

Care is the call

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education and shelter, but to be recognised as persons," she observed.

Sonia said society should pay greater attention to autistic persons. "If society nurtures them, it will get back much in return."

Speaking of the enormous challenge posed by autism, she said, "There is much of it [autism] that we still do not understand. Science itself in the seven decades of research has not found clear answers or explanations for its causes."

Sonia, also chairperson of India's ruling United Progressive Alliance, noted that prevalence of autism is widespread and today it is believed that nearly one person out of every hundred is afflicted with autism.

In India alone, she added, 8 million individuals are estimated to have autism spectrum conditions.

She stressed the need for civil society's participation in sensitising people to autism and in providing quality care and services to those affected.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who addressed the meeting as special guest, emphasised establishing the rights of the challenged people in developing countries.

"It is necessary to create social and legal frameworks to mitigate sufferings of the challenged people, protect their rights, and promote their causes," she said adding that in most of the developing countries, the rights of those challenged are rarely recognised, and seldom met.

Hasina pointed out that dangers such as social stigma, misinformation and lack of experts and treatment centres limit the quality of support available to the autistic persons.

Necessary social and legal frameworks should be created and infrastructures built

to lessen their sufferings, protect their rights and promote their causes, she continued.

"Challenges faced by families living in poverty are already immeasurable; it is even more challenging when that child has a complex disability such as autism."

The prime minister mentioned that identification of a disability and appropriate interventions within the first year of a child's life are particularly important when it comes to meeting the challenges of neuro-developmental disorders such as autism.

She called upon all to work in cooperation with one another so that as a region "we can develop scientifically sound practices, which are socially applicable and economically feasible".

Arranged on the theme "Autism Spectrum Disorders and Developmental Disabilities in Bangladesh and South Asia", the conference adopted seven-point Dhaka Declaration at its opening session.

It also appealed to the donors to pay attention to the unmet needs of millions of people affected by autism and financially support the programmes planned to improve care and services.

Global research and advocacy forum Autism Speaks organised the conference in collaboration with the government of Bangladesh, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University and World Health Organization (WHO).

Bangladesh does not have specific data on those affected by autism but officials estimate that around 150,000 children may be classified as autistic.

Health Minister Dr AFM Ruhul Haque said the government will carry out a special census to determine the

number of the autistic persons.

At the conference, it was stated that the autistic populace in the world is increasing at a rate ranging from 10% to 17%. The exact number of autistic people is not available, but the experts claim it would be tens of millions.

The inaugural function was addressed, among others, by Sri Lankan first lady Shiranthi Wickramasingha Rajapaksa, Maldives vice-president's wife Ilham Hussain, Foreign Minister Dipu Moni, Health Minister AFM Ruhul Haque, Indonesian Health Minister Endang Rahayu Sedyaningsih, Bhutanese Health Minister Lyonpo Zangley Dukpa, Andy Shis of Global Autism Public Health Initiative, Shekhar Saxena of WHO, Aysa Saif Mohammad Hamadan Ali of UAE and Belal AlNezami of Jordan.

Hasina's daughter Saima Hossain, an autism activist and an organiser of the conference, was also present.

A cultural programme styled "The Land That I Love" was presented by the national cultural team of children with autism.

Earlier in the day, Sonia Gandhi placed wreaths at National Mausoleum at Savar, paying tribute to the independence martyrs. She also placed wreaths at the mural of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at Bangabandhu Memorial Museum at Dhanmondi.

The Congress chief met Hasina after inaugurating the conference.

She called on President Zillur Rahman at Bangabhaban after the special ceremony in which she received Bangladesh Freedom Honour on behalf of her slain mother-in-law Indira Gandhi.

Autism initiatives hold ray of hopes

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The conference focused on creating awareness about autism.

"It was relatives, not outsiders, whose unfriendly attitude was sometimes so shocking that I could not hold back my tears," Salma told The Daily Star.

She added that the conference would create awareness about autism.

Children with autism lack communication and socialising abilities due to a complex disability involving a biological or organic defect in brain, experts say.

Boys are four times more prone than girls to have autism. The exact reason behind the problem is yet to be discovered.

Though it cannot be cured, improvement is possible with proper care and attention.

Around 1.5 lakh children in the country are perceived to be autistic, which is one per cent of the total number of the people with disabilities.

Echoing Salma's view, other parents at the conference said their children are not getting proper education

mostly for shortage of special schools.

At present, there are only 22 private schools that operate in a limited scale for autistic children in the capital, social welfare ministry sources said.

Nevertheless, participants are happy that the problem is recognised by the top level of the government.

"This international conference on autism shows government's commitment to the autistic children to ensure their rights to education, treatment and empathy," said Rownak Hafiz, chairman of Autism Welfare Foundation.

Rownak, who has been working with autistic children for 15 years, said these children are not disabled. They are rather able in a different way, and they need proper training, care and treatment.

The social welfare ministry runs some 15 one-stop service centres across the country to diagnose and manage autism, but the centres face shortage of trained manpower.



Tawshif

Farida Yesmen, executive director of Disabled Rehabilitation and Research Association, said, "We need autism diagnosis units at least at the divisional hospitals. Otherwise, the children outside Dhaka will remain undiagnosed and will not get education and treatment."

A number of parents said they suffer badly due to the lengthy process of diagnosing autism and admitting their children to schools.

Rokhsana Ahmed, a mother of an autistic child, said she had to go from doctor

to doctor with her son. The child specialists could not even identify the problem.

She had to migrate from Chittagong to Dhaka just to admit her boy to a school.

"When I heard about the conference where the world leaders are participating, I thought the prime minister [Sheikh Hasina] would announce setting up of a shelter home for the autistic children. My child will have no place to go after my death," she told this correspondent.

One in every 110 children has autism globally, which is higher than the number of the children being affected with HIV/AIDS or Leukemia, according to Autism Speaks.

An estimated 1.5 million people are affected by autism in the US where the prevalence rate is increasing by 10-17 per cent every year.

BSMMU and Autism Speaks will hold a three-day workshop starting from Wednesday at BSMMU for the parents, teachers and therapists on how to manage the children with autism.

Commuters

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Like Saba and Elias, thousands of people had to pass through untold sufferings yesterday, as almost all the city streets were chock-a-block with traffic.

A large number of important streets and link roads were off-limits to regular traffic for over two hours to ease the movement of motorcades carrying Indian National Congress President Sonia Gandhi, Sri Lanka's First Lady Shiranthi Rajapaksa and Maldives vice-president's wife Ilham Hussain along with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and ministers.

The VIPs were in the city to attend a two-day conference on autism yesterday.

Dhaka Metropolitan Police earlier in a press release said it would regulate traffic on roads from Sonargaon Hotel intersection to Bijay Sarani to Savar yesterday from 9:30am to 10:00am for smooth transport of VVIPs to the National Memorial.

Besides, from 5:00pm to 7:00pm, routes from Ruposhi Bangla Hotel through Kakrai, High Court, Zero Point and Rajuk to Bangabhaban would be restricted.

The VIPs were scheduled to leave Bangabhaban for the airport at 7:00pm.

"We tried to ease congestions and we did not control traffic before the VVIPs' arrival. The restriction was imposed only during the VVIP movements," Deputy Commissioner (Traffic) Khandaker Nazmul Akhter of DMP (south) said.

If a busy area of the capital is jammed for an hour or two, the rest of the city feels the impact, said another DMP high official, preferring anonymity.

Yesterday, the officer added, the city dwellers on almost every road experienced long tailbacks, starting with the VIP movements in the morning.

An Uttara resident said he left house for his Farmgate office at 10:30am.

He was more than an hour late for work as he was caught in a jam at a level crossing near the Army Stadium at 11:45am. There, he had to spend about 40 minutes.

From the level crossing to Farmgate his car moved by inches.

He reached his office at 12:25pm spending an hour and 55 minutes on road. Usually, it takes 40 minutes to one hour and 15 minutes.

An East Shewrapara resident said he waited at Shewrapara bus stand for at least half an hour for a bus to go to Bashundhara residential area in Badda.

He got a bus but had to get down on Gulshan Link Road as it was moving very slowly in heavy traffic.

Finally, a walk of around three kilometres to his destination was the last resort.

Azharul

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against Azharul.

According to the petition, the Jamaat leader on July 19 at a press conference at his party office said the government scrapped the caretaker government system by exploiting the Supreme Court.

The petitioner also brought contempt of court charges against Azharul.

The HC bench of Justice AHM Shamsuddin Chowdhury Manik and Justice Gobinda Chandra Tagore ordered government officials concerned to take action against the Jamaat leader within two weeks and submit a report on the compliance of the order in 10 days.

The home secretary, inspector general of police, commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police and Supreme Court registrar have been made respondents to the rule, petitioner's counsel Manzilur Murshid told The Daily Star.

He said the bench also issued a rule upon Azharul to explain within two weeks why he should not be punished for contempt of court.

Deputy Attorney General ABM Altaf Hossain represented the government.

Worker dies

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labourers around 9:45am joined work on the rooftop of the four-storey building.

"We were removing wooden frames from the newly-built pillars. Miraz pulled a wood piece from a pillar which was at the edge of the rooftop and suddenly lost control," he said.

His head hit the boundary wall of the adjacent building before he fell to the ground, Zakir added.

Miraz was rushed to a nearby hospital and then shifted to Dhaka Medical College Hospital. Doctors around 2:00pm declared him dead, Badda police said.

Zakir said Miraz would not have died had there been protective arrangements.

Following the incident, workers stopped the construction work.

An unnatural death case was filed with Badda Police Station in this connection, said Mahbubur Rahman, officer-in-charge of the police station.

339 sacks

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Considering the crisis of sugar in the local market, the monitoring team, however, yesterday gave permission to the three traders to sell those in local market at government fixed price.

A meeting was also held between local sugar traders and district administration yesterday afternoon with Additional Deputy Commissioner Md Shah Alam in the chair.

Shajahan Khan, one of the three traders, informed the meeting that those sacks, which were found in his godown on Sunday, were allotted to a trader in Dhaka by Thakurgaon Sugar Mills authority.

He bought the delivery order (DO) from that Dhaka-based trader and lifted 146 sacks of sugar to his godown.

During discussion, he admitted that such stocking was illegal. "We have been doing this for about 20 years," he added.

SI indicted

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justice before the court after it read out the charge.

The court, however, fixed September 25 for trial of the case. The court also summoned complainant of the case to appear before it on that date to give his statement.

Earlier on April 13, another Dhaka court granted bail to the sub-inspector in the case.

Anwarul Haq, an assistant director of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), filed the case on December 19, 2010.

The case statement said SI Rakibul demanded Tk 5 lakh bribe from one Ferdous Ara to arrest five criminals she had brought charges against on December 3, 2010.

A team of ACC caught the sub-inspector red-handed while taking the bribe at National Heart Foundation Hospital in the city's Mirpur, the statement added.

Best friend honoured



PHOTO COURTESY: PMO

The plaque in honour of late Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi.

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mother-in-law took a firm stance to side with the Bangalee people fighting to establish their own country.

"If Indira Gandhi could have been with us, I know she would have been overwhelmed by the high honour you have bestowed on her," Sonia said.

"There can be no honour higher than the one conferred for the freedom of an oppressed people and the birth of a great nation," she said.

She said she felt humble and privileged but also proud to accept the award on her mother-in-law's behalf. "I do so with a very full heart and consciousness that the honour is not her alone but also India's, and in a sense yours as well."

She said she came to Bangladesh not just to visit another country.

"Memories and emotions flood my mind. My husband and I were present at the airport along with Indira Ji amid massive crowds on the historic morning on January 10, 1972, when Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was welcomed in Delhi on his way to his newly free country," recalled Sonia.

"The amount of excitement and sense of optimism, indeed the knowledge that history was being made, I can never forget," she said.

Sonia concluded her speech by saying, "Joy Bangla, Joy Bangladesh-India friendship."

President Zillur Rahman said, "This is a very special and historic occasion for us, an occasion that will certainly be written in golden letters in the history of both of our nations."

He said Indira Gandhi inspired millions of Bangladeshis and Indians to

fight against all oppression and injustice.

"She launched an intense and bold diplomatic move for Bangladesh, despite challenges by some major powers. She also vigorously pursued the Pakistani authority for safe release of Bangabandhu," he said.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina described Indira Gandhi as a true and great friend of Bangladesh, its people, and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

"On Bangabandhu's request, she withdrew the Indian soldiers within three months of Bangladesh's independence. That was a unique gesture of Mrs Indira Gandhi," Hasina said.

"We are delighted to honour her with our highest award," she said, recalling the eventual days of Bangladesh's liberation war in 1971.

She said Indira Gandhi travelled the world to rally support of the world community for the independence of Bangladesh, and for saving the life of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who was then facing capital punishment in a Pakistani jail.

Foreign Minister Dipu Moni said, "We are here to honour a friend who played the most critical role among all our foreign friends in our nation's journey to statehood. Indira Gandhi changed the course of events in the fateful months of 1971. And with the support she gave to our embattled people, the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh was born. Today we are here to recognise and express our gratitude, and to honour Indira Gandhi."

The award's teak frame contains two gold plates on both sides of a folded box. Fifty-year-old teak, preserved

by the Department of Forest, has been used for the frame.

Sreemati Indira Gandhi's name is inscribed on the plate on the left side in Bangla and English while the plate on the right has the signatures of Bangladesh President Zillur Rahman and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

The plate on the left mentions that the award was conferred as the highest token of respect and gratitude of the Bangalee nation to Indira Gandhi for her immense contribution to Bangladesh's War of Independence.

A brief audio-visual documentary was played at the 50-minute ceremony which showed images of Bangladesh's Liberation War, Indira Gandhi's activities during that period, and some of her moments with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The documentary made the audience quite emotional.

The entrance of Bangabhaban was decorated with pictures depicting historic moments of Indira Gandhi during Bangladesh's struggle for liberation. Both Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Sonia Gandhi saw the pictures with curiosity.

State Minister for Liberation War Affairs Capt (ret'd) AB Tajul Islam gave the welcome speech. A large number of dignitaries including some foreign guests were present at the ceremony.

Cabinet Secretary M Abdul Aziz read out the citation conferred on Indira Gandhi.

The event concluded with the playing of the national anthem of Bangladesh.

Indira Gandhi was the third prime minister of India for three consecutive terms from 1966 to 1977, and for a fourth term from 1980 until her assassination in 1984.