

Assistance To Blind Children In Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, now it is estimated that there are at least 200,000 blind children. Many children are blind because of a severe lack of Vitamin A in infancy. According to World Health Organisation 70,000 children go blind every year in Bangladesh, due to this deficiency in their diet. Another reason for blindness is attributed to ulceration of the cornea (the surface of the eye) arising out of a trivial accident causing a scratch on the eye that later is complicated by secondary infection. Until a few years ago, in Bangladesh smallpox was also frequently a cause of blindness in children. A small percentage of blind children about 5 per cent of the total, have congenital conditions like cataracts but their families are unfortunately often either too poor, or living too far from a properly-equipped hospital, for corrective surgery to be undertaken.

In many Asian countries at present only a small number of blind children receive any kind of assistance. In Indonesia, there are about 300,000 blind children, but only 18,000 get special care. In India according to an estimate of the World Council for the Welfare of the Blind out of one million blind children only 15,000 are being assisted. In Bangladesh of the 200,000 only less than 1,000 are being helped by either a Government or non-government agency to become self-reliant. This is a serious situation because the blind child is often the most vulnerable, the most neglected, and the most deprived of all children.

A special organisation known

as 'Assistance for Blind Children (ABC)' was established last April in Dacca to provide services for blind children in Bangladesh. The organisation was later registered with the Deptt. of Social Welfare and became an Associate Member of the World Council for the Welfare of the Blind.

Assistance for Blind Children (ABC) is providing useful service to blind children in Bangladesh. The organisation is distributing Braille equipment to children in five government institutions for the blind. In the past five months it has provided financial support for surgical treatment to fortyone blind children from poor families. The ABC has also a programme to construct hostels at selected schools where blind children can reside and participate in the integrated education programme organised by the Deptt. of Social Welfare. A hostel at Edward Eye Institution in Mymensingh has just been completed and hostels in Serajganj and Patuakhali will be constructed soon. It has also established a demonstration project for rural blind children who can be taught to participate in the daily activities of village life.

The organisation works in close collaboration with similar international and national organisations and was established in contacts with the Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind, the Helen Keeler International, and the Christoffel Blindmission. In Bangladesh, ABC will also work in close cooperation with existing similar organisations like the Bangladesh National Society for the Blind. A Coordination

Group for ABC has been formed in the United States, with the main purpose of raising funds for the new organisation's activities. A similar group will be established soon in the United Kingdom. Donations already received from various organisations in Europe, The United States and Bangladesh include £10,000 from the Hermes Foundation in London, Taka 15,000 from the UN Women's Association in Dacca, the funds from the Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind for hostel construction and from the Christoffel Blindmission for the project for rural blind children.

The organisation has a nine member Executive Committee with Dr. Michael HK Irwin, UNICEF Representative in Bangladesh as President and Mr Habibullah Khan Minister for Information and Broadcasting as Vice-President; Other members of the Committee are Secretary—Mr Nurul Islam Khan Deputy Director Department of Social Welfare Treasurer—Mr Abu Baker Siddique Liaison Officer, in Bangladesh, for the Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind; Assistant Secretary Mr Monsur A Choudhuri Executive Officer of the Bangladesh National Society for the Blind Mrs Salma Khan Deputy Chief, Social Welfare and Women's Affairs Section, Planning Commission. Mr Rabiul Husain, Medical Adviser, Central Hospital Management and Coordination Committee, Bangladesh National Society for the Blind; Mrs Munir Khan Chairman, Education Committee, Women's Voluntary Association and Mr AM Mufazzal, Executive Editor of the Bangladesh Times.