

27 June 2010

HAPPY HOMES PROJECT LAUNCH

ActionAid Australia is one of the major Australian overseas aid NGOs, formerly Austcare, one of Australia's oldest overseas aid agencies. In November 2009 the President of Action Aid Australia, the Honourable John Dowd AO QC, in company with David Bitel, the Immediate Past President of the Refugee Council of Australia and close friend who has been active in Bangladesh community support organisations for many years, visited Dhaka and witnessed first hand the excellent work undertaken by ActionAid Bangladesh in managing a project called Happy Homes. This project was established in November 2006 to develop life skills for deprived and vulnerable young and adolescent girls from the streets of Dhaka. The project is a joint venture between ActionAid Bangladesh and Assistance for Slum Dwellers.

Recently published figures suggest that there are over 2 million children in Bangladesh aged between 6 months and 5 years who suffer from acute malnutrition (World Food Program, UNICEF). Approximately 600,000 children aged between 7 and 15 live in the streets of Dhaka of whom about 40% are girls. These children come from poor, destitute and shelterless families. Many of the street children are abandoned by their parents and have suffered mental, physical and sexual abuse. Some are vulnerable to child trafficking and prostitution, and others are forced into bonded labour and child marriage, even though this is contrary to the law of Bangladesh. ActionAid Bangladesh has set up five homes, each accommodating 30 girls and providing day support services for 50 girls. The girls live in this accommodation from the ages of 7 to 15 and are provided life skills and basic needs; these include counselling, medical support, mainstream education and vocational training as well as games and self awareness life skills and cleanliness training. When they attain the age of 15 the girls are better prepared for re-integration with families and society.

Enthused by this project, John Dowd and David Bitel set up a committee in Australia as a separate organisation, Bangladeshi Friends of ActionAid Australia Inc, to raise funds for the ActionAid project with the intention of acquiring land in the Dhaka region to build premises to house the project and to provide ongoing support for the important activities of the project. The aim of the project is to secure \$800,000 in funding over three years. It is expected that AusAID will become a partner in the funding of the project.

A major inaugural event has been arranged to take place on Tuesday 3 August 2010 at the New South Wales Parliament House in Macquarie Street, Sydney. Her Excellency Professor Marie Bashir AC, CVO the Governor of New South Wales, has agreed to be present as the Principal Guest and a large number of other dignitaries from Bangladesh and Australia are expected to attend this gala evening.

Some 30 Bangladesh community leaders have each agreed to act as table hosts for the event with the aim of inviting 10 people to each table. We encourage as many members of the Bangladesh community as possible to be present to ensure the success of the evening which it is expected will be the major event in the community calendar in 2010.

It is hoped that this event will lead to future fundraising activities within the Australian Bangladeshi community which is specifically to assist ActionAid to raise the monies required to fund this important project.

This is the first time that the Bangladesh community has worked with a mainstream Australian overseas aid agency and success of the project will bring great credit to the community. Funding support for the project is sought from members of the community. Monies donated will be tax deductible and donations should be forwarded to ActionAid Australia.

For further information contact David Bitel, Chairman of the Project on dbitel@ppilaw.com.au or Professor Sheik Rahman, Treasurer of the Project on sheik.rahman@unsw.edu.au

+ photo (front)