

Ensure support for autistic people

PM Hasina calls upon all govts at int'l conference

UNB, Thimphu, Bhutan

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday said everybody should take the responsibility for ensuring adequate social and medical support for people with autism and neurodevelopmental disorders.

"Governments should make policies and programmes to ensure that no individual is neglected. They deserve to have the opportunity to participate in their countries' economic growth," she said.

The PM was addressing the opening ceremony of the

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three-day International Conference on Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders at the Royal Banquet Hall in Thimphu.

Bhutanese Prime Minister Dasho Tshering Tobgay also spoke at the event.

Recalling that Bhutan had recognised Bangladesh as an independent country on December 6, 1971, Tobgay said they were confident that Bangladesh would have more successes in future.

Greeting Bangladeshis on the occasion of Bangla Noboborsho, he said hosting the conference was a "wonderful coincidence" in the Autism Awareness Month.

Tobgay praised the instrumental role of Saima Wazed Hossain in creating awareness about autism and congratulated her for being designated as "WHO Champion for Autism" in Southeast Asia.

Hasina said people with autism and neurodevelopmental disorders deserve to live with dignity and be loved by people around them.

Even some standard programmes remain inaccessible to families living outside major cities and beyond their means, the PM observed. "Despite our commitments, there are no established guidelines or models to assist them."

She said all governments of the world should make policies and programmes to ensure that no individual was neglected.

The PM regretted that people with Autism Spectrum Disease (ASD) and their families were often subjected to stigma, discrimination and human rights violations.

Talking about Bangladesh, she said incorporating disability and autism into the mainstream national development agenda was one of the country's priority areas.

For the first time, she said, a nationwide census in Bangladesh had included information on people with disabilities, including autism. "We've taken a number of legislative, social and medical initiatives to address the issue of autism."

She mentioned that an 8-member Advisory Committee on Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders, headed by Saima Wazed Hossain, helps the national steering committee develop priorities, design programmes, devise implementation strategies, identify necessary resources and provide guidance on the appropriate use of those resources.

She said Bangladesh played a crucial leading role in the formation of South Asian Autism Network and its charter.

The PM said Bangladesh's initiatives and leading role in the field of ASD could not have been generated without the efforts of Saima.

"Saima has not only raised awareness, but her efforts have contributed significantly to life-changing experiences for many."

In Bangladesh, Saima had been instrumental in getting recognition for ASD as a disorder and not a curse, as was often believed by many, the premier added.

"Her work in this area has been recognised by WHO through her appointment as a member of World Health Organization's 25-member Expert Advisory Panel on mental health."

Poonam Khetrapal Singh, WHO regional director for Southeast Asia, was present at the programme as the special guest. Bhutanese Health Minister Lyonpo Tandin Wangchuk delivered the welcome address.

Bhutanese Queen Jetsun Pema and Saima Wazed Hossain, chairperson of Suchana Foundation, were present.

Chairing a discussion at the Royal Banquet Hall, the Bangladesh PM said it was important for all to look for avenues to strengthen efforts to ensure inclusive development for all people, including those with ASD and neurodevelopmental disorders (NDDs).

The discussion was titled "Enabling countries to successfully address autism and other neurodevelopmental disorders as part of their Sustainable Development Goals".

The PM said NDDs significantly impact mental, emotional, physical and economic wellbeing of people, their families and community.

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