Opening Remarks by H. E. Dr. Abdul Momen, Bangladesh Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the UN at the Panel Discussion entitled ‘Solving the Autism Public Health Puzzle: Regional and International Collaboration’ on April 6, 2011, New York.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I am privileged to be a part of today’s event to observe the World Autism Awareness Day and I am thankful to Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, co-founders of Autism Speaks Suzanne and Bob Wrights, Saima Hossain, Chair of the National Advisory Committee on Autism in Bangladesh, and Mr. Kiyo Akasaka, Under Secretary General for Communications and Information for their spirit, enthusiasm, help and support. Both Secretary General and his wife are committed to help improve the life of autistic children and his very presence is a testimony of it. I also would like to thank the President of New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) for helping us to create public awareness on the issue.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have a good news-- the White House has agreed to co-sponsor this event with us and Ambassador Rick Barton of the US Mission is here to join us in today’s event.

In order to create global awareness on the issue of Autism, at the initiative of Qatar, the UN General Assembly adopted the resolution 62/139 to observe April 2nd as the World Autism Awareness Day in 2007. The force behind it was the Autism Speaks and at their appeal, Bangladesh lighted its major buildings with ‘blue lights’ on April 2nd to create public awareness on the issue.

Autism is the fastest growing serious developmental disability and since 2002 through 2006 its growth rate is around 57 per cent. As per WHO, approximately 1% of the world’s population or 67 million are affected by autism. Currently autism affects 1 out of 110 children and 1 in 70 boys. Boys are four times more likely than girls to have autism. Autism costs over $35 billion per year in USA alone and it is expected to increase significantly. Unfortunately, autism receives less than 5% of the research funding and many believe, there is no medical cure for autism. Recent findings, however, view that early diagnosis and intervention can improve outcomes.

Bangladesh government is fully aware of the prevalence of autism and it is one of the first countries to become party to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol. It also passed Disability Act in 2001 and I am pleased to report that, only last month, we conducted a nation-wide census (that takes place every 10th year), and for the first time, we collected information on persons living with disabilities including autism. To address the issue of autism, the government has taken a number of initiatives such as (1) its Ministry of Social Welfare introduced Disability Related Coordinated Special Education Regulation 2009 that includes learning procedures of autistic children, (2) initiating Society of Welfare of Autistic Children or SWAC, (3) paying 100% salaries and allowances to the teachers of autistic children, (4) autistic medical services have been extended significantly at the Sheikh Fazilatunessa Specialized Hospital and, the most prominent being the setting up of the ‘Centre for
Neurodevelopment and Autism in Children’ at the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University. [We have a couple of doctors from the Centre here today who travelled all the way to attend today’s event]. I must add that this was possible due to personal initiative of the Honorable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and I would like to add, we need global support to meet our goals. Research shows that more children will be diagnosed with autism this year than with ‘AIDS, Diabetes and Cancer’ combined.

Finally, we are lucky to have a distinguished panelist to enlighten us on our topic ‘Solving the Autism Public Health Puzzle: Regional and International Collaboration’ and I am also thankful to all of you for attending today’s event. I have a dream that one day, with your concerted efforts, deep commitment and global support and collaboration; we can face this challenge and minimize its negative consequences.

Thank you all.