

Miserable State of Our Medical Colleges

Afraid of losing support among so-called students — for those who turn educational institutions into virtual battlefields can hardly be termed as genuine students — the ruling party has followed a disastrous policy of 'laissez-faire' resulting into the prevailing chaos in every branch of our education.

The latest account of the damage caused by the government's policy comes from no less a person than the health minister, Kamal Ibne Yusuf, himself. In replying to a question from an opposition member, he informed the Parliament yesterday, that from November '92 to June '93, over a period of seven months, our six medical colleges put together, were closed for a period of eight months. The reasons? Recurrent violence and political unrest. What lies behind this violence and so-called political violence? Rivalry, conflict and factionalism of the students' wings of the different political parties. To put it bluntly, medical colleges in question are, literally, hostages in the hands of these student wings of political parties. The worst hit were the Chittagong and Sylhet Medical Colleges which were closed for more than 35 per cent of the time, while the average for the six makes for 20 per cent of the time, that the colleges were supposed to have been open.

If for a period of seven months, the government is obliged to keep these institutions closed for anything between 20 and 36 per cent of the time, then it does not need much of an imagination to understand what sort of doctors these institutions are going to produce. Is there any guarantee that for the next seven months, the record is likely to be better? The minister gave a one sentence answer in the House. 'We are taking all necessary steps'. This standard reply, without bothering to elaborate a single step that the health ministry has taken to prevent further disruption of classes, is perhaps an evidence that future may be just as bad as the past. What will happen in these medical colleges will be determined by the student parties concerned, and not by what the authorities will do or not do. That is the bottom line. Again when the minister was asked as to whether or not any of the miscreants were caught, or any disciplinary action taken against anyone, he promptly replied that it was not the job of his ministry.

The public is not interested in such glib and technical replies. We want our future doctors to be able to study peacefully and uninterruptedly for the period that is specified for the course. We hold the government responsible, and especially the relevant ministry, to ensure that. What we published under the heading 'Grim statistics', has the potential of leading to long term national disaster. In an environment of such indiscipline and lack of accountability, it is obvious that rigorous pursuit of medical science is hardly possible. There was a time when students from Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Nepal would come to our medical colleges, especially the one at Dhaka, for studies. All these countries, save perhaps one, have long surpassed us in medical education, and have turned their medical colleges into renowned institutions, and their medical services, into foreign exchange earning business. We had the potential, perhaps still do, of doing the same.

To go in that direction, we need a government that does not to pander to the wishes of hooligans and terrorists for short term political gain. A determined drive to clean our medical colleges of all anti-social elements, and restoring academic atmosphere in all these institutions, is the legal and moral responsibility of the government. They cannot shirk this basic responsibility.

The faster this government learns that 'performance' is a far greater guarantee of public support, than harbouring terrorists and anti-social elements, the better we all will be.

No Polythene Bag, Please

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Jute Ministry, at a meeting on Saturday, has come up with a courageous and laudable decision in that it has sought to ban the production of polythene bags in the country. The committee decision, still in a recommended form, must receive the affirmative nod from other concerned ministries and go through several formalities as required in the parliamentary system, before becoming a law. Whether lobbies favouring continuation of polythene bag production will be able to reverse the decision or not is an outcome eagerly to be awaited in the meantime. But there is no doubt that the committee has shown its pragmatism and environmental consciousness by arriving at a conclusion we have for long been urging the authority to move towards.

Once again we take this opportunity to lend our strong support for the Parliamentary Committee's move and earnestly hope that the recommendation will be well received by other concerned authorities for its early implementation. Certainly the move will not be without some complications, chief among them being the reallocation of roles for the closed-down factories now manufacturing polythene bags. But one hopes the settlement of these claims will not be very difficult. Even if all these prove quite costly, in the ultimate analysis it's not as costly as could be due to the environmental damage wrought by the continuation of production and use of the innocuous looking substance called polythene.

The strongest reason we have in favour of a total ban on the substance is that we boast the best replacement one could ever think of. The advantages also are many. On whatever counts, the natural fibre of jute is superior to polythene — except perhaps in terms of carrying. But this is one disadvantage we must bear with to save us from pains in a number of other areas. Not only will our jute receive a boost through its use as bags but the environment-friendly fibre will spare us of a catastrophe we are now heading towards for our mindless littering of the imperishable polythene bags. What however will be in demand is more research for coming up with thinner and more durable jute bags at a competitive price, not only for the domestic market but also for the foreign markets.

WRITING in these columns last week about currency convertibility, I made a passing reference to the nexus between gold smuggling and illicit drug trafficking. Roughly about a week earlier, about 130 grams of smuggled gold valued at around one crore Taka, had been seized in Chittagong from two members of the crew of a foreign flag vessel. At about the same time, two consignments of heroin, each valued at roughly one crore Taka, were seized in separate raids on two passenger buses — also in Chittagong. These could be just isolated events or one could read a connection, however tenuous it is, between the two cases. What deserves notice is that both hard drugs and gold are being smuggled.

When internationally traded currency is not available freely, gold usually serves as the only acceptable medium of exchange for transactions in hard drugs or for payments on account of goods smuggled. Gold can be sold for clean money too. It's all seen as a part of money laundering process. Payment in gold for drug transactions could be a more important requirement when the stuff is meant for consumption at home. Considered in this perspective, reports of increase in the number of drug addicts in the country are indeed disturbing.

Seizure of illicit drugs by the law enforcing agencies is not exactly a new phenomenon in this country. However, it used to be thought earlier that this country was mainly serving as a transit route for hard drugs. Recent developments tend to take away this consolation.

The number of drug addicts in the country is said to have increased four times in the last five years. As for hard drug addiction, the findings of a survey conducted by the World Health Organisation on heroin addiction in this country, suggest

THE Middle East is in ferment over the secret deal done by the Palestine Liberation Organisation and Israel in the accords signed in Oslo on August 19. Supporters consider the 'Oslo Accords' an historic breakthrough after a century of Zionist-Palestinian warfare, while opponents call them a 'betrayal' of both Palestinian national rights in their homeland and of Muslim rights in a part of Dar al-Islam, the 'House of Islam'.

The fact that the deal was done in the deepest secrecy has itself given rise to suspicion and concern that the PLO may have given too much for too little. But there would have been no 'Oslo Accords' if the circle of men in the 'know' had been widened beyond half a dozen on each side.

Publicity would have generated debate on the details of any accord and almost certainly would have torpedoed it. On the other hand, if Arab leaders had been informed, they would have suspected that the PLO was doing a separate deal with Israel and tried to disrupt it. Thus, the accords had to be reached in secrecy if they were to be reached at all.

It was a United States official who suggested to Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres the idea of holding direct secret talks with the PLO. These took place nine months ago, in Oslo. Two high ranking officials from each side met 14 times and hammered out a 23 page 'Declaration of Principles' setting forth an agenda for a stage-by-stage Israeli withdrawal from territories captured in 1967 and the implementation of Palestinian self-rule over the two million Palestinian inhabitants in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

The first stage of this process is Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and the town of Jericho in the West Bank, within six months of the formal signing of the declaration. The second stage, to occur over the next three months is Israeli military evacuation of the centres of Palestinian population in the West Bank, excluding East Jerusalem, in preparation for elections to a Palestinian Interim Self-Governing Authority to take over the ad-

Of Drug Trafficking, Smuggling, Money Laundering and the Golden Connection

that no less than ten per cent of the addicts are hooked to hard drugs. Heroin is said to have been first detected in this country in 1983 and since then, over 55 kilograms of this hard drug were seized by the law enforcing agencies. Lately, cocaine also has joined the stream of hard drugs being smuggled into the country. Over the past three years, more than seven kilograms of cocaine were seized. And, as is well known, seizures usually represent only a fraction of the total quantity being smuggled.

Proximity to drug producing areas, particularly the borders along Myanmar-Thailand-Laos, the so-called Golden Triangle, is cited as the immediate reason for rendering this country vulnerable to drug trafficking. Drugs from the so-called Golden Crescent, especially the north-western region of Pakistan, is also considered as another source. With addiction on the rise, drugs will continue to flow in through clandestine channels from these sources until production is stamped out in the areas where these are grown. And, this is easier said than done! Thailand is said to have come down heavily on drug trafficking. Now, foreign media reports say, alternate routes for smuggling heroin produced in the Golden Triangle have already been established, further to the north and east. Last year, seizure of heroin in China is said to have increased nearly eight-fold to a quantity exceeding 2,000 kilograms. However, most of the heroin is reportedly being routed through Laos to Cambodia and also Vietnam from where the drug is being shipped out. The virtual closure of the traditional Thai conduit has not stopped the

profits from illicit drug trafficking being funnelled into the financial system by using the legitimate financial institutions, as also through the informal money markets. In order to prevent the use of the banking system for laundering drug money, experts called upon the financial institutions to play a key role in the detection of flow of illicit funds. They stressed the need for effective customer identification and updating record keeping practices within the financial institutions.

The symposium made several recommendations for limiting the use of the banking system for legitimisation of illegal earnings from drug trafficking, smuggling and similar other serious economic crimes. These

include requiring financial institutions to report suspicious and large cash transactions, effective and identical supervision of both bank and non-bank financial institutions, monitoring cross border flow of funds and developing legal framework and efficient methodology to trace, freeze and confiscate the proceeds of crime.

In this country, drug trafficking is perhaps yet to assume the serious proportions that smuggling has. The number of drug addicts is still said to be below one million. The volume of transactions also perhaps is not quite staggering. However, all these do not make the phenomenon less alarming.

gold and merchandise. Freeing movement of currency from exchange controls could stimulate such activity in the initial phase of convertibility. Effective monitoring ought to be set in place. Measures adopted should also take the existence of the vibrant informal money market into cognizance. Rather aptly designated in local business parlance as *dundori taka*, literally, the secondary quality Taka, this money generated outside the formal financial system, is generally thought to be financing a fairly wide range of transactions on our market place.

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THE situation of remittance by the workers abroad is perhaps another area which might call for more intensive monitoring during the initial phases of currency convertibility. Through the medium of the so-called *hundi* business, funds generated by the earnings of our workers abroad, are also used to finance smuggling and probably the traffic in drugs too.

Under the *hundi* mechanism being practiced now, the worker's foreign currency earnings remain abroad while his nominee at home receives payment in Taka, usually at a rate more favourable than the official conversion rate. That, indeed, is big business.

In the context of the upcoming currency convertibility, ideas for deterring use of the legitimate financial system for purposes of money laundering, as emerging from the discussions and suggestions made at the Singapore symposium, merit consideration. Money laundering forms a nexus with drug trafficking, smuggling of

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