properties of sensitive infrastructure at the headquarters.

Practical training and techniques of using firefighting equipment were provided during the display on disaster like fire incident.

All military and civil officers, junior commissioned officers (JCOs) and soldiers of the headquarters were present at the demonstration.

Earlier, Fire Service and Civil Defence Department made a presentation on firefighting and earthquake at the seminar hall of the headquarters.