

**Regional Conference on
Autism Spectrum Disorders and Developmental Disabilities
in South Asia - Inaugural ceremony**

Address by

Sheikh Hasina

Hon'ble Prime Minister
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Hotel Rupashi Bangla, Dhaka, Monday, 10 Shraban 1418, 25 July 2011

Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim

Your Excellency
Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, President, Indian National Congress,
Madam Shiranthi Rajapaksa, First Lady of Sri Lanka,
Madam Ilham Hussain, Second Lady of Maldives,
Distinguished Delegates,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Assalamu Alaikum and Good Morning to you all.

I extend to you all a very warm welcome to Bangladesh, and to the opening of the two-day, "Regional Conference on Autism Spectrum Disorders and Developmental Disabilities in South Asia".

It is estimated that every day three hundred and sixty thousand children are born in our world. Sadly, one in every 110 of them is born with an autism spectrum disorder. It means that every day there are more than three thousand children born worldwide with autism. The challenges faced by families living in poverty are already immeasurable; it is even more challenging when that child has a complex disability such as autism. As a leader of a developing country, I have always been mindful of the needs of the underprivileged, especially those faced with the challenges of ASD as well as poverty. That is why, at the behest of my daughter, Saima Hossain, a school psychologist with expertise on autism, I have requested you all to join me today to launch the Global Autism Public Health Initiative developed by Autism Speaks, as well as to help establish a South Asia Autism Network.

I am convinced that by the time this important conference is over, we will all have learned something new about autism and other developmental disorders. We will also gain valuable information from one another on current research and interventions on this very important subject. Such information would assist us in helping children with ASD to be better adapted to an increasingly complex world.

In many countries like Bangladesh, we tend to ignore mental illness, and thereby, miss the significant benefits we could otherwise gain from early identification, and timely interventions. Identification of a disability and appropriate interventions within the first year of a child's life are particularly important when it comes to meeting the challenges of neurodevelopmental disorders such as autism.

In most developing countries, the rights of those who are challenged are rarely recognized, and seldom met. Dangers such as social stigma, misinformation, and a lack of experts and treatment centers, limit the quality of support available to these families. Therefore, we need to create necessary social and legal infrastructures to lessen their sufferings, protect their rights, and promote their causes. In Bangladesh, we plan to make progress in these areas within the shortest possible time.

I firmly believe with the help of international organizations such as Autism Speaks, WHO, the UN, and others, we can develop better identification methods, improve treatment options, and create social support networks for families facing challenging conditions every day of their lives. Many of our guests here have been invited so that they may share their experiences in launching similar initiatives in their countries, and for developing comprehensive mental health centers. We also look forward to hearing their ideas and future plans for addressing the challenges of ASD in their countries.

It is said that, "one should never leave for tomorrow what one can do today". So, I request you all to join me in friendship and partnership in taking up this tremendous challenge facing us today. Let us begin the process of working in cooperation and collaboration with one another, so that as a region we can develop scientifically sound practices, which are socially applicable and economically feasible.

I conclude by expressing my deep gratitude to you all for coming to Bangladesh, and for your valuable support and participation in this very important conference. I also hope that while you are with us in our country, your stay would be happy, pleasant and memorable.

Khoda Hafez.

Joi Bangla, Joi Bangabandhu.

May Bangladesh Live Forever.

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