

National Conference on Combating Acid Violence in Bangladesh

*Organised by Acid Survivors Foundation
BIAM Auditorium, Dhaka, 26 February 2011*

Honourable Minister,
Distinguished participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Ami Bangla polte para na ... but Shubho Shokal. Monira has kindly agreed to translate the main points of my remarks into Bangla.

It is a privilege for me to address this audience along with you. Thank you to Monira and the Acid Survivors' Foundation for organising this conference, and for everything you do.

We are here because we have a common understanding that acid attack against women and girls is unacceptable. The UK government condemns it in the strongest possible terms. I have been working in Bangladesh for the last four years. ***The use of acid as a weapon of attack on innocent women and girls is appalling.*** The cruelty of the act and the resulting disfigurement and grave suffering of victims have pained me immensely.

Violence against women and girls impedes development. ***When women and girls do not feel safe at home, and are unable to contribute to society and benefit fully from health, education and other services due to physical suffering or fear of being attacked, then society as a whole suffers.*** That is why the UK government has made women and girls the focus of all its development assistance.

Moreover, among all the interventions that we can all do for betterment of women and girls, ensuring a safe environment both at home and outside, is of the highest priority.

I am therefore very glad to see all of you here, representing various government departments, the police, and NGOs which provide medical and legal assistance to the victims of acid attacks. I feel encouraged that things are indeed changing for the better. Your commitment and your assistance can help make the lives of these innocent girls and women better, and make them active members of the society. We have just seen how fantastic some of them are at dancing and singing.

Working together we have already seen significant improvements. The prevention campaign has significantly reduced the number of attacks. In 2002 there were over 500 known attacks a year. In 2010 the number came down to around 115. That is still 115 too many. ***The challenge, I am sure you will agree, is to sustain the downward trend and eliminate this violence of unspeakable nature.***

The UK has had very long relationship with ASF- DFID provided close to £1 million of financial support since 2002. The British Women's Association was there at the start, in 1999. Among various other things, our support has helped ASF to continue with the campaign against acid violence and to provide comprehensive specialised medical care services to victims of acid attack. The service is completely free, which benefits around 700 acid victims every year. ***I can confirm that DFID will continue to provide significant support to acid survivors in the coming years. We need to work out the details, but it will be more than in the past.***

I know that ASF will not be able to fight against acid attacks alone. I urge you to prioritise your actions to tackle violence against women and girls, to define clear and measurable commitments, and to work in partnership with ASF and other organisations which are working with victims of gender based violence. It was great to listen into some of the lively debate a little earlier, with people reporting on progress and subjecting themselves to scrutiny. But it is not enough just to talk a good game; we need to play a good game too.

By coordinating your work better you will be able to assist the victims' better- by making it easier for them to know what medical, legal, psycho-social and rehabilitation services are available to them and how they can access them.

We, for our part, will continue to support local, multi-sector responses, including piloting innovative new approaches both with the government and with partners in civil society, with a focus on prevention and mitigation. All of us being here today is testament to our readiness to change things; to help the people who have suffered attacks; to bring justice against the perpetrators; and to change attitudes in order to stop attacks being acceptable, feasible, possible, allowed.

Regardless of what we do, it is the victims, those trying to build their lives despite the terrible injustice done to them, who are the true heroes and an inspiration to all of us. We must pursue justice on three levels: first, for individual cases, making use of the welcome innovation of the "7373" number with the Police, and without recourse to "red tape fees"; second, for survivors collectively, enabling them to be accepted and able to play full and active roles; third, for society, to eliminate the dreadful scourge of acid attacks.

If together we can support the survivors in maintaining a dignified life and taking control of their destinies, then we will make Bangladesh a much safer and better place to live for all. I believe we must do this, we can do this, and we will do this.

Thank you

Chris Austin
DFID Country Representative, UK