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EDUCATION FOR ALL

The International Literacy Day was observed on Wednesday. The annual energizer reminds people and governments of the pledge made at the world conference in Thailand in 1990 to ensure "Education for all by the year 2000." The heads of UNESCO and UNICEF who took the initiative to get the leaders of the most populous countries together in Jomtien, Thailand, had stressed that they should be "personally and actively involved" in the activities geared to bring literacy and numeracy to all their citizens.

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia's own involvement needs no telling. Primary education has been made free and compulsory for both boys and girls, with a positive bias for the girl child, who is exempted from paying school fees upto class eight. On August 29 the "Food for Education" programme was launched by the Prime Minister to cover initially 4,600 schools in the most backward Thana of each district. The aim is to encourage poor parents to send their children to school and barter literacy lessons for food.

The country has some 51,000 general primary schools and 16,000 religious primary schools. Added to these are the initiatives of various non-government, "grass-root" development organisations that are trying to bring both children and adults within their non-formal education programmes. But this network is not adequate if the ambition for the turn of the century is to be realised.

According to the recommended minimum there should be at least one school every two kilometres. We are far from meeting this requirement. The government has however already made arrangement for construction of 4,000 new schools in deprived areas, and steps have been taken to reconstruct and repair schools where necessary. The Fourth Five Year Plan has provisions for renovating about 25,000 of them.

We are just seven years from the 21st century, and realistically speaking, there is bound to be some compromise on the target of EFA. Statistics show only a 7.8 per cent increase in the literacy rate in the thirty years between 1961-1991. According to the 1981 census the rate of literacy on the total population was 19.7 per cent. By 1991 it went up to 24.82 per cent.

Even though enrolment has increased considerably following implementation of the government's compulsory primary education programme — and efforts are being made to sustain it — we should be happy to cover at least 95 per cent of school going children by the year 2000. This is the hope of the government's primary and mass education division, which claims that 76 per cent of school-going children in 1992 — out of the estimated one crore, 73 lakh, 50 thousand — were attending classes. By the next seven years the group is expected to swell to one crore 96 lakhs 40 thousand which means an additional hundred thousand classrooms will be needed.

The challenge is not only to draw children to schools but to hold them for a minimum number of years at least so that they would have the basic skills of writing, reading and keeping elementary accounts. The government is well aware that expanding formal education facilities alone is not enough. A great deal of effort and imagination has to be spent in evolving effective methods of imparting the basic educational skills.

The importance of non-formal mass education programmes can hardly be overestimated in Bangladesh, given our socio-economic conditions. With the government's Non-formal Integrated Education Programme, the mass of literally disadvantaged people would not only be given name-writing skills, which was sadly the case in past programmes, but would be helped to know enough to be able to take control of their lives.

As Prime Minister Begum Khaleda said, while launching the Food for Education Programme said, "Education is a weapon against poverty"; for it is through education that people are gradually empowered to give their best for themselves and for their families.

By empowering the individual with basic educational skills and providing for "continuing education" throughout life Bangladesh should be able to transform the people into a more productive resource. And all efforts to that end must be sustained.