

SAARC ministerial meet on women begins

Khaleda calls for common S Asian position in Beijing

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia Saturday underlined the need for formulating a common position by the SAARC member countries on the problems of millions of women in South Asia so that they could raise voice collectively on the issues at the coning world conference on women in Beijing, reports BSS.

Inaugurating a two-day SAARC ministerial meeting on women in Dhaka the Prime Minister hoped that a collective SAARC position would be presented in the Beijing conference on the basis of consensus.

The meeting of the SAARC Women's Affairs Ministers, she said, would help reach a consensus through exchange of ideas and experiences on taking a coordinated stand on various issues of common concern of women at the Beijing conference.

The Prime Minister said the Dhaka resolution on women, to be adopted at the ministerial meeting, would cover the common interests of the South Asian region, where one-fifth of the world's women live.

The collective wisdom and the shared experiences of the South Asian countries, Begum

Zia said, would help make the conference a success.

The Prime Minister said Bangladesh believes in gender equality and "our Constitution guarantees equal rights for men and women". Begum Zia said Islam, which is the religion of the majority people of Bangladesh, also emphasises equal rights of men and women.

Chaired by State Minister for Women's and Children Affairs Begum Sarwari Rahman, the inaugural session was also addressed by the SAARC Secretary General, Mr YK Silwal, the Indian Minister of State for Women and Child Development, Mrs Basavara Jeswari.

The inaugural function began with the recitation from the holy Quran by Qari Fatema Akhtar.

The Prime Minister said Bangladesh had taken a number of steps for empowerment, development and security of women in Bangladesh. In government jobs, she said, 10 per cent quota for gazetted officers and 15 per cent for non-gazetted staff had been reserved for women in addition to merit and regional quota.

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In primary education, Begum Zia said, sixty per cent of teachers are appointed from among women.

Referring to free education for girl students up to class ten outside the municipal areas and stipend for them, provision for capital punishment to stop repression on women, loan facilities to make the women self-reliant and establishment of a separate ministry of women's affairs, the Prime Minister said, these steps had reflected Bangladesh's commitment for the advancement of women.

Bangladesh, she said, was committed to implementing the goals and objectives of the Nairobi forward-looking strategies.

Begum Zia underscored the need for launching a comprehensive action programme, to be supported by matching resources, for the success of this commitment.

The Prime Minister said that the developed countries had responsibilities to provide fresh and additional resources to attain the goals of the Nairobi forward-looking strategies for

women's socio-economic development.

The delegates from the seven SAARC countries, Ministers, MPs and diplomats and high civil and military officials were present at the inaugural session at the impressive International Conference Centre (ICC).

Large size flags of the seven SAARC countries were hung from the main entrance of the ICC to the auditorium on the occasion.

Bangladesh is hosting the SAARC ministerial meeting on women towards the world women's conference in Beijing as per the decision taken in the last SAARC summit in New Delhi in May this year.

The first ever Women Affairs ministerial-level meeting assumes importance in view of the upcoming United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing in September this year.

Begum Zia said the first World Conference on Women was held in Mexico in 1975. "We are now on way to Beijing to participate in the fourth world conference on women after a long journey from Mexico via

Nairobi, Rio, Vienna, Cairo and Copenhagen," she added.

The prime objective of all these endeavours, Begum Zia said, was to ensure equal rights of men and women by freeing the women community of all exploitations and deprivations.

Yet discrimination against women still persists in different countries of the world and equal rights of women to education, training, jobs, housing and other sectors have not yet been ensured, she said.

Bangladesh, the Prime Minister said, was emphasising on status, equal rights and empowerment of women from the very beginning of the formation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

Begum Zia said as SAARC Chairperson, she raised the issues in different international fora.

The Prime Minister said the declaration of the World Summit for social development in Copenhagen has highlighted, enhancement of social integration, alleviation and reduction of poverty, and expansion of productive employment.

She said "peace" is a far cry

for women and violence against women is a serious problem in South Asia, as indeed in other parts of the world. "We must enact and reinforce penal, civil, labour and administrative codes to punish and redress the wrongs caused to women and girls who are subjected to any form of violence," Begum Zia said.

She said social inequality among men and women in almost every sphere of life is a great challenge before us.

Women community of this region are passing their days amidst traditional social taboos, superstitions and other impediments. They are not getting equal opportunity in education, health, nutrition, jobs, politics, economic activities and management of environment.

The causes behind discrimination against women and repression on them include erosion of social and cultural values, caste system, unequal position of women in family and society, drug addiction, regional and international conflicts etc. We must raise our voice collectively to bring an end to it, she said.