



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina sits with British Prime Minister David Cameron, left, Chantal Compaore the First Lady of Burkina Faso, and Pakistani rights activist Malala Yousafzai, right, at the "Girl Summit 2014" at Walworth Academy in London yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

FIGHTING CHILD MARRIAGE Religion-based parties create obstacles

PM tells Girl Summit

UNB, London

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday said her government is addressing child marriage problem in a holistic manner though it faces significant opposition from religion-based political parties such as Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami.

Jamaat also opposed Bangladesh's National Women Development Policy 2011 and threatened to scrap it, she told a High-Level Session of the maiden Girl Summit 2014 at Walworth Academy here.

"Child marriage certainly deserves our focused attention, but it can't be treated in isolation. In Bangladesh, we, therefore, are addressing the issue in a holistic manner which helped us achieve a sustained decline in the last two decades," she added.

"Second is strong legislations. We've had in place a Child Marriage Restraint

Act dating back to 1929. We're currently updating the law to provide harsher penalties and prosecution," mentioned the PM.

Poverty reduction, ensuring education and creating job opportunities can naturally reduce child marriage, she observed.

"Basically, what I feel that if we can reduce poverty and ensure education and job opportunities, then naturally the child marriage will get reduced. This is our opinion and we've taken all these steps to ensure that our girls should be educated properly and then they should go for jobs so that they can make their own decisions," mentioned the premier.

Moderated by broadcaster Zeinab Badawi, the session was also addressed by two other panellists -- First Lady of Burkina Faso Chantal Compaore and

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Winner one, win for all

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November, 2009 after The Daily Star had run an investigative report.

"This [the lengthy trial] will encourage people to keep committing crimes," said Hanif, head of nephrology department at Dhaka Shishu Hospital, in an interview with this newspaper on Saturday.

His apprehension is justified by the fact that Rid Pharma had produced paracetamol syrup with the same toxin in 2009. At least 28 children died at that time until the physician blew the whistle once again.

Also the president of Bangladesh Pediatric Association, Hanif said many family members of the victims in 1980s might have died by now, and the verdict is too late to be considered as a consolation for them.

It is very likely that a significant amount of evidence have been lost by now, making it even more difficult for proving the heinous crime, he mentioned.

He blamed inefficiencies and lack of commitment of the Directorate of Drug Administration (DDA) and other government agencies concerned for

the delayed trial.

"The drug administration had filed the cases and it is duty-bound to work for quick disposal of those. Did it do that?" he questioned.

Trial record shows that owners of Rex Pharma were acquitted due to deliberate destruction of evidence by the DDA. The prosecution even could not prove before the court that the syrup was properly tested in laboratories both at home and abroad.

Lack of seriousness of the government agencies concerned is also evident in the case against Adflame. Although more

than 2,000 children had died between 1982 and 1992, the company was implicated for the death of 76, allegedly due to negligence of the government agencies in preserving record and evidence.

Hanif believes the Drug (control) Ordinance, 1982 is insufficient for trying the perpetrators. He recommended incorporating capital punishment in the law to prevent pharmaceutical companies from committing such crimes "intentionally". "Those adulterating drugs only for the sake of profit must be ordered to walk the

gallows."

The existing law is lax as its provision stipulates the highest 10-year rigorous imprisonment and a fine of only Tk 2 lakh for drug adulteration.

It seems that the law has no provision to compensate the irreparable loss of the victims' families, Hanif pointed out.

He suggested that the ministries of health, law, commerce and home should coordinate with each other for retaining the growth of the country's promising drug industry.

The physician hardly cared about

being praised for the role he has been playing against drug adulteration. His name was dropped twice from the list of nominees for Ekushey Padak, said sources.

"I'm satisfied that I've been able to save children from death," he added.

In his reaction to yesterday's verdict, Hanif said he was happy to see the culprits punished finally.

Although the judgment came after 22 long years, it gave a message to the adulterators that they have to face music if they committed such crimes, he added.

Star report foiled

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date fixed by a Dhaka drug court for announcing judgment on adulteration of medicines for children by a manufacturer two decades ago.

An investigation by The Daily Star in 2009 set the trial against five high-ups of Adflame Pharmaceuticals back on track after it remained stayed for 16 years following a High Court order. Though the stay was vacated by the HC in 2007, the trial did not resume until the day The Daily Star report was published on November 11 two years later.

The HC decision cancelling the stay on Adflame trial was kept concealed by a drug court clerk for two years.

The Daily Star report brought in the spotlight the government's indifference to take action, allowing five manufacturers to continue with producing tainted drug for a decade, its reluctance in prosecuting the offenders after a physician had blown the whistle, and manipulation and corruption at the Directorate of Drug Administration

(DDA) and the Dhaka Drug Court.

Five years have passed since the deadlock on the trial was brought to an end, finally having three of the five Adflame adulterators convicted for the highest term as per the Drug (Control) Ordinance 1982.

Surprisingly, Attorney General Mahbubey Alam apparently remained unaware of the matter throughout the period since this daily made the disclosures in 2009 with regular follow-ups as the trial stepped forward inch by inch on its track.

As a result, uncertainty looms over the fate of two other cases still stayed by the HC even after The Daily Star investigation brought it to light five years ago. It has been 21 years now that the trial of manufacturers at Polychem Laboratories Ltd and BCI (Bangladesh) Ltd has been suspended since 1994.

Contacted by The Daily Star, Attorney General Mahbubey Alam regretted that he did not know about it

and felt that the DDA was supposed to inform him about the deadlock.

"I would have jumped in for prosecuting those manufacturers had I known it," he told The Daily Star.

The HC while vacating the Adflame stay in 2007 underscored the importance of completing the trial regarding drug adulteration and said: "It is a crime against society as such the trial should be held to find out whether the allegations are true or not."

But even the HC order could not reach the trial court without having been impeded. The order was placed in the piles of disposed off cases by court clerk Abdul Haque, who received it on October 5, 2007. A massive four-day hunt by The Daily Star in 2009 finally discovered the document.

Apparently, this incident of drug adulteration is the country's biggest ever corporate corruption as an estimated 2,700 children were killed between 1982 and 1992. Though media outcry forced the DDA to act

and prosecute four of the five brands tested positive for containing 10 to 20 percent diethylene glycol on December 3, 1992, the trial was manipulated by destroying evidence deliberately.

Records show that a Mymensingh court, which acquitted two accused of Rex Pharma in 2003, had never been told how the test was undertaken. Even the test report was not produced during trial. The prosecutor had also never made the point that a test supervised by a government analyst was conclusive, no matter where it was conducted.

An exception to this might have taken place if the defendant had written to the DDA questioning the test within 28 days of receiving the results, but that was not done either.

"It is found that the chemical examination of the seized paracetamol syrup was not properly done," ruled the court in its acquittal order.

The DDA never appealed against the acquittal.

But The Daily Star investigation revealed that SK Roy, an expert consultant from the World Health Organization, had worked with the DDA for the test taken place at a government-owned drug testing laboratory, Essential Drugs Company Ltd (EDCL).

The EDCL had just installed gas chromatography equipment required for the test at that time. Results of an independent test done in the USA matched with the government findings. The Daily Star saw the USA report on test result.

The EDCL people, who were present during the test, confirmed that it was done properly, but the government men did not want them to keep an official record of it.

A DDA circular, two days after the test was done at the EDCL, explained the reason for not keeping records. The circular stated that Bangladesh "did not" have adequate facilities for carrying out such tests, questioning integrity of the test result.

This circular provided the ground, on which the accused moved to the HC to secure bail and obtain a stay on the cases in mid-1994. It was never challenged by the DDA.

Apart from all these, City Chemical and Pharmaceutical Works Ltd was not even sued after its product, Paracit, was found to have contained the toxin. A director of the company was Khondker Mahtabuddin Ahmed, who was the father-in-law of Barrister Abdus Salam Talukdar, the then LGRD minister and BNP's secretary general.

Neither DDA Director General Jahangir Hossain Mallick nor Director Abul Khair Chowdhury, complainant of three of the four cases, could be reached for a comment.

Surprisingly, after the Adflame trial was resumed following The Daily Star report, the complainant of the three cases, DDA Director Abul Khair Chowdhury, spoke in favour of the accused and appeared to have forgotten the name of the brand, Adflame.

184 rape cases

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At least 2,208 incidents of gender-based violence occurred over the last six months. Of them, 304 women and children were raped, 82 were gang raped, 45 were killed after rape and there were 51 cases of attempted rape.

The statistics were prepared on the basis of media reports. Many more incidents, however, go unreported, the Parishad said.

President of Mahila Parishad Ayesha Khanam expressed grave concern over the increasing trend of rape incidents, especially rape following abduction from streets and buses during travel.

The incidents are increasing day by day due to the prevailing culture of impunity, she said, alleging that almost in all the cases, the rapists are protected by their political identities and influences.

Even police are forced to delay the arrest of rapists and preparation of investigation reports upon directives from higher-ups, she claimed.

"The government should adopt a zero-tolerance stance against rapists," Khanam said,

urging all to take steps to isolate the rapists socially and to ensure the safety and security of women and children.

Reading out the keynote paper, Masuda Rehana Begum, assistant secretary of the Parishad, described 14 incidents of rape or attempted rapes committed in different educational institutions by teachers or fellow students.

She recommended setting up of a separate women and children repression prevention tribunal to deal with such cases, establishing district-level shelter and rehabilitation centres for victims, and recruitment of specialist doctors for medical tests on rape victims.

Masuda mentioned 17 steps, including establishing rule of law, ensuring independent judiciary system, raising awareness and ensuring DNA and other medical tests with state expenditure to be taken to ensure justice to victims and to prevent oppression against women.

Maleka Banu, general secretary of the Parishad, among others, was present on the occasion.

Yunus calls for Gaza ceasefire

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"As the situation continues to deteriorate and the disproportionate number of deaths in Gaza mounts, we are called by conscience to speak out in every way possible not only to end the current violence, but to address the roots of violence," added the statement.

The laureates opined the international community must create the context in which real peace is possible, by condemning violations of basic human rights, holding accountable those who are responsible for breaches of international law, and by refusing military and economic aid that supports Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory.

"Only then will Palestinians and Israelis be able to live in peace and freedom," they added.

Apart from Yunus, Betty Williams, Jody Williams, Mairead Corrigan Maguire, Tawakkol Karman, American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) General Secretary Shan Cretin, International Peace Bureau Co-Presidents Ingeborg Breines and Reiner Braun are among others who signed the statement.

"There have been attacks on Gaza before. There have been ceasefires declared before. And yet the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territory grinds on," they said in the statement.

They also said some 17 lakh Palestinians are now living under Israeli siege in Gaza.

Currently, the Palestinians are restricted in moving from one place to another and are arbitrarily denied access to water and electricity, they said, adding that the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israel would only be resolved with the end of Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territory.

The Nobel Peace laureates said peace requires the presence of justice, of equality, of recognizing our common humanity and those who would be brokers for peace must first acknowledge and address the coercive and corrosive power that Israel wields over Palestinians.

"Only free men can negotiate: a prisoner cannot enter into contracts," the statement also quoted Nelson Mandela saying this in 1985.

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