

A National Book Policy

The announcement by Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia that the government would soon introduce a national book policy is timely as it is reassuring. The statement, made on Sunday at the opening of a book fair organised by the National Book Centre, indicated that the proposed policy would serve a number of objectives.

As the Prime Minister rightly said, the policy should be so designed as to encourage reading habit among our educated class, and that this would help in the consolidation of democracy in the country. At some point, it should also involve production of text books for the country's primary and secondary schools, which contain materials on democracy, political pluralism and even human rights. Only experts can decide how this should be done. Here, lesson can be drawn from the experience of other developing countries. In effect, we have to take a new look at the whole question of writing and production of text books for our schools and colleges.

When it comes to promoting the reading habit among our educated or new literate class, it would serve little or no purpose just to spread the word, "Read more books." Due to their financial difficulties, most middle class families are unable to spend much on books, newspapers and periodicals. The alternative is to set up as many public libraries in Dhaka and in various districts and upazilas as possible, in co-operation with public spirited individuals and organisations. Such libraries should have special children's sections. At the same time, we should increase the number of mobile libraries which can go from one upazila to another and even show movies on the literacy campaign, population planning, care of environment and such other issues of national interest. It is important to make reading look more like a joy and pleasure than a formidable challenge and a hard task. In countries which have effectively dealt with the problem of illiteracy, all kinds of innovative devices have been used to meet the challenge, such as the introduction of comic books sold from the roadside shops at subsidised prices.

Unless its terms of references are announced, we would not know how much the proposed book policy will cover. At this stage, we would suggest that the policy should take into account the rights of authors, the question of copyright and the movement of reading materials among neighboring countries in South Asia. In a country like Bangladesh where the literacy rate is pathetically low, the question of giving our authors access to new markets, either in their original publication or in translation, is a vital one, which will make or unmake our book industry. These are only some of the issues involved in the preparation of a national book policy. We suggest that these issues are carefully discussed and examined by a committee of experts and representatives of different interests connected with the industry. Our aim should be to produce a policy that lasts a long time and serves the overall national interests, not a policy based on expediency and short-term commercial gains.

The Message of Christmas

The Christmas, the season of goodwill, is here. While the formal observance of the day may be confined to our Christian brethren, its message of peace and love remains universal, especially for a country like Bangladesh. It is particularly important in a nation where people of different religions live side by side, in harmony, practising their faiths in quiet solemnity. This harmony should be further strengthened and given new meanings and dimensions.

This year, Christmas comes at a time when despite its new political dispensation, Bangladesh continues to face discord and violence, at all different levels of the society. The educated class, not to mention those who have been denied the right to read and write, view the future with cynicism, while sections of people indulge in activities which are contrary to all our religions, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity. When people pray in the Churches today, their minds will be filled with the hope that what we see around ourselves may prove to be a passing phase and that despite the shadow cast over our present socio-economic life, we will not be denied of a place in the sun, in this generation or next.

The same message of hope and harmony should be heard in different places, among people in the trouble-torn countries in all the continents, among the hungry millions in Africa, in Sri Lanka which is desperately trying to end its ethnic conflict and among the people in Eastern Europe and in former Soviet Union who are creating a new history of their own. Above all, the message of goodwill should echo through the divided city of Jerusalem, the occupied Arab territories and Israel, the home of three great religions, Islam, Christianity and Judaism, the message that should rekindle in all of them the urge to live together in peace and hope. Let this message of Christmas be heard, loud and clear, throughout the world.

Algeria's Quest for a Stable Polity

by A.S.M. Nurunnabi

ALGERIA is going through a major turning point in its history. The change may be rough and perhaps explosive.

After a bloody war of liberation lasting eight years, independent Algeria emerged on the map of the world in July, 1962. For 30 years Algerians, like central Europeans, were run by a rigid and authoritarian socialist regime by the National Liberation Front (FLN). In early 1988, it seemed that Algeria would be one of the few Arab countries willing to take a gamble on political pluralism. In its own 'glasnost', some 50 political parties came to life, several led by good men purveying good ideas. But if they rejected the political tiddlers fighting one another, Algerians were left with a miserable choice between the two big fish: either the Islamic fundamentalists who gather to themselves, through the mosque, the poorest of the poor; or the old party chieftains and hacks trying urgently, but with mixed success, to change their colours.

The proud hope that Algeria would herald a break with the undemocratic traditions of the Arab world had been blown sky high. Algeria's Islamic mili-

tants called off their movement against the authorities because they had been promised within six months the presidential election they were calling for as well as the parliamentary one. Sid Ahmed Ghozali, the new Prime Minister declared that the elections would take place as soon as possible, the parliamentary one first.

The election campaign collapsed into violence. The Islamic party, realising that they had been outwitted with a mildish electoral fiddle and that it had virtually no chance of winning an outright majority at the parliamentary election due on June 27, took to the streets instead. Once there it began demanding that the presidential election, due at the end of 1993, should be held immediately.

After days and nights of ever nastier clashes in Algiers between the riot police and young men led by Islamic militants, President Chadli Benjedid brought the agitating electoral process to a violent end. On 4th June, he declared a draconian four-month state of siege for the whole country, dismissed his government, postponed indefinitely the elections due June 27, and July 18, and sent tanks into

the streets. Thereafter, the Government ordered a crack-down against Islamic radicals. Troops raided fundamentalist strongholds, seizing arms and ammunition. They also arrested Abbasi Madani and Ali Belhadj — the two most prominent leaders of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). Algeria's increasingly powerful fundamentalist movement — as well as more than 2000 of their followers. The government charged Madani and Belhadj with having fomented, organised and



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directed "an armed conspiracy against the security of the State."

The show of force failed to bring a quick end to the turmoil and violence. By seizing the top leadership of the FIS, the government sought to neutralize the most militant wing of the Algeria's main opposition group. But subsequent events did not seem to indicate any positive result in this direction. Though its leaders are in jail, its offices shut down, and its newspapers banned, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) remains the liveliest of the political parties in Algeria. On November 1st, the anniversary of the start of Algeria's war of independence, some 300,000 supporters marched through central Algiers to demand the establishment of an Islamic state.

The size of the turnout suggested that if the party should choose to take part in parliamentary election, it would stand a chance of winning more votes than any of its rivals.

Notwithstanding the uncertainty of the future of the present ruling party (FLN), President Chadli Benjedid took a tentative step towards

democracy by announcing plans to end the state of siege he imposed in June last when rioting aborted the general election due at that time. On September 29 last, he lifted the state of siege and set the election, twice postponed previously for December 26.

Sid Ahmed Ghozali, newly installed Prime Minister after the events of June, has been striving to organise the new elections. In his address to the Algerian Parliament, he said that he was committed to free, democratic presidential and parliamentary elections. He sought to walk a middle ground between the National Liberation Front which has controlled the government since Algeria gained independence in 1962 and opponents in the Islamic Fundamentalist Movement. "We will not allow any party whoever they be, to block the realization of this goal" of free elections and democratization, he said.

The President also seems determined to get the elections under way. Last October, he appointed Maj General Larbi Belkheir, his right hand man and a pillar of the army, as minister of the interior, with responsibility for making sure that, on this occasion, the

election takes place peacefully, on its due date.

Though the FIS is split on tactics, it is hard to see it taking part in an election while its leaders are in prison. It is more likely to exclude itself, calling for a boycott.

As President, Mr. Chadli can afford to gamble. An election for his own job does not take place until 1993, and he has lended off pressure to advance the date. By then, if Algeria's ambitious economic reforms under the new Prime Minister succeed, support for the Islamic opposition may have passed its peak. In fact, the success of the FIS was more a vote against the FLN, the ruling party. The common wisdom is that the FIS is actually a response to 30 years' of mismanagement, corruption, and a ruined economy that failed to meet the aspirations of the up-and-coming generation of Algerian youth. Those who support the FIS see in a return to justice, accountability, honesty, and due process — values that were destroyed by 30 years of a socialist experiment gone bad.

Now, it is for the FIS to decide whether to fight on the street or at the polls.

Christmas beyond Rites and Rituals

by Jerome Sarkar

IN solidarity with the Christians all over the world, the Christians in Bangladesh every year celebrate Christmas as their prime religious festival on the 25th of December. CHRISTMAS is the birth day of Jesus Christ and it is celebrated with much pomp, grandeur and colourful displays as an earnest expression of jubilation, celebration and triumph of humanity. The Christmas is not mere rites and rituals, it is a culture of promise for an immortal life and as such it has a special significance in Christian living.

The Christmas tide gathers its momentum as the winter fogs become thick in early December. People start sending out Christmas Cards to friends and relatives living far and near. They buy gifts for friends, near and dear ones. One may easily presume that the greeting cards in vogue in different forms and for various purposes in the present world have mostly emerged from the exchanges of Christmas Cards.

The enthusiasm and jubilation mounts with the preparation activities such as composing and tuning Christmas

Carols, devotional songs. The Christmas party usually comprising of young boys who visit the Christian families to sing devotional numbers and dance to the tune and rhythm is very popular in the villages. Of course, they have gained enough popularity in cities too. Besides, the youth clubs arrange drama, variety shows etc. The houses are colourfully decorated as the financial capacity permits. Christmas Tree ornamented with lights, cards, gifts etc. adds more glamour to the whole of the festivity. Most of the families make a replication of the manger to commemorate the birth of Christ. Stars of various sizes framed by bamboo sticks and wrapped with coloured papers are hoisted on the top of the houses and the trees. In the villages, the earthen walls and yards are aesthetically scribbled with various figures and forms by the village folk themselves.

In recent past, Santa Claus too appeared with gifts for the children. A day is usually fixed for observing children function just after Christmas and Santa Claus's descent to greet the

crowd specially the children, turns it into a dreamland.

Christmas specialities include cakes and roasts. The local cake i.e. pithas like Filis, Patishapta, Bibica pitha etc. deserve special mention. In cities almost every family makes cakes and pithas by themselves. In villages local cakes i.e. pithas do dominate the specialities.

On this occasion, souvenirs and magazines are brought out and the national dailies publish supplements to mark the day by publishing special features and writings. The city hotels too arrange special programmes on this occasion. The members of other religions also share their joy and happiness of the occasion one way or other with their Christian friends which turns the festivity all the more enjoyable. In a word, the Christian families become very vibrant with activities as the Christmas approaches.

The actual festivity starts with the mid-night Mass in the Churches. Most people specially the children put on new

clothes. The mid-night function reminds the Christians of Jesus' birth in the shivering cold night at Bethlehem. Jesus was born in a manger of a cave.

At that time, census was taking place in that country. To register their names like other people Maria and Joseph, the parents of Jesus, set out for Bethlehem. On arrival at night, they found that the motels and boarding houses were packed up with people from far and distant areas. After a long search, finding no other alternative means of accommodation, they had to take shelter in a cave meant for the shepherds and sheep.

On that night of nights Jesus was born in the manger of the cave. The three Magis (the wise men) instructed by the Divine Spirit set out to worship the long awaited baby. The saviour, for whom people had been anxiously looking forward for years together. On camels they set out to see the new born baby. A bright STAR led their path ahead. Following that shining star the Magis arrived at the cave with their gifts for the baby. Thus Jesus, as it was predicted and believed by the Christians, the King of all kings without the kingdom on Earth, came into this world to save the sinners in a most humble way. He led an austere life and in a short time of thirty-three years he preached and advocated, inter alia, for love, sacrifice, charity, forgiveness, service to the sick and poor. His most enlightening teaching is "Love thy neighbour as thyself."

In pursuance to Jesus' teachings, thousands made it their lives' commitments to work for the neglected and poor people in the form of human services to the needy, unloved and uncared for. Many educational institutions, hospitals and clinics, leprosy cure centres and drug addicts' rehabilitation programmes stand as testimonies to that effect. The orphanages for the helpless children, the cooperatives to mitigate the economic hardship of small households, among others, stand out. Human Right Movement under the Peace and Justice Com-

mission is another step forward fulfilling Jesus' teachings. The humanitarian service being predominantly rendered by the altruists without gimmick of publicity is turning Jesus's principles into reality.

The microscopic Christian community in Bangladesh is living happily as a part and parcel of the whole community. However, sometimes people observe that the Christian culture is different from that of the native people which is partly true. As the preachers from the West first came to preach Christianity in this country, their influence among the local Christians is obvious. On the other hand the overwhelming impact of the Western culture has not spared anybody of this country.

It is not an easy task to elaborate the spirituality of Christmas in a small, single write-up. I have tried to give an outward social picture of it. In a simple way we can say without any hesitation that Christmas is a pledge to establish peace, justice and joy in this world of turmoil and tribulations.

Europe : Slamming the Door on Refugees

Under pressure from a politically powerful right wing, Western European governments have announced plans to restrict future migration and admission of refugees from the Third World and Eastern Europe, reports Alejandro Kirk of IPS from Brussels.

quickly deported if their applications are rejected or disbelieved.

The camps were made possible by a fragile agreement between Christian and Social Democrats that began to crack almost immediately.

Chancellor Helmut Kohl insisted in amending the asylum rights established in the German constitution, and proposed measures to allow border guards to decide the applicants' status on the spot.

Around 200,000 asylum seekers are expected in Germany this year alone. Across the EC, the number of applicants rose to 327,000 in 1990. Other non-EC European countries like Austria, Sweden and Switzerland also received thousands of requests every year.

The legal problems of refugees in Europe have been complicated by a dramatic rise in the number of racist attacks, particularly in Germany, where there have been several serious assaults on

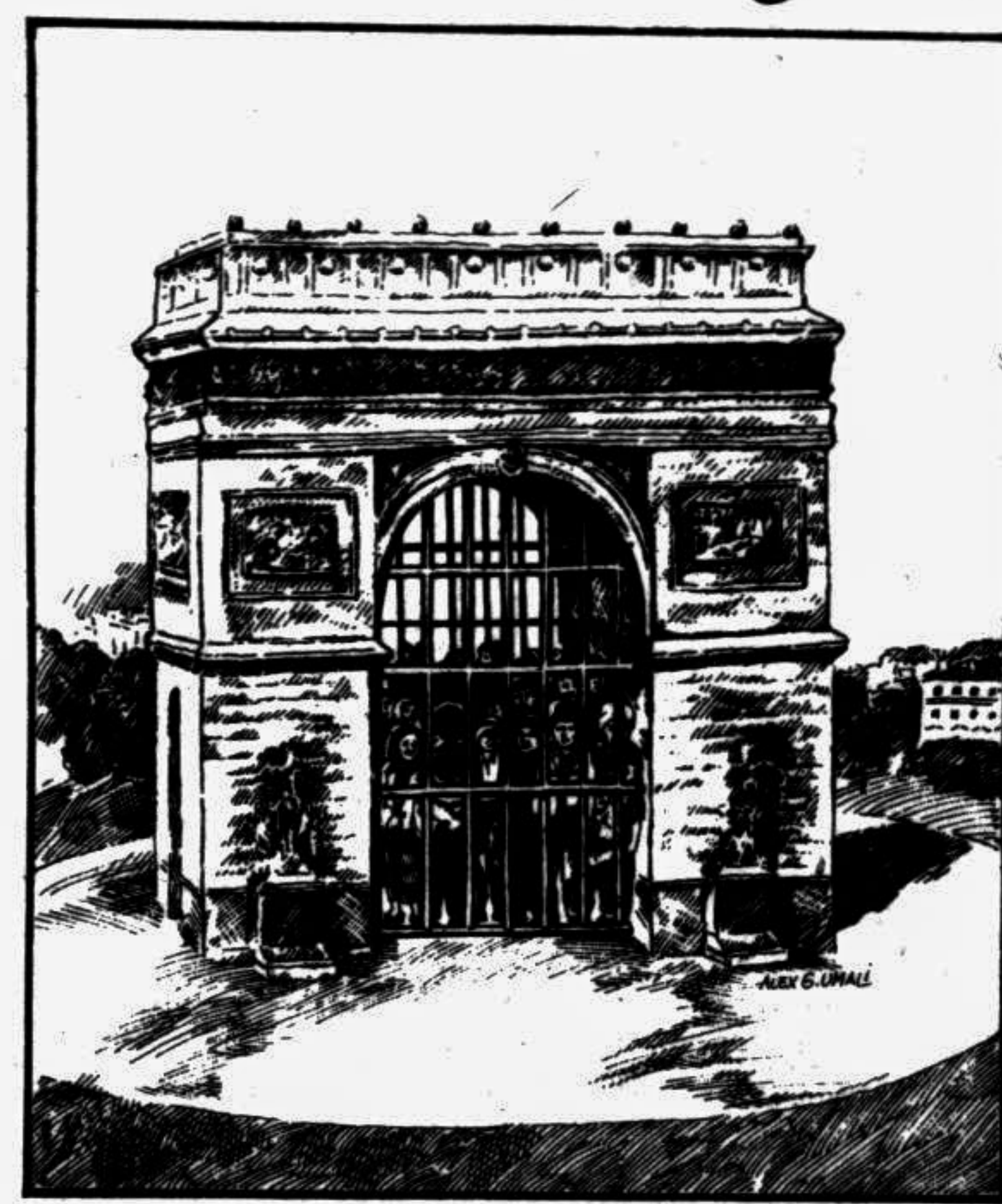
Mozambiquan students and Turkish 'guest workers'.

Gypsies in Spain have been victims of official and unofficial discrimination. In the Andalusian town of Jaen, a mob that razed a Gypsy camp and chased them out of town was led by the socialist town mayor.

In Italy, working class neighbourhoods and substantial parts of the population in northern cities have protested against the opening of shelters for homeless immigrants and defended people who have beaten and killed African workers and students in Italy.

The Lega Lombarda party, gaining strength in northern Italy, not only proposes the expulsion of Third World citizens, but also wants a ban on Italian emigration from the rural south to the richer north.

In the EC administrative capital of Brussels, subtle municipal regulations allow city councils to reject foreigners, even if they have been granted work permits and visas by the



government. In France, the right-wing National Front has built up a 15 per cent electoral share nationwide over the last few years with its xenophobic policies and calls for the repatriation of immigrants.

The London Financial Times newspaper recently quoted German Social Democrat Oskar Lafontaine, as saying that Germany faced a greater problem with Eastern European immigrants of German ancestry, of whom

400,000 arrived in unified Germany last year.

The paper speculated that as many as 25 million Soviets might try to cross the borders into EC countries over the next few years and that perhaps two million Eastern Europeans do the same each year.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) executive director Dr Nafiz Sadik has already warned that the migratory flood would not only be massive, but unstoppable in forthcoming years.

By imposing unfair trade rules and financial constraints on the Third World, the North had not only denied the South the means to achieve sustainable development, but had also planted the seed for a future mass migration northwards, Sadik has said.

Many countries are now home to the children and grandchildren of migrants born in the former colonies of the European power — a generation whose feelings were summed up in the words of a 1980's British immigrants' protest banner: "We're here because you were there."

The unhappy experiences of these millions of descendants of former European colonial subjects — racism, violence, social and economic discrimination — may soon be shared by a newer, larger and nearer generation of migrants from the East.

To the Editor...

Mymensingh Medical College

Sir, Attention of the Teachers' Association of Mymensingh Medical College has been drawn to a news item published in the 12th December issue of The Daily Star as 'Immediate reopening of Mymensingh Medical College demanded.' The fact remains that the Mymensingh Medical College was closed on November 5 due to clash between political rival groups and the situation was beyond control of the college administration.

However, the association was surprised at the holding of a press conference by a section of students at a time when the

decision of reopening of the college was already taken much earlier. The association expresses deep concern at the non-specific allegation made against the Principal of Mymensingh Medical College who is also a bonafide member of the Teachers' Association of Mymensingh Medical College.

Md. Zahurul Haque
Secretary,
Teachers' Association of
Mymensingh Medical College.

Agency Commission

Sir, I am one of the many businessmen in the country. When I submitted application for payment of my agency commission from the concerned government office I was told that the government

was facing acute financial crisis. Therefore, I should wait for some time.

But has the government stopped incurring expenditures against the monthly remunerations and other benefits in respect of the govt. servants? Businessmen, including the importers and exporters get their commission once in several months or even years with which they manage their families for several months or years till they get another business. They also meet their office expenditures with this money which the government servants don't.

It is as much illogical and unethical to withhold govt. officers' salaries and allowances, ration, car, telephone, gas, electricity, travelling and daily

allowances, expenses on out-station accommodation and free-furnished quarters for the high officials, on the grounds of financial crisis as it is to withhold agency commissions of importer/exporters etc. on similar grounds. Further, the businessmen have to pay salaries to their staff as well as incur expenditures on maintaining office premises and looking after their principals.

The attitude of withholding agency commission on such grounds as explained above manifests and encourages corruption, i.e. attitude, on compulsion, among some such businessmen to bribe and persuade the high officials of the government.

In view of the above, it is most earnestly requested that

the government be kind enough to issue office circular facilitating payment of businessmen's commission so that none of them is compelled to entice any official when it is alleged that during the period of crisis some high officials tend to take advantage.

A businessman
Dhaka.

BUET Situation

Sir, Recently I went to the BUET campus and saw the condition of the vehicles burnt by outsiders. The sight is enough to generate sympathy for the unfortunate owners. A teacher's salary is not enough to replace a motorcar. The teachers of BUET are refrain-

ing from taking classes to draw the attention of the authorities. I suggest that the BUET authorities pay the compensation to the affected teachers from any suitable fund and replenish the same by levying a subscription of Tk 1,000/00 per student. Classes should resume forthwith. The levy may be collected over a period of 10 months.

Why penalize innocent students and the guardians for no fault of theirs? Because there is nobody to take care of their interest? Have they elected a government which should choose not to concern itself with the state of affairs prevailing on the campuses in the country?

A guardian
Dhaka.