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COMPULSORY PRIMARY EDUCATION THROUGH SOCIAL MOVEMENT

The government's move to begin compulsory primary education in all schools of the country will be a milestone in the annals of education in this part of the world. It is a bold and courageous step and reflects on the determination to go ahead with the social targets despite the limitations of resources and logistic facilities. The initial success achieved in the 68 thanas of 64 districts where compulsory primary education was introduced last year has encouraged the authorities to embark on an ambitious programme. A report prepared by UNICEF says that all school-going children in 30 percent of the school area were attending schools. In the remaining, 91 percent of the children were enrolled in schools. Only an increased effort could bring the children currently evading schools into the classroom.

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia presiding over a special meeting on education on Thursday emphasized that her government would leave no stone unturned to implement its social goals for which it had won a mandate of the people. The meeting reviewed the progress of compulsory primary education and expressed satisfaction over the achievements of last year.

In primary education the main problem remains the high drop out rate. Children, especially from rural households and urban poor families, apparently drop off from the regular school routine, either because of poverty or due to lack of social awareness about education. The thrust of the government has to be therefore on not only bringing the children to schools but also on retaining them. In the coming years social workers will fan out in the countryside motivating parents to send their children to schools. Since the female enrolment and dropout rate is higher, an added effort has to be made with respect to the girl child. Parents have to be encouraged to treat their girl children at par with the male issues.

The Prime Minister takes a personal interest in the welfare of the girl-child. It is due to her drive that a social movement has been built up for female education. The community is now involved in a massive way in sponsoring and running schools for girls. The government has taken a pragmatic step by giving preference to women in respect of appointment of teachers in the primary schools.

The pro-education direction of the government was evident when the national budget was presented in Parliament last June. The education sector received the highest allocation in the budget. The funds are expected to be used to reconstruct and rebuild 9000 schools which had suffered damages, pay for enhanced salaries of teachers and provide educational aids. The implementation of the educational projects in the current annual development programme will have a visible impact on the education sector. It will expand educational facilities enhancing the scope for enrolment at all levels.

Perhaps not all the primary school dropouts can be brought within the fold of formal schooling. But non-formal education can play a role in raising literacy rate which now stands at 30 percent much below the desirable level. Some very successful non-formal school models have been evolved in Bangladesh by voluntary and community effort. These non-formal schools should be more extensively used in the coming years. The Prime Minister has indicated that she wants a social movement to develop on the issue of compulsory primary education. The extensive use of non-formal schools will make the movement a reality.