

"World focus on Autism"  
Address by  
Her Excellency Sheikh Hasina  
Hon'ble Prime Minister  
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh  
New York, 27 September 2012

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Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim

Madam Ban Soon-taek,  
Mrs. Suzanne and Mr. Bob Wright,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Assalamu Alaikum and Good Morning to you all.

1. I consider it to be a great privilege to have the opportunity to speak before this gathering of such exceptional personalities who have been serving selflessly millions, especially children, afflicted with autism and other development disorders. They are the unsung heroes of our time whose accomplishments in easing the life of special segment of the humanity need to be boldly recognized and publicly encouraged. I would like to specially thank Mrs. Suzanne Wright and Mr. Bob Wright of "Autism Speaks" and our Permanent Mission in New York for organizing this important "World focus on Autism" Event.

Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

2. Every day the world is becoming more and more aware of the growing number of children suffering from Autism spectrum disorders or developmental disabilities. Up to 2 percent of children between the age of 3 and 10 in virtually every country suffer from such disability. In Bangladesh 0.8% children are estimated to be autistic, while in the USA it is 1%. The children who are ill and their families, especially in developing countries, suffer social and cultural stigma, isolation, discrimination, lack of health care and education facilities. For them, Autism is a life long struggle. Indeed, the emotional, social and financial burden on families, communities, and countries is staggering. Equally staggering is the treatment costs, which is beyond the reach of many families even in developed countries like the USA, and is unaffordable in LDCs as Bangladesh. Opportunity for early diagnosis of Autism and intervention is almost nil in developing countries. It is painful and paradox that most Autistic children have exceptionally high IQ levels. Given medicare they can transform into creative and contributing geniuses.

3. These disorders were brought to the global fore and the WHO, only in recent times, through the dedicated work and relentless awareness efforts of a few people and their friends, and the family themselves of autistic children. Among them are Suzanne and Bob Wright, and I am proud to include with these illustrious persons, also the name of my own daughter, Saima Wazed Hossain, a child psychologist. It is from her and her work that I discovered how painful and complex autism spectrum disorders were, and the sufferance of those children. My heart went out to them and have made me a champion, an advocate, a patron and an Ambassador of all those suffering from ASDs and the DDs.

4. Today, Bangladesh is a leading country championing the cause of autism at national, regional and also at global levels. 2012 is described as the "Year of Autism" in Bangladesh. In July 2012, we organized a conference on autism and developmental disabilities in South Asia at Dhaka with Suzanne and Bob Wright and Saima. It drew over 1000 participants from 11 countries, including eminent personalities like Srimati Sonia Gandhi, president of the Indian National Congress; Mrs. Shiranthi Rajapaksha, First Lady of Sri Lanka; Mrs. Ilham Hussain, First Lady of the Maldives, who are also with us here today. The conference in Dhaka, designed to propose solutions for autism communities in Bangladesh, roused tremendous awareness among the people, the policy makers and the academia in the region.

5. The Conference also marked the official launching of Autism Speaks Global Autism Public Health Initiative (GAPH). It also inaugurated in Bangladesh the National Advisory Committee for Autism. This with the Inter-Ministerial Task Force on Autism formed with representatives of 8 ministries devised a Strategic and Convergent Action Plan for Autism and Developmental Disabilities in Bangladesh. The action plan outlines specific objectives for the development and implementation of autism awareness, education, training, and research programs mandated at a government policy level. Bangladesh is today a nation with more compassion and understanding of the needs of children afflicted with autism and their and families. Families are also now benefiting from our community and professional training programs for the detection and treatment of ASDs and DDs.

6. Earlier this month, the 65<sup>th</sup> WHO South East Asian Regional Committee in Jakarta endorsed a resolution that, for the first time in history, identified autism and developmental disabilities as a regional public health priority. This is a triumph for the autism affected people of the region, and Bangladesh is proud to lead that process. Furthermore, Bangladesh and India, with technical support from WHO and Autism Speaks, is holding the first meeting of South Asian Autism Network or SAAN early in 2013 in New Delhi. It would build partnership for addressing autism at a regional level and supporting families and individuals in a collaborative manner. Our two of the world's most populous countries are literally re-writing public health and education policies to improve the lives of individuals with autism. I take this opportunity to thank Her Excellency Srimati Sonia Gandhi for her leadership role in advancing these regional endeavors covering autism.

7. In conclusion, I would like to inform that Bangladesh is tabling the UN's first ever resolution on Autism Spectrum Disorder and Developmental Disabilities in this year's UNGA. It calls for local, national and international actions on sharing the burden with people and the families with ASDs and DDs, and mobilizing political will and resources to address the challenge. I request you all to support the resolution. I believe your support will see the adoption of this benign resolution and inspire worldwide awareness for the children and the families living with autism. I also believe that this movement that we have begun will move forward in achieving its noble goal of meaningfully assisting those unfortunate yet gifted children enabling them to contribute significantly as partners towards building the future world of hope and glory.

I thank you all.

Khoda Hafez.  
Joi Bangla, Joi Bangabandhu.  
May Bangladesh Live Forever.