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Tragic deaths in Delhi

Massive failure of the police and administration

We are deeply saddened by the deaths of at least 23 people in violence that has erupted in Delhi over the last three days over India’s Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The Act allows all non-Muslim migrants from Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan to be eligible for Indian citizenship, hence it is reasonable to expect Indian Muslims to be worried about their own status. Thus the protests against the Act, which as far as we know have been peaceful, should not have warranted such violent reactions from supporters of the CAA. But the reports coming in from Delhi show that the situation has escalated dangerously. In fact, the violence, it seems, has been allowed to spiral unnecessarily for which the state can no longer absolve itself of responsibility. Ominously, Muslims have been the main targets of the violence.

Mosques and mazaars have been burnt, with slogans of hatred chanted against Muslims, and neighbourhoods have been terrorised compelling people to be confined in their homes. What is most objectionable, however, is police inaction during the acts of vandalism, arson and violence against Muslims as reported by the Indian and international media. Even the Indian Supreme Court has criticised the role of the police as being unprofessional.

It is tragic that a city like Delhi, which is characterised by communal harmony but had seen tragic eruptions of violence, should be turned into a battlefield by inflammatory, anti-Muslim rhetoric that has unleashed such terror. The central and Delhi governments must take all necessary measures to prevent further escalation of violence and hold the police and other civil administration bodies accountable for their failure to control the violence and prevent so many deaths and injuries. The perpetrators of the violence should be identified—this should be easy as there is enough footage despite attempts to prevent journalists from taking pictures and videos—and they should be arrested.

From the inflammatory hate speeches of certain politicians that instigated violence, it is clear that a certain quarter of the Indian ruling party deliberately allowed the situation to reach such a frightening level. They encouraged individuals to act on their communal hatred and the police played a partisan role by looking the other way while the violence took place and, in some cases, they even encouraged it. Needless to say, the Indian authorities must step in and control the situation, ensure the security of all groups, especially the vulnerable, and open a dialogue with those opposing the CAA while issuing stern warnings to those who are instigating and carrying out violent attacks on the protesters. Such violence that clearly has a communal tinge is a threat to India’s democracy.

Ten years to build a hospital!

Patients made to suffer needlessly

It is indeed shocking that despite the health ministry’s approval in 2007 for the construction of a seven-storey extension building for Sher-e-Bangla Medical College and Hospital (SBMCH) in Barishal, the project is yet to be finished. According to a report by *The Daily Star*, the building has been under construction for 10 years now and was due for handover to the medical authorities in December last year. With a capacity to admit 1,000 patients, the existing hospital presently accommodates 1,800-2,000 patients on average. Moreover, 4,000-5,000 patients seek treatment from the outpatient department regularly. Needless to say, the purpose of the extended building was to address the needs of the huge influx of patients that SBMCH receives. Our report further states that the hospital has been dealing with this crisis for the last three decades.

According to the Public Works Department (PWD), two firms were jointly awarded the construction project in 2007 with a budget of Tk 25 crore, but by 2011 they appealed to revise the project as the implementation cost had increased. The legal procedures that followed suspended the venture, causing further delay. Later in 2018, a new tender worth Tk 8.10 crore was given to a new firm to construct five storeys of the building which was initially supposed to be handed over by January 2019, but due to fund crisis, was later rescheduled to December 2019.

We do not understand why there should be repeated delays in a project of such significance, which was supposed to alleviate the sufferings of the patients. This is an example of how essential infrastructure often remains out of reach of the beneficiaries because of the inefficient management of projects. Nearing its completion now, the firm constructing the building has confirmed that they will be handing over the building to PWD by tomorrow, February 28, and PWD will complete the remaining work by June. We urge the government to make sure the deadline is met this time. Such apathy regarding healthcare is totally unacceptable. Patients should not have to suffer because of the indifference and inefficiency of officials and project authorities.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

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Stop child abuse at any cost

It is shameful that we as a society have earned quite a bit of notoriety when it comes to child abuse. One may recall the many horrific incidents in which children were abused and tortured. A report by this daily about a homeless boy who was set on fire by an unknown man filled me with fear and anguish. Are street children so much neglected that no one even bothered to notice a crime of this magnitude being committed?

Apart from physical abuse that children suffer, the alarming rise in the number of child rape incidents in our country is also disturbing. If the existing laws cannot prevent sexual abuse of children, then the authorities should implement more severe laws to protect them. It is extremely important that we take the matter seriously and do whatever is necessary to ensure a happy and healthy future for all children.

Vanulal Debnath, East West University, Dhaka

Do we need a uniform admission test in universities?

THE OVERTON WINDOW



ERESH OMAR JAMAL

THE announce-ment on January 23 that a uniform admission test will be held for all public universities starting next year had stirred a big debate. Even university teachers seemed divided over the issue—some supported it, while others opposed. The education ministry had previously decided, in 2010, to introduce a new admission procedure for the country’s public universities—the cluster

system. Students were to take one test for a place in any of the general universities, another test for science and technology universities, and one more test for a place in any of the agriculture universities. Ten years after the decision was made, only the medical colleges at present have a uniform entrance test, and the previous cluster system remains unimplemented beyond that.

Will the new proposal similarly fall through? Members of the University Grants Commission (UGC) initially gave the impression that it would not, remaining adamant in their comments that this new system would surely be implemented and soon. Some top public universities such as Buet, Chittagong University, Dhaka University, Rajshahi University and Jahangirnagar University, however, had opted out of it.

Whether the UGC can convince the academic councils of these universities to reconsider, with a new cluster system that it came up with during a meeting yesterday, is difficult to predict. But one thing is for certain: people from both sides of the aisle have presented some excellent arguments that should not be ignored in any decision that is ultimately made.

Those who are in favour of some type of a uniform admission test system argue that it will best serve the interest of the students. Right now, students are buying university admission forms for Tk 400 to Tk 700 each. They are spending a considerable amount of money to travel from one university to another across great distances to sit for each of the tests. Students are also having to sit for separate tests for seats in different faculties and departments of the same university—with admission test dates of different universities coinciding at times, to complicate matters even more.

In a May 2013 study, the UGC found that an admission seeker has to spend an average of Tk 43,100 on coaching

and other admission related expenditures. This is clearly absurd. Yet somehow this absurdity has become the norm; according to the same UGC study, 93 percent of admission seekers in the country take coaching classes to get admitted to higher education institutions.

Having one admission exam system will relieve students from the hassles of travelling across the country to sit for separate admission exams of different universities—it will save them time, energy and money. But some academics believe the costs that would arise from having a uniform admission exam still outweigh these benefits.

According to DU Professor Emeritus Serajul Islam Choudhury, “public universities should be autonomous” and an important aspect of that autonomy is for universities to have the sole authority to appoint teachers and select which students to admit. A uniform admission

Relations at DU has pointed out, is that if we look at the overall situation of governance in Bangladesh, there are some obvious reasons for concern.

For example, when we look at the PEC, JSC, SSC and HSC exams, we see that these exams are “marred by corruption and question leaks.” What guarantee is there that the same will not happen to the proposed uniform admission exam, if it is implemented? Can we really take such a risk when the lives of so many young people are hanging in the balance?

This is where the differing sides do agree, that organising such an admission test would be a daunting task and there should be proper mechanisms in place to stop any irregularities. But because the tendency to politicise any and all institutions is widespread in our country, that brings with it its own sets of challenges. Can those challenges be overcome?



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PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

According to DU Professor Emeritus Serajul Islam Choudhury, “public universities should be autonomous” and an important aspect of that autonomy is for universities to have the sole authority to appoint teachers and select which students to admit.

test system could take away that authority from universities to an extent—leading to some loss of autonomy, which could instigate further losses down the line.


In fact, one BNP lawmaker had recently demanded in parliament that the government amend the University Ordinance 1973 to force four leading public universities to accept the uniform admission test. Such demands prove that the concerns surrounding the issue of autonomy are not completely baseless.

Professor Serajul Islam also mentioned that “there is no organisation that can manage” the huge process of a uniform admission test such as the one proposed. However, the UGC Chairman Professor Kazi Shahidullah had said before that the UGC will form a committee to conduct the exams. That could very well be a difficult and time-consuming process—as yesterday’s proposed switch to a new cluster system indicates. However, the main apprehension that rises in regard to that, as Professor Tanzimuddin Khan of the Department of International

To reduce the load on aspiring students and their guardians, and to keep up with international norms—as we see foreign countries having uniform exams such as SAT, GRE, etc., even if they are different from what is being proposed—perhaps it is inevitable that some sort of a uniform admission test system has to be introduced for public universities in Bangladesh. And if not that, it could be necessary for the system that is now in use, which puts so much pressure on students, to be altered in some way. What way should that be? Well, this needs to be worked out by the experts and various public universities themselves. But given the present circumstances, being hasty in making any final decision may not be the right way to move forward. Therefore, it is most likely that the debate over public university admission tests will continue to heat up before the new cluster system proposed after yesterday’s meeting comes into effect—if it indeed does.

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Modi-Trump tango beyond bilateral ties



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

THE recent economic slide notwithstanding, India is seen by the United States as the anchor of regional economic and security cooperation not only in South Asia but beyond it. That was one of the most important messages from President Donald Trump’s 36-hour visit to India on February 24-25—which coincided with renewed clashes over the controversial new citizenship law in Delhi that killed at least 23 people and injured more than 150 so far.

India is the only South Asian country that Trump has visited in his first term as president. That is as much because India is a huge market for American defence hardware as because of its strategic position as a bridge between South East Asia and Central Asia where China and Russia are increasingly assertive. The focus of Trump’s visit, as evidenced by the joint statement issued late on the night of February 25, was almost equally devoted to the bilateral content of India-US partnership in areas like defence, energy, trade and technology as to the regional security and development, including the Indo-Pacific.

Trump and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during their talks at the Hyderabad House, decided to upgrade the bilateral relations to a comprehensive global strategic partnership, and in keeping with that, the joint statement contains the “vision and principles” of this partnership. Part of the new facet of the enhanced ties was also reflected when Trump and Modi spoke to a crowd of about one lakh people in Ahmedabad’s Motera Cricket Stadium on February 24.

From a South Asian point of view, the India-US joint statement was an unstated but emphatic response to China’s growing footprints in the region through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), covering the infrastructure sector of all countries except Bhutan.

According to the joint statement, India and the United States remain committed to sustainable, transparent, quality infrastructure development in the region. Since China’s financial assistance through loans for BRI projects across the world has sparked concerns about the possibility of the beneficiary countries landing in debt traps, the statement mentioned a

new framework of cooperation between New Delhi and Washington to cover development projects. The framework, called “Blue Dot Network”, has been projected as “a multi-stakeholder initiative that will bring governments, the private sector and civil society together to promote high-quality trusted standards for global infrastructure development” in order to “contain the build-up of sovereign debt in developing and low-income countries” and “ensure responsible, transparent, and sustainable financing practices for borrowers and creditors.” This was the first time that this new template of third-country projects has figured in talks at the highest political level between the US and India.

The concept of Blue Dot—essentially a US proposal into which it has

for cooperation in third countries as a development solution across the world.

Over the decades, particularly during the long years of the Cold War, the US and India have differed and remained mired in suspicion and mistrust of each other over the shape of global trade and political orders, India’s ties with Soviet Union and later Russia, inclusiveness of global nuclear regime and transfer of sensitive technology with military and civilian uses. But what has remained constant and uncontested is their concern over the rise of China as an economic and military power and the threat it poses to the interests of India and the US. Arun K Singh, India’s former ambassador to the US, rightly points out that the strategy towards China is one of the four factors that have “historically affected the India-US relationship at any



US President Donald Trump and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

PHOTO: AFP

already roped Australia and Japan—is expected to assess development projects using certain yardsticks like funding transparency, environmental norms and debt sustainability, and to facilitate not only government but also private finance. Clearly, Blue Dot is being projected as an alternative to BRI because no one country can match the financial clout of China when it comes to projects under BRI. It is also in the context of BRI that one has to view the agreement reached between Modi and Trump on a new partnership between USAID and India’s Development Partnership Administration

point of time.” Secondly, India and the US have travelled a long way in their bilateral ties in the last two decades and signed a civil nuclear cooperation deal in 2008 when a Congress government, led by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, was in power in India and talks for which were launched during the BJP rule under Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

Today, New Delhi and Washington are talking about the purchase of six nuclear reactors from the troubled US multinational Westinghouse, advanced training and expanded exercises between all services and special forces and closer

collaboration on co-development and co-production of advanced defence components, equipment and platforms. The US sees “a strong and capable Indian military” supportive of peace, stability and a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. India and the US have reached some kind of understanding on India’s role in the South Asian neighbourhood in order to contain China’s footprints, a far cry from 1971 when Richard Nixon, a president from the Republican Party to which Trump belongs, not only backed Pakistan during the Liberation War of Bangladesh but also sought to pressurise India through an outreach to China through Henry Kissinger’s hush-hush visit to Beijing.

The US wants India as an important component of its pivot to Asia policy and central to a free, open, inclusive, peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific region underpinned by the recognition of ASEAN’s centrality as a counter-balancing force to China. When the US and India agree on support for safety and freedom of navigation, overflight and other lawful uses of the seas, and advocacy for peaceful resolution of maritime disputes in accordance with international law, both have China’s claim of sovereignty over South China Sea. The US also wants India’s role as a net provider of security as well as developmental and humanitarian assistance in the Indian Ocean, a region where China is increasingly assertive.

There is also a convergence between India and the United States on efforts towards a meaningful code of conduct in South China Sea so that “legitimate rights and interests of all nations according to international law” are upheld. Then, Modi and Trump decided to strengthen consultation through the India-US-Japan trilateral summits, the India-US-Australia-Japan quadrilateral consultations, a mechanism which was revived in 2017 after remaining dormant for about a decade in the face of China taking up the issue separately with Tokyo and Canberra. Beijing has in the past made no secret of its suspicion of the Quadrilateral as an effort to gang up against it.

It remains to be seen how far and at what pace India travels with the kind of role envisaged to it by the US. After all, Modi is also engaged in ramping up ties with China and held two informal summits with President Xi Jinping in 2018 and 2019.

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