

Launching of "Education First Initiative"

Address By

Her Excellency Sheikh Hasina

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

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Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim

Mr. Ban Ki-moon, Secretary General of the United Nations,
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Assalamu Alaikum and a very good afternoon to you all.

1. I congratulate you, Mr. Secretary General, for launching today the "Education First Initiative" at the 67th UNGA. I also thank you for including Bangladesh as one of the Champion States of this initiative. Bangladesh, since its birth in 1971, had focused on education for socio-economic development. Our Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared, "Education would be our first and foremost tool for national development". He recognized the need for establishing a uniform, mass oriented and universal system of education, ensuring free and compulsory education to all children. It had since then been enshrined in our Constitution, and when I became Prime Minister, promoting the cause of education was made a lot easier.

2. Our globalized world is now facing serious challenges of poverty, global financial crises, unemployment, deprivation, intolerance, climate change impediments, terrorism, and other maladies. The solution lies in educating the people to face them intelligently and collectively. Education also inspires one generation to create a more peaceful, prosperous and sustainable future for their next generation. It is sad that despite our Millennium commitments reaffirming the central role of education, millions of children remain out of schools or are leaving them early. Quality education to understand humanity's shared values and the necessity of collective measures to survive together is also lacking. Mr. Secretary General's initiatives to "put every child to school"; "improve the quality of education"; and "foster global partnership for education" may provide the impetus necessary to achieving proper education for all by 2015.

3. Education is placed as a lead "agent of change" in our overall development agenda. Our 2010 Education Policy ensured further access for all to education. We are committed to eradicate illiteracy by 2014. We have already reached almost 100% enrollments at the primary level. Education of girls is also one of our major aspirations. It is said, "If you educate a boy, you educate a person, if you educate a girl, you educate a family and a whole nation". During our first term from 1996 to 2001, we adopted a National Women's Development Policy, and we revised it during our present tenure to suit our current needs. Girl's education has been made free up to higher secondary level. Special stipend for girls has increased their enrollment in higher secondary and graduation level. Gender parity has been achieved in primary and secondary levels, a prime target of MDG-3. Currently, the male-female ratio at secondary level is 47:53.

4. We have also distributed 230 million free text books for the primary and secondary schools. We are progressing with School Feeding Program to keep the poor children at school. A "Prime Minister's Education Assistance Trust Fund Act 2011" has been enacted to ensure education for the poor meritorious students. Introduction of Primary Terminal Examination after Grade 5, and Junior School Certificate Examination after Grade 8 have reduced dropout rates. Curriculum of Madrassahs has been improved to bring their students within the fold of modern education. Teachers are being given special training to improve the quality of teaching lessons. Vocational and technical education is also being taught to men and women migrant workers for overseas market. They are our asset and already 8 million of them are working abroad.

5. To achieve "Digital Bangladesh" and "Vision 2021", we removed import duties on computers; have even started to produce computers "Doel" at an affordable cost, around 110 US dollar; arranged free internet service to schools and making available online 106 e-textbooks; arranged 17 mobile computer labs to teach children the use of computers; introduced multimedia classrooms and ICT labs in some secondary and higher secondary schools. All our efforts in education, in the last three years, has been steadily changing Bangladesh by reducing poverty level by 10%, enhancing GDP growth rate to an average of 6.5% and per capita income by 34.6%. However, to achieve full literacy, our efforts in the developing world must have the support of our development partners and of the UN agencies like the UNDP, UNICEF, UNESCO and WFP.

6. I, therefore, urge our development partners, UN Agencies and business organizations to support education for every child everywhere. I welcome the involvement of the Secretary General's Global Adviser for Education, former British Prime Minister, Mr. Gordon Brown and the UNESCO Chief, Ms. Irina Bokova. On my part, I pledge my full commitment and complete support to your noble "Education First Initiative" to ensure its success. I conclude with the hopes and aspirations on "Education" as reflected in the following verses of the first Bengali Nobel Laureate Poet Rabindranath Tagore:

Quote:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high
Where knowledge is free
Where the world has not broken up in fragments
By narrow domestic walls...
Where the mind is led forward
Into ever widening thought and action
Into that heaven of freedom, let my world awake."

Unquote.

I thank you all.

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

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