

OFFICIAL SPEECHES

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As representative of his Excellency, the Commonwealth Secretary-General, it is my pleasant duty to convey, on his behalf, the warmest greetings and sincerest welcome to you all. We express our deep sense of gratitude to the Government and the people of Bangladesh for their close co-operation and great generosity in hosting the present Commonwealth Regional Seminar on Universal Primary Education for the Asia-Pacific region. I deem it a great privilege to accord a special welcome to his Excellency, the President of the People's Republic of Bangladesh and to express our deep sense of gratitude to him for kindly gracing the occasion by his august presence. We express our heartfelt thanks and appreciation for the excellent facilities that have been put at our disposal and for the warm welcome that we have received since our arrival here. I would like to extend a very hearty welcome to the delegates, consultants and observers and wish them success in their deliberations. It may be mentioned here that although this seminar has been organized for the Asia-Pacific region, the participation by observers from other regions of the Commonwealth lends the seminar an inter-regional character. Our thanks are due to the various Commonwealth governments for supporting the seminar through the participation of their delegates. We offer our thanks to all the guests who have found it convenient to join us.

On this auspicious occasion, I would like to take the opportunity to say a few words about the Commonwealth. The modern Commonwealth with its predominantly Third World membership, is not the mere ghost of the British Empire. It is the free association of sovereign Commonwealth nations and its strength lies in its complete freedom and great flexibility. In spite of its diversity, there is a sense of community. Its ties sustain and support a sturdy infrastructure of consultation and co-operation, embracing the governments of a quarter of the world's population. The Commonwealth has achieved formal observer status at the UN and at a number of international meetings, thus enmeshing itself within the growing complexity of international institutions and associations. On a broader canvas the Commonwealth has been endeavouring relentlessly for a new international economic order aimed at securing for the Third World reasonable price stability for primary products, steady access to the capital and the vast markets of the developed world and a fixed percentage of aid from the rich to the poor. On political issues, the Commonwealth Declaration of Principles (1971) recognized 'racial prejudice as a dangerous sickness threatening the healthy development of the human race and racial discrimination as an unmitigated evil of society'. The opportunities and limitations of the Commonwealth were aptly summed up by its present Secretary-General, His Excellency Mr S S Ramphal, when he said "We cannot negotiate for the world but we can help the world to negotiate".

The activities of the Commonwealth Secretariat reflect the major interests of the member nations. Besides dealing with political and economic issues, they encompass co-operation in education, information, export development, health, food production and rural development, applied studies in government, international affairs, science, legal matters, youth affairs and economic affairs. Established in 1971, the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFTC) is an inter-governmental, multi-lateral development fund, which assists economic and social progress in developing countries. The present seminar has been made possible by funds from CFTC.

The Education Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat was created in 1966 with the following objectives:

- (a) To assist and stimulate co-operation in education among member states.
- (b) To study educational trends and developments.
- (c) To initiate and promote ways of dealing with specific educational problems and
- (d) To publish information on significant educational topics that are of special interest to the Commonwealth countries.

The work programme of this Division is based on the remits from the Heads of Government Meetings and the Conferences of Commonwealth Education Ministers. These Ministerial meetings, otherwise known as the Commonwealth Education Conferences, are held every three years. The eighth Commonwealth Education Conference will be held in Sri Lanka in August 1980. Specialist Conferences take place every two years, on themes recommended at Commonwealth Education Conferences. The last one was held in New Delhi from 22 January to 2 February 1979, having as its theme Non-Formal Education for Development. For the first time a meeting of Commonwealth Senior Education Officials was held in July this year. The purpose of the meeting was two-fold - to discuss the preparations for the Eighth Commonwealth Education Conference and to review the work programme of the Education Division.

Besides organizing the above conferences and meetings, the main areas of operation of the Education Division include seminars, workshops and training courses in such fields as science and mathematics education, teaching about the Commonwealth, book development, non-formal education, special education, universal primary education, educational media, higher education, curriculum, teacher education and educational administration and supervision. The purpose of this operation is to help member governments improve the specialist expertise of their staff as well as to assist the governments themselves to formulate action-programmes in problem areas of education.

Furthermore, the dissemination of information to member governments is an important function of this Division and is accomplished in various ways. In addition to holding workshops, seminars and training courses, information is gathered and disseminated through liaison visits, and through publications arising out of reports and commissioned studies. The establishment of a network of Commonwealth desks in the education Ministries of member states has opened up new possibilities for effective collaboration in the collection and dissemination of information. The exchange programme known as the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan is operated in collaboration with the Association of Commonwealth Universities.

The Seventh Conference of the Commonwealth Education Ministers held in Accra, Ghana (1977) recommended, inter alia, 'that the Commonwealth Secretariat, in consultation with the governments concerned, should assemble information on the steps being taken to implement programmes of universal primary education in member countries and make this information available to other countries'. In pursuance of this remit, the Secretariat has carried out and published a research study entitled 'Progress Towards Universal Primary Education - A Commonwealth Survey'. The Conference also recommended that the Secretariat should arrange a series of meetings on Universal Primary Education. It is eminently befitting that the first of these meetings is being held in Bangladesh whose people traditionally have held learning in utmost esteem and veneration. This comes as no wonder when it is remembered that Islam regards the acquisition

of knowledge as obligatory upon every man and woman. Thus, in Bangladesh, schools have traditionally received assistance from rulers, chieftains, affluent and religious citizens. It is worth mentioning in this context that William Adam's educational survey conducted in 1835 recorded one hundred thousand schools indicative of one school for every 400 citizens. This traditional indigeneous system of mass education that had developed throughout the centuries, had all the characteristics of a modern mass education system. It was free, universal and was meant for both males and females. The schooling was both formal and non-formal and it involved the community. Besides using parents as teachers, it evolved the famous monitorial system - senior pupils as teacher aides, teaching their junior colleagues. This glorious historical backdrop should serve as a source of inspiration and guidance to the present seminar.

The objectives of the present seminar are:

- (a) To obtain an overview of current and planned action in member countries.
- (b) To analyse the findings of the Commonwealth survey on progress towards UPE with respect to what countries mean by UPE, to examine constraints in its implementation and to suggest remedies.
- (c) To determine preparatory steps that will be necessary for the successful implementation of UPE.
- (d) To investigate alternative strategies for implementing UPE.

We hope that the present seminar will afford a great opportunity for exchange of views and experiences among the participants and it will draw heavily upon the manifold experience and innovative practices of Bangladesh in Universal Primary Education. Mention may be made of the experiment by the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development, Comilla, with the mosque-based feeder schools, attached to the local primary schools, teaching classes I and II with specially trained Imams as teachers for children as well as for adult illiterates; the new curricula for primary education and for teacher education at this level, with emphasis on work experience and population education, formulated by the National Committee for Curricula and Syllabuses; the UPE Pilot Project of feeder schools in the Meher Union of Comilla district, run largely by women teachers with close community involvement and the project for manufacturing teaching materials out of locally available materials, undertaken by the Village Education Resource Centre at Savar. These innovative experiments representing laudable efforts at adding social dimensions to education have tremendous significance for achieving universal free and compulsory primary education within target dates not only in Bangladesh but also in other countries.

Perhaps it is pertinent to remind ourselves on this solemn occasion that universal, free and compulsory primary education is a challenge that has long been with us. Twenty years ago, 15 countries of Asia, inspired with the ideal of socio-economic development, met in Karachi and after prolonged and thorough discussion, decided unanimously to recommend to UNESCO a programme for them to achieve by 1980 universal, free and compulsory education of seven years' duration for the age-group six to thirteen or seven to fourteen. The programme was duly approved by the UNESCO Conference at its eleventh session held in Paris in 1960 and came to be known as the Karachi Plan. Ever since, the challenge has been taken up by these countries as well as by other newly independent countries all over the globe with varying degrees of success. We have assembled here today in the International Year of the Child to re-dedicate ourselves to this noble but formidable task. It is worth recalling here that out of the two thousand million inhabitants of the developing

countries, more than 800 million are under fifteen, and that less than four children in ten in these countries complete their primary schooling. If present trends continue, in 1985, only two-thirds of children aged from six to eleven throughout the world will be attending school. It is unfortunate that despite its enormous resources, world expenditure on armaments now being close to the terrifying level of \$300 billion dollars a year, the modern world is still unable to offer all children education free and compulsory, at least in elementary stages, as proclaimed in the Declaration of the Rights of the Child. Consequently, new generations of young people will swell the already teeming ranks of the illiterate. Hence permanent remedies for a situation like this lies in ensuring universal school attendance for children and increased endeavours to eliminate school wastage reinforced by simultaneous effective adult literacy programmes. Once more the task might appear daunting but we may take heart from the exhortation of courage from one of the noblest men of our time, Dag Hammarskjold, "Never look down to test the ground before taking your next step; only he who keeps his eye fixed on the far horizon will find his right road".

In organizing this seminar the Commonwealth Secretariat has received invaluable help and co-operation from many quarters. We are immensely grateful to His Excellency, the President of the People's Republic of Bangladesh for his generous patronage and inspiring guidance. The very fact that His Excellency has kindly consented to inaugurate the seminar, symbolises how dear to his heart is the cause of education as a whole and that of Primary Education in particular. This demonstration of political will undoubtedly augurs well for the realisation of the challenging goal of free, universal and compulsory primary education. To the Hon. Prime Minister, we are greatly indebted for the enthusiastic support and kind guidance that we have received from him. Our gratitude is due to the Secretary, Ministry of Education for his advice and co-operation, who while attending a two-day meeting of the Commonwealth Senior Education Officials in London in July last, not only made admirable contributions to the deliberations but also took the opportunity to hold discussions with His Excellency the Secretary-General and other senior officials of the Commonwealth Secretariat about mutual co-operation in various fields of education. The first fruit of his pioneering but pragmatic efforts, is the present regional seminar which is being inaugurated today. We are also grateful to the other officials of the Ministry of Education as well as to those in the Education Directorate, Bangladesh National Commission for UNESCO and Bangladesh Education Extension and Research Institute for their hard work and valuable co-operation.

Thank you all.