

PRESS RELEASE

Dhaka, 12 May 2004

AMADER KONTHO- OUR VOICES

(youth with disabilities raise awareness of their lives and needs through photography)

Today Wednesday 12 May at 5PM, the exhibition of the photographs taken by youths with disabilities is being inaugurated at SARPV's office-premises (House 3/8, Block F, Lalmatia, Dhaka 1207; contact- 8119271, 9124522, 011845855, 0171544346; SARPV is a disability advocacy organization). This open-air exhibition will remain open for all tomorrow Thursday 13 May from 10AM-6PM. The exhibition is a part glimpse of the work of 15 trainees with disabilities after their attendance in two training workshops held in February and May 2004 and their independent work during the mid-period. The exhibition is considered the first of its kind in Bangladesh and aims to raise awareness of disability issues and to affect policy change, through the voices of disabled people themselves.

The young trainees are representatives of the organisations namely ADD, CSID, FAVH-Dhaka, Prodipaloy- Chakaria/Cox's Bazaar, CDA- Dinajpur, SPD- Meherpur, SRDD-Munshiganj. The participants' disabilities range from total blindness, to visual impairment and mental disability, learning difficulty or physical disability. Whilst each participant faces different challenges on a daily basis, the group is united in its effort to draw attention (through photography) to the needs, views and wishes of people with disabilities across Bangladesh.

This unique photographic project has been initiated by SARPV- Bangladesh and made possible through funding provided by DFID-UK through Healthlink Worldwide, a UK based non-govt. organisation. Photographer Anna Blackman, from PhotoVoice- the UK based photography-training organization, is facilitating the training-workshops along with two Bangladeshi youth photographers namely Shefali Akter Shetu and Abul Kashem. This seems to be the first of such initiative of photography by persons with visual impairments in Bangladesh. Earlier, in last September, during the disability simulation exhibition by name 'Seeing in The Dark', SARPV organized the show of photography work by the persons with visual impairments.

The exhibition is arranged informally in part, despite its booking with the national museum gallery, in protest to the non-responses from the honourable Prime Minister's Office to its appeal. The honourable Prime Minister was formally requested to kindly inaugurate the exhibition so that the youths get a chance then to place their demands to the Prime Minister that require urgent implementation. We believe, along with the govt.'s current initiatives of wheel-chair distribution, soft credit from the commercial banks, the following steps will complement enormously to the positive changes in favour of people with disabilities-

1. Stipend till at least Higher-Secondary education for students with disabilities for costs for transport and assistive devices
2. Provision for two sets of books for use at home and school by students with disabilities
3. Accessibility in all secondary schools, and stations and terminals, where wheelchairs, crutches or other assistive devices should be kept, toilets are built accessible and easy-usable
4. Rickshaws and especially adapted vehicles should be allowed to ply along all roads and thoroughfares for people with disabilities only.
5. Shahid Minar, National Mausoleum should have provisions for letting all people move along despite their old age, illness or disabilities, with/out using wheelchairs/crutches
6. The buildings for schools, union parishod bhaban, or other public buildings that are now being built or planned, should accommodate good toilet facilities and
7. and allocation of one day from any parliament-sessions to discuss the above and more other urgent issues around disability in presence of all members despite their difference in political beliefs and practices

The letter of request sent formally to the Prime Minister's office, the repeated follow-up over telephones, immediate faxing papers upon request resulted no response (neither a simple 'yes' nor 'no'). This informal exhibition protests that non-response. Today the trainee-photographers will be returning home in different districts, and they decide to present the glimpse of their work to the media for drawing the attention of our honourable Prime Minister.

Are there no scopes for these youths from the remote villages to reach the Prime Minister with their messages? Will 'Our Voices' remain always unheard by the govt.?