

25TH ANNIVERSARY OF SANGAT

Pakistani national Akeela Naz gets Meeto Memorial Award

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Born in a family like many of the millions of poor landless farmers in Pakistan, she clawed her way up to emerge as one of the most recognised woman's leader in South Asia.

The persona behind the 'Thapa Force,' an army of protesting women farmers wielding "thapas" (a stick to wash/strike clothes with), Akeela Naz from Panjab yesterday received the second Meeto Memorial Award.

The award is given to honour young South Asians committed towards communal harmony, peace and human rights.

Akeela's family was among the millions of poor farmers who were forced to pay heavy revenue to compa-

nies and military agencies that did not even own the land.

She campaigns to mobilise farmers, especially women, to use their "thapas" as a weapon for self-protection and to guard their lands and families against encroaching police forces.

Her fight with corruption, abusive military and government officials in Pakistan and resolve to unite women farmers against exploitation led to her recognition.

Akeela said, "When I used to ride on tractors to go to fields, I never thought what I was doing would receive such recognition."

"I'm happy that my efforts have brought a positive change in the lives of poor peasants and what we are doing is being appreciated

not only on a local level but internationally," she said.

"Asian countries should work to spread peace. Together, we are stronger," she added.

She received the award from popular singer Anusheh Anadil, one of last year's awardees, at Jatya Natyashala of the National Shilpakala Academy in the city.

Prominent Indian women's rights and peace activist Kamla Bhasin instituted the award in memory of her daughter, Meeto (1978-2006), who was a young scholar, dancer and a human rights activist.

The programme coincided with the 25th anniversary of Sangat, a South Asian organisation promoting peace and feminism.

Women from Iran, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India and Burma attended the programme making it a true South Asian assembly.

"We need to realise that the clash of civilisation is not between Islam and Christianity," said Kamla Bhasin, "but rather the clash is between profit and Mother Nature, between people and greed."

To overcome these conflicts, people need to make friends and engage in partnerships in every step of their lives, she said.

Sunila Abeyasekera, an award-winning Sri Lankan human rights campaigner, delivered the keynote speech.

"Meeto, a daughter, friend and guru to many of us, was a very fine young woman," she said, "her short life stands as an example of beauty, artistic and intellectual achievements and deep commitment to the syncretism of South Asia."

"This award is not just a tribute to Meeto and her work, but also recognition of the achievements of many South Asians like her who are living their dreams for a better world," she said.

Offering a word of thanks, Hameeda Hossain, prominent human rights activist, expressed joy at this unique award which chooses individuals from South Asia.

Ain o Salish Kendra Executive Director Sultana Kamal, Nijera Kori founder Khushi Kabir, Pakistan Women's Commission Chairperson Anis Haroon, Indian women's movement leaders Abha Bhैया, Suneeta Dhar, Rukumini Rao and Nepal Constituent assembly member Jawla Saha were some of the many international activists who attended the ceremony.

Later, Anusheh Anadil, singer and cultural activist from Dhaka, and her group of musicians enthralled the audience with their performance.



Students of Chhayanaut sing at a programme titled "Sharat Utsab" at Bakul Tala in Fine Arts Faculty of Dhaka University yesterday commemorating the autumn season.

PHOTO: STAR



Distinguished guests light lamps at the award giving ceremony of Sangat, one of the prominent women's networks of South Asia, held at Jatya Natyashala of Shilpakala Academy in the city yesterday. Popular singer Anusheh Anadil, inset left, one of last year's awardees, hands over the second Meeto Memorial Award to this year's recipient Akeela Naz of Pakistan.

PHOTO: STAR



Infectious diseases occur for poor health system

Says WHO regional chief

BSS, Dhaka

The absence of a robust public health system over the years has resulted in emergence of infectious diseases in Bangladesh and the current onslaught of anthrax is a reflection of it, says the regional chief of the World Health Organization (WHO).

Bangladesh has experienced several outbreaks of Japanese encephalitis, bird flu, swine flu and anthrax after 2007 in quick succession.

"A weak public health system in Bangladesh leads to spread of many infectious diseases in short intervals in this densely populated country," WHO Regional Director for South-East Asia Regional Office (SEARO), Dr Samlee Plianbangchang told the news agency in an interview here.

Despite an epidemiological transition towards non-communicable diseases, Samlee said, infectious diseases appeared to remain as the main health

challenge for years in Bangladesh because of poor investment in public health neglecting the approach of prevention of disease than cure.

He said the long neglected health related factors such as malnutrition has led poor younger generations to become more susceptible to infections--the present leading cause of neonatal and infant mortality in Bangladesh. This country, he said, now should invest more on food security, nutrition, education, women and community empowerment to prevent infectious diseases and improve human health.

Samlee arrived here to launch a three-day regional conference on primary healthcare in emergency situations that ended on Thursday.

"As health is a multidisciplinary field, all concerned ministries and sectors such as water, sanitation, education and nutrition must act together to improve health of people as it is not the task of

health ministry alone," said WHO regional chief on the eve of the conference.

He advocated for coordination and collaboration among inter-agencies, including health and family planning ministry, for extracting best health outcomes in Bangladesh.

Samlee appreciated the initiative to reactivate 13,000 community clinics across the country.

Asked about WHO's future supports, especially under emergency situations--earthquake and climate induced cyclone and flood situations-- Samlee said his organisation was devising a new strategy to enhance technical assistance for capacity building of volunteers and community empowerment.

He urged the government to involve more volunteers, improve disaster warning system and simulate disaster preparedness in short intervals to keep people ready to face emergency situations.

Harijans devoid of minimum living standards

Says Abul Barakat

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Though there are at least seven clauses in the constitution of Bangladesh where freedom, right and dignity of Harijon Community is reserved, they do not enjoy minimum standard of life, said eminent economist Abul Barakat yesterday.

He also said secularism was established in the country through liberation war. But in the last 38 years the rights of the minority community were not established as different governments changed the constitution.

Prof Abul Barakat, however, felt that the rights of those communities would be established through the return to the 1972's constitution.

The professor of economics department of Dhaka University was addressing a discussion titled "Poverty reduction of Harijon community" organised by Manusher Jonno Foundation at the

Public Library Auditorium in the city.

Abul Barakat recommended the government to give constitutional rights to each minority and ethnic community. "There should be a law on abolition of discrimination and its strict implementation," he said.

Cells should be formed at the concerned ministry, he said, adding that the community should be included in the Safety Net Project and separate allocation should be made in the national budget for the Harijon community.

In his speech as chief guest, Social and Welfare Minister Enamul Haque Mostafa Shaheed said the government would take all necessary steps to protect the basic rights of the Harijon community.

Nirmal Chandra Das, secretary general of Bangladesh Harijon Oikya Parishad, said though the community has been serving the nation by engaging

themselves in the cleaning occupation, they live in very disagreeable conditions.

"We always suffer from insecurity. People do not want to recruit us in any profession except sweeping," he added.

Though there is no census on minority community conducted after the liberation, Nirmal Chandra claimed that there would be about 14 lakh Harijon people living throughout the country. About 1,500 sweepers work under Dhaka City Corporation.

Chief Waste Management Officer of Dhaka City Corporation Bipon Kumar Saha, lawyer of Bangladesh Supreme Court Satendra Chandra Vaktu and Director of Fair (a non-government organisation) Dewan Akhtaruzzaman also spoke on the occasion.

President of Bangladesh Horijon Oikya Parishad Babu Krisnalal presided over the programme.

Jamaat, Oikya Jote unhappy over Babri verdict

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ) yesterday expressed concern and dissatisfaction over the much-awaited ruling of Allahabad High Court on Babri Mosque.

Top leaders of the two Islamist parties, in a reaction, said the Allahabad High Court "mainly gave verdict in favour of Hinduism".

In a release, Jamaat's Acting Ameer Maqbul Ahmed and Acting Secretary General ATM Azharul Islam said the verdict disappointed the entire Muslim world including Muslims in India.

"The verdict was politically motivated and in favour of communalism," said the two Jamaat leaders.

They hoped that the Supreme Court will scrap the verdict and take necessary measures so that Babri Mosque can be rebuilt.

Mufti Fazlul Haq Amine, chairman of IOJ, in a release, said the Muslim world could not accept the verdict as it went in favour of Hinduism.

"Justices of the Allahabad High Court once again scrapped the Babri Mosque which was demolished in 1992 under the direct supervision of the then BJP government in India," said the top leader of IOJ, a section of BNP-led four-party alliance.

The Allahabad High Court ruled on October 30 that the 64-acre (25-hectare) site should be split, with the Muslim community getting control of one-third and two Hindu groups splitting the remainder.

Thursday's ruling said the Hindus could keep the area where the mosque once stood because the court determined it was the birthplace of Rama and archaeological evidence showed a temple predated the mosque.

Over the years, the dispute triggered bloody communal violence and threatened India's foundation as a secular, multicultural democracy.

'Build cross-dam to save Swandip'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Swandip-Noakhali Cross-Dam construction is inevitable to prevent Swandip from eroding away, speakers told a press conference yesterday urging the project's immediate implementation.

"The erosion of Swandip will not be controlled unless the cross-dam is built. If immediate actions are not taken, the island (Swandip) will vanish from the map of the country," they observed.

The speakers told the journalists that the Bangabandhu government made a contract with the Netherlands in 1974 to set up the dam.

A Netherlands study team examined the possibility for the dam construction in 1987, and recommended the ministry of water resources to build it, which has not been yet implemented.

Swandip-Noakhali Cross-Dam Implementation Parishad organised the press conference at the Jatiya Press Club, while the Parishad President Dr Md Jamaluddin Chowdhury read out a statement.

The environment and forest ministry has taken a new initiative to build dam between Noakhali-Urirchar, excluding Swandip-Noakhali Cross-Dam, said the parishad.

JP Morgan senior VP calls on Muhith

BSS, New York

David A Weisbrod, senior vice-president of JP Morgan, a leading financial institution in the United States, called on Finance Minister Abul Maal Abdul Muhith at the Bangladesh Permanent Mission to the United Nations in New York on Wednesday.

The meeting is being considered as very crucial before opening of a branch of the institution in Dhaka this month, according to a message received here yesterday.

Earlier, President of JP Morgan Heidi Miller and Senior Vice-President Weisbrod had taken initiatives to open a branch of the institution in Dhaka after meeting with Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in 2009 during the 64th UN General Assembly session in New York.



Social and Welfare Minister Enamul Haque Mostafa Shaheed speaks at a function titled "Poverty reduction of Harijon community" organised by Manusher Jonno Foundation at the Public Library Auditorium in the city yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

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