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PRIMARY HEALTH CARE AND EDUCATION

Access to primary health care and basic education to this nation of nearly twelve crore women, men and children is an assurance that the government of Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia gives not only through her own pronouncements and practical measures, but also through the reiterations of her cabinet colleagues.

Health and Family Welfare Minister Chowdhury Kamal Ibne Yusuf, addressing a function organised by a private hospital in Faridpur on Saturday, said that the present democratic government is committed to improving the health profile of the nation. It is well aware that the mother and child health indices in our country reflect the deplorable socio-economic conditions under which the majority of the population live.

The government is committed to establishing an efficient mother-and-child- health care network throughout the country. But, the Health Minister pointed out, the role of private sector initiatives in complementing government efforts is equally important if we are to ensure that an effective health care delivery system is in place within reach of every man, woman and child.

Thanks to international development partners like the UNICEF and the UNFPA, Bangladesh is all set to conquer nearly all of the child killers. Through its National Plan of Action (NPA) within the Fourth Five Year Plan the government hopes to reach a package of minimum human needs to all—universal education, safe water and sanitation, primary health care and nutrition.

It is reassuring that allocation for this basic minimum package has gone up, compared to previous years' expenditure, and the government is open to suggestions of diverting funds for social development from other unproductive sectors.

The education sector is enjoying a great deal of attention. As the Information Minister Barrister Nazmul Huda said recently, "none would remain illiterate and ignorant" if the government's present programmes for the spread of education are successfully implemented. Terming the programmes to be "epoch-making", Barrister Huda added that by making primary education compulsory and free—with education for girls free up to class eight, and initiatives like food-for-education and mass education—the nation can look forward to eliminating illiteracy provided the programmes are implemented successfully.

Indeed, the worst of the battle can be fought in Bangladesh with a two-pronged approach—basic education and health care. Nearly 80 per cent of the diseases in Bangladesh can be tackled with the guarantee of safe water and sanitation for every household. Bangladesh today can boast of reaching a majority of the population with safe drinking water and though we still have a long way to go with sanitation, work on that head is continuing.

By the end of this year all salt consumed in Bangladesh would be iodized so that iodine-deficiency disorders no longer plague Bangladesh. Today about 40 per cent of the total population are affected in one way or the other by the lack of this trace element in the diet. Apart from goitre, cretinism, and other physical signs of iodine deficiency, there are damaging effects on the brain cells, making victims "slow" and less productive.

Those working on the Iodine-deficiency programme claim that the extra cost incurred to iodize one kilogramme of common salt amounts to the price of only a cup of tea. It is amazing indeed what appalling effects we can avoid with just a little thought and initiative; and both can certainly be put to better use if the people have access to such crucial information. Basic education curricula therefore must be designed to address these everyday realities of life.