

## Dialogue, not collision

The teachers of all our universities have struck work twice. They have a programme of staging a sit-in in front of the Prime Minister's office on October 5. From October 10 they will go on an indefinite, continuous strike — paralyzing the nation's higher education system completely. Why? The whole society knows why. Does the government know as well? There is no reason why it shouldn't. And if it doesn't indeed, it is not a government — decidedly.

The incredible incidents of Jahangirnagar University, it seemed, would have gone by default had not the university teachers reacted sharply as one man. Result is nabbing of some four of the culprits on the one hand and a case, with charge-sheets at the ready, against ten teachers accusing them of attacking the students with lethal weapons. The ineptitude of handling a situation universally condemned by all in the nation was exacerbated by the police's suspected complicity in the midnight medieval pogrom mounted by Shibir on sleeping non-Shibir students of the Rajshahi University, and the resulting killing of one and injuring of scores of the hall inmates. The government made nothing to extricate itself from a situation where in the Parliament Treasury bench members joined Opposition to denounce the Jamaat, clearly identifying them as the culprits of that carnage. Repercussions followed first in Khulna, where two students were killed, then in Chittagong University, the stronghold of the Jamaat students front.

In a setting of colleges closing down every other day due to violence, the above chain of events was of itself quite a load to be sorted out. The government unfortunately, in a sudden surge of inordinate foolishness, chose to make in Parliament certain pronouncements patently derogatory to the university teachers — something that hasn't been done ever — in a very transparent attempt to pass on the buck.

Why did the ministers try to pass the blame on to the teachers? Is it because they thought the society was pointing the finger to them? After all why wouldn't the people suspect that the government, first because it is in the power saddle and then because it had its student wing too and not quite of the Gandhian predisposition, had much to do in the failure to eliminate terrorism on the campus.

It is possible, and perhaps even true, that there are teachers in all our universities, who do not discharge themselves ideally and do not cringe from using students as pawns in a game they think they are leading. When all the major political parties, including very much the ruling one, have among them made a battle ground of the campuses, it should be understandable if some teachers stoop to lowly ways for survival and even prosperity. The government is in no position at all to fault the teachers on the terrorism account before it has effectively handled the problem at the culprits' level — including those in their fold.

The recriminations in the Parliament have been most unfortunate and the tenor of the fulminations of particularly three ministers can hardly be swallowed by the society, let alone the teachers. Now teachers have gone on action. Neither of these courses is going to help the urgent job at hand, namely, elimination of campus terrorism. This collision course must forthwith be dissipated and the tension between the government and the teachers defused in the interest of developing a primarily necessary concerted action by the two entities — two prime-movers so to say — against the wayward students and their backers from outside the universities.

A gap has developed between the teachers and the government. And it is yawning wide. This must be stopped. A very good way for that would be to open a dialogue with the teachers, if so necessary after the three ministers had duly apologised. The government cannot run the universities without teachers and it is the teachers from whom the students would learn and imbibe character and not the government. The government's bona fide intentions in the whole matter would be proven if they try to win over the teachers by conceding to their demand in a manner compatible with ways of governance.

## A Minister's Job

Post and Telecommunication Minister, Tariqul Islam has recently taken his personal initiative to make the lives of the corrupt elements of the T & T (Telegraph and Telephone) miserable by catching them off their guard. His unannounced presence and personal communication have already been rewarded with considerable success. Known for huge irregularities, appalling service and an intolerable contempt for its consumers, the T & T is slowly awaking to its duties — thanks to the minister's drive for clearing the garbage accumulated in the department over the years.

The minister has clearly taken the fight to the corrupt employees of the T & T. But his is a job quite daunting and therefore unenviable. As the minister in charge of the department, he is doing the most mundane job he can hardly afford. Under the circumstances, perhaps he has few choices other than going for the unpleasant drive. But evidently this cannot be a permanent solution to the problem. Moreover, it also projects him as a loner — provided that he is serious about what he is doing and is not after any publicity stunt.

What is important is to develop a system — one that can effectively get to the root of the mess for its effective tackling. The fact that the minister himself has to carry on the campaign against the criminals of the T & T should expose that he finds not many to take into his confidence. This is a very dismal situation. A minister cannot or should not intervene to ensure that things under his ministry are moving smoothly. Nor his successors are expected to match his zeal for clearing the garbage; they may find his shoes larger than the ones they could comfortably step into. This is why a workable system with full accountability has to be developed.

The minister has however made a small dent in the corruption-infested department under his own supervision. Lethargy and malpractices of all conceivable and inconceivable descriptions mark most of the services under the dispensation. What the Post and Telecommunication Minister has done cannot achieve much without active cooperation from his cabinet colleagues. Nevertheless he has shown a way worth following and a spirit worth emulating, the latter being more important. The Minister of Public Works and Co-operatives has followed suit. Even if their efforts do not bring about the desired results, their beneficial impacts will be felt. This is significant because it shows if the good work is pursued further, the bureaucratic, inept and corrupt tangle can really be taken care of.

# Efficiency of the Bureaucracy can Ensure Economic Progress

By long tradition all the business to the nation is conducted at a very low level of efficiency. Even the private sector and the NGOs are no exception, but our public agencies are in a class by themselves.

RECENTLY I came across a report from Washington about a crusade launched by President Clinton against government inefficiency and waste and a bloated bureaucracy. Vice-President Al Gore headed a blue chip National Performance Review panel to bring what is said to be "badly needed efficiency and economy to federal government." The panel invited suggestions from the members of the public who responded enthusiastically and flooded it with thousands of suggestions as well as instances of waste and inefficiency in the government. Working under the direct supervision of Al Gore who was the guiding spirit behind the whole exercise, a report entitled "Creating a government that works better and costs less" was prepared. Clinton presented the report to the nation and vowed to carry out the plan which will overhaul the federal bureaucracy, sharply cut middle management, jettison cumbersome purchasing and hiring practices and strip the federal system of what was called "useless bureaucracy and senseless rules." The plan would save the government \$108 billion over the next five years and envisions a 12 per cent cut in the federal civilian work force. Some of the recommendations are innovative and far-reaching. The aim seems to be to remake the federal government in the image of the nation's most successful private businesses. The catchy phrase "reinventing the government" was used to describe the bold initiative.

It is perhaps a coincidence that a report on the same subject, prepared by a team of experts fielded and funded by the UNDP, was submitted to the Government of Bangladesh recently. The local press published excerpts from the report and commented on some of the recommendations. Thanks to the local UNDP office, I have got a copy. It is a very well-researched and carefully prepared document. I understand that the government, following age-old practice, has appointed a committee to study the report. We hope that the government would then take action on the report. However, given our past experience, it is quite possible that the committee's report will be passed on to be examined by another committee, perhaps at a different level. The process can easily go on in an endless cycle, at least until the next election. After that, who knows what will happen and so, why bother now? I sincerely hope that this is not how this important report is being treated.

I mentioned the US crusade to increase government efficiency and reduce waste just to emphasise the importance of the subject. Even a highly developed country such as the United States has to be on guard against a bloated bureaucracy and waste and inefficiency. In Bangladesh we are certainly aware of the problem but in our usual way we do nothing about these matters. By long tradition all the business to the nation is conducted at a very low level of efficiency. Even the private sector and the NGOs are no exception, but our public agencies are in a class by themselves. Inefficiency, corruption, waste and mismanagement of public resources are so widespread that though these are often subjects of editorials by newspapers and occasional seminars, as a people we seem to have become desensitised about them. One observes, for example, with deepening despair that the nation is beginning to make peace with corruption. The conventional wisdom in Dhaka these days is that once you have amassed enough money, (never mind how you have done it), you can buy your way out of the

clutches of the law. Ershad, for quite different reasons, is an exception. In this environment of cynicism, it is surprising that inefficiency and waste in government would be shrugged off as a matter of only academic interest? When it comes to specific steps to improve the system, we seem to lose interest and turn our attention elsewhere. Had it not been so, some of the recommendations of the report could have been easily implemented by the government.

Although sponsored by the UN and finalised under the su-

in a month and the rest of the time he attends political rallies; so files remain pending. They are also busy in intra-party cliques. That is why there is inaction in government. Except for a few, ministers have no previous experience in running administration. All this has a cumulative effect on the performance of the government.

It would not be unfair to say that these observations reflect, fairly accurately, the perception of the vast majority of the people. Delays and aberrations in decision-making, red tape and cumbersome procedure, cor-

nor can it be achieved within a year or two. Perhaps we can follow the American example and take up a five-year programme of reform. It has to be a comprehensive programme and all levels of the administration will have to be involved. A few steps can however be taken now, without delay. Take, for example, the frequent transfer of secretaries of ministries. The adverse impact of these rapid fire transfers on the administration is obvious. According to the report, one secretary was transferred four times in three years to three different ministries. Another secretary was transferred three times in one year and ten months. Yet another secretary was transferred six times in four years and two months. On average a secretary serves in a post for just about one year. This, needless to say, is an absurd situation which must not be allowed to continue for any reason.

Decentralisation of the administrative functions must be accompanied by devolution. Power and authority, especially financial power, must be vested in the elected local officials. Why can't we have a national consensus on this issue? Successive governments have used the local government system as a means to strengthen their political base. The abolition of the upazila scheme has turned the whole exercise into a massive wastage of public funds. We must make up our minds and stick to a system. The central government cannot be efficient in managing local affairs of a thana or union; nor can officials be sent from Dhaka to deal with local problems. The experts, I was glad to see, have given much importance to this aspect of reform. We will not achieve much only by reforming procedures or rules. We need to restructure the system in order

to make it cost-effective, lean and truly democratic.

The report has extensively dealt with the question of civil service management. Bureaucracy in Bangladesh has become too large. There are many reasons for this but two reasons, in my view, stand out. First, development work was entrusted to the bureaucrats. The Deputy Commissioner or the SDO and in recent years, the TNO were the chief of the team of officials charged with implementing the development programme of the government. The local people were relegated to a passive role. This strategy has failed. Let us face the facts and seek an alternative strategy. The second reason for the proliferation of the bureaucracy is our belief that we could run industries with civil servants. Immediately after independence, the abandoned and nationalised industries were handed over to civil servants with little or no relevant experience. Isolated from the discipline of the market, most of these industries have become white elephants.

The report has identified many of the shortcomings of our civil services and come up with some excellent recommendations. For example, it said, "Performance and accountability, rather than patronage and rent-seeking, should be the criteria for action by public officials in running the affairs of the State." As a nation we will do well to take the report seriously and make an honest attempt to change our outmoded ways in running the government. I hope the committee which is looking at the report will submit its own report soon so that the implementation of the recommendation can begin in right earnest. Indeed all the political parties should also study the report in order to absorb the ideas thrown up about an efficient administrative system. Since we cannot do without a bureaucracy, should we not try to have an efficient one?

## ON THE RECORD

by Shah AMS Kibria

pervision of UN experts, eight distinguished local experts worked on it. It would, therefore, be a mistake to brush it aside as the work of some foreigners who do not know what they are talking about. The leader of the UN team, Dr A T Rafiqur Rahman happens to be a senior UN official from Bangladesh whose knowledge and expertise as well as commitment to the project ensured its high quality. In fact the report sparkles with wit and insight. On the subject of perception of government performance, it quotes a private sector comment which is most revealing.

It says, "Performance of the government is not at all satisfactory. It is a non-performing government. Interest of the ministers lies more in opposing other parties than doing government duties. Unless the ministers work, the secretaries do not work and so on down the line. Moreover, the minister remains in his district for 15 days

ruption, poor motivation and poor training and above all, excessive centralisation and concentration of authority are some of the key issues. The report quoted, presumably approvingly, a sarcastic remark by Lord Curzon about our love of files. One look at the office of some of our top officials will prove that Lord Curzon did have a profound insight about the character of the people in South Asia. We just love the stacks of dusty files that adorn the desks of most officials, as a testimony to their power and their ability to hold up decisions. The report has correctly identified "risk aversion" as the most important cause for delay in decision-making. Lower level officials can pass the buck upwards but then it gets stuck at some point. Naturally even a simple decision takes months and years because nobody wants to take the risk.

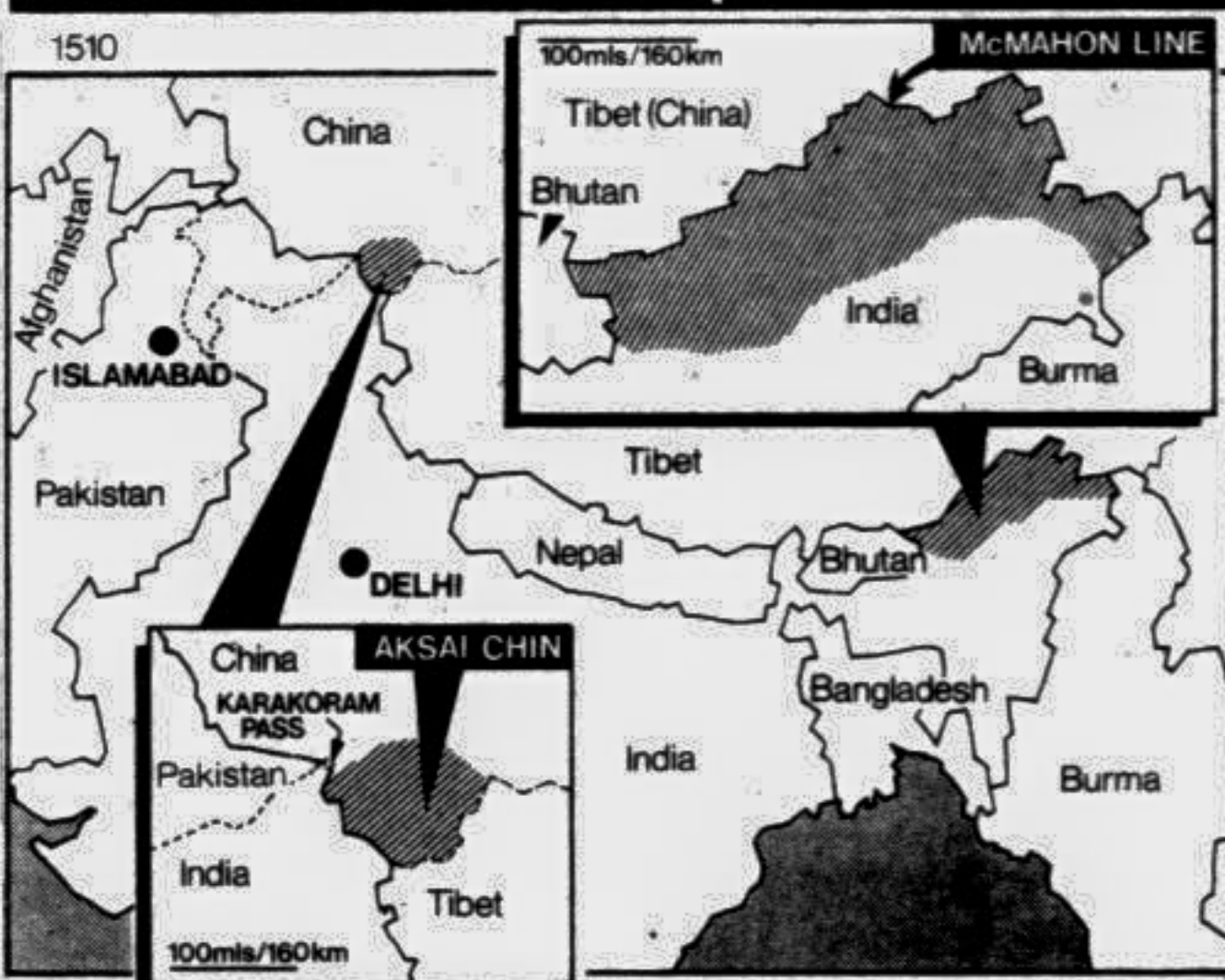
Where do we begin the cleaning up process? It is certainly not going to be a simple task

## Asian Giants Take a Leap towards Peace

D K Joshi writes from New Delhi

China and India have signed an agreement to resolve their border dispute. The two countries went to war in 1962. Since then relations have been strained. Following the end of the Cold War both have redefined their foreign policies and agreed to solve their bilateral problems. However, the Asian giants have a long way to go before they have a mutually agreed international border.

### India and China: disputed areas



natural, ethnic and administrative boundary in the area running mostly along the high Himalayan range.

The 1,100-mile boundary with Sikkim and Tibet in the western sector, New Delhi asserts, was sanctified by custom and reaffirmed by the treaty of 1842 signed by the representative of Kashmir, the Dalai Lama of Tibet, and the Emperor of China.

China says the McMahon Line was established by British imperialism and is "illegal" and that the impending boundary in

the western sector (Aksai Chin) was never delineated. China claims an area of 50,000 square miles — 36,000 square miles of territory in the eastern sector south of the McMahon Line and 11,000 square miles in Ladakh, including 2,000 square miles occupied after the 1962 India-China war.

On his 1960 visit to India, prime minister Zhou En-lai offered to accept New Delhi's claims in the eastern sector in exchange for Beijing's in the western sector. His successors have repeated this formula.

The Sino-Indian stalemate was broken in 1988 when Rajiv Gandhi visited China — the first Indian Prime Minister to do so after almost three decades.

Almost five years and six meetings later the JWG produced an agreement envisaging delineation of the LAC, renunciation of force against each other and reduction of forces deployed along the border.

Though both countries have described it officially as a landmark, the accord merely signifies that the two neighbours are adjusting to the shifting international realities in conformity with their own national interests and aspirations.

Since the 1962 war a sea-change has taken place in the world. India's superpower friend, the Soviet Union, has disintegrated and the United States has come to dominate the international scene. The agreement gives New Delhi more room in its national security management and provides greater diplomatic space in the emerging bipolar world.

It also paves the way for a more realistic China policy and stimulates the process of defining a mutually accepted LAC, without prejudice to the claims of each side. This will ensure peace on the frontier while the two sides negotiate a final border settlement.

India's China diplomacy has mellowed. Realism is now the watchword. New Delhi has bro-

ken away from the confrontational approach. China, too, has relaxed.

The two Asian giants still have miles to go before they can have a mutually agreed international border. For Rao, the agreement signed on September 7 during his visit to China, is most opportune. His leadership is under challenge at home and India's role in international politics has diminished.

Political opinion at home has welcomed the agreement cautiously. The only strident note came from the Hindu revivalist Bharatiya Janata Party, which warned the government against taking any step that could end up in recognising the LAC as the formal border. The agreement's supporters believe:

- Acceptance of the principle that there is a LAC on the ground will help avoid border tensions;
- Thinning of troops on both sides of the LAC will lighten India's defence burden so it can spend more money on development;
- A congenial climate will be created for the sharing of developmental experiences in the fields of agriculture, water resources, primary health and population control, where there is ample scope for cooperation.

The fears and suspicions of the agreement's critics are:

- It does not refer to Indian security concerns, such as supply of Chinese missiles and

other military hardware to Pakistan;

- Use of the phrase "a fair, reasonable and mutually beneficial settlement" implies give and take and could mean acceptance of the Chinese claims in the western sector. Such a proposition was firmly rejected by the Indian parliament which resolved to drive the Chinese from every inch considered Indian soil;
- It legitimises occupation of 14,000 square miles of Indian territory in Ladakh, betraying Indian people;
- By accepting the de facto situation arising out of the 1962 war and dropping the LAC prefix "so-called" it weakens the case ably put by Indian officials in their joint report on the boundary question in February 1961 as "defined by nature, confirmed by history, and sanctified by the laws of nations."

The accord has been hailed as a "landmark agreement." Euphoria may be misplaced or impolitic. When it comes to the crunch the Indian parliament's unanimous resolution to drive the Chinese from Indian territory will be invoked and nationalistic sentiments aroused. That may not be easy to counter.

Time is a great healer. The new generation born since the 1962 war did not experience the humiliation of defeat from China. The younger generation is more pragmatic and aspires for peace and prosperity for the two billion people of Asia's giants. India and China may eventually realise that the gains of a final agreement on the border dispute far outweigh their hostility and competition for the leadership of Asia.

D K JOSHI joined the Bombay 'Free Press Journal' in 1946.

## To the Editor...

### Creation of divisional headquarters

Sir, This has reference to a letter published on 16-08-93 in your esteemed daily under the above caption. The writer Mr O H Kabir is a frequent contributor to the letters columns of a number of English dailies. The respected correspondent mentioned a number of published letters on the topic, but missed that of mine. I would like to remind him of appreciating one of his letters in a local daily last year.

However, Mr O H Kabir in his letter asked all concerned to "talk about, discuss and find out ways and means for a meaningful, workable and concrete administrative reform." Perhaps no conscientious person can oppose this view. But I find no reason why we are to avoid demanding new divisional headquarters before the establishment of a 'meaningful' administration. A question may be asked: "Is our administration meaningless?" Of course not. But the administration is apparently corrupted and sub-standard. How meaningful administration do we want and deserve? What will be the standard? We need an ac-

countable and transparent administration. How much transparency? ACRs to be published, or at least to be readily supplied for review so that both the subordinate and super ordinate may correct themselves? We require an effective administration. How much effective? Questions may be asked in a never ending line. But who are reads to answer?

Mr O H Kabir rightly commented, "The more we created new administrative units the more we delegated executive powers to the government servants and spent more and more money from the public exchequer...." But what is the solution? Administrative units to be curtailed, or all are to be abolished to save the public exchequer? He suggested people-oriented administration and indirectly pointed to the empowering of MPs and Ministers. It is universally accepted that administration should be honest. Are the MPs and Ministers more honest than the Secretaries, DCs etc? Truth is that the voters are 'allegedly' lured by leaders through monetary offerings and the latter group has to make money later as a compensatory measure (if not a

profit from the investment made during election). The Govt officials may make money for better (?) living, but they need not compensate perhaps. As such it may appear that, in the present set up, Ministers are less reliable than Secretaries.

The present set up is to be changed. The voters (present and future) must be educated so that they cannot be lured by short term and meagre offers. The vote seekers have to make them understand by placing concrete programmes. Education is a human right. Food and shelter are the homo sapien's animal rights. A minimum level of economic development is required for supplying food and making shelters. Some type of development is accompanied with the establishment of every administrative unit. This is an actual fact (although it could be otherwise). People around the administrative unit are literate (if not properly educated) in more numbers than in remote rural areas. Communication through ideas/language increases if physical communication system develops.

Establishment of new divisional headquarters necessi-

ates better communication of both types mentioned above. In other words, people are educated and financed better. That is why the zonal people ask new divisional headquarters. The government is to consider their rightful demand. If the second smallest division — Khulna (not the smallest as mentioned in my letter "Creation of New Divisions" on 5-7-93 in DS; the smallest in area is Dhaka) — can be further divided, why not the largest (Chittagong) and the second largest (Rajshahi) ones? I urge the Government to establish two more divisional headquarters at Hobiganj/Sylhet and Rangpur respectively and also to annex the entire greater Faridpur to Barisal.

Mr Abdus Sattar Molla  
SME, IER, DU

### Peaceful

Succession  
Sir, Mr SAMS Kibria's article on 'Peaceful succession...' appearing on 19th September in your paper prompts me to express my thoughts. Succession in a civilized manner under a

party government will be possible only if the parties are democratic in their own folds. A change in our constitution can be helpful in this context. Rigid adherence to the party whip inhibits the blossoming of democracy. So long the parties are not democratic (as is the case with all our parties), floor crossing (by the MPs) should be allowed. If there are claims to remain in power for 25/50 years, definitely the same elements would prefer to dissociate from such craziness.

Forming a caretaker government everytime an election is due is unfortunate and sign of an immature country with unstable politics. But we cannot avoid such a fate unless the political parties and their cadres are imbued with democratic ideals.

M A Haq  
25/E Green Road (B-8),  
Dhaka-1205

### NBR policy on dish antenna

Sir, The 'Bangladesh Operative Tariff Schedule — 1993-94', by NBR under Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is no

doubt a much better publication than its previous one. Unfortunately in chapter 85 namely 'Electrical Machinery and Equipment and Parts Thereof' the NBR authority, for the second successive time, omitted the name of Satellite Receiver and its other necessary accessories. It is understood that Airport Customs authority has introduced a provisional tariff for different satellite receiving equipment. As it is a booming business in this country at this moment, we feel that the government should immediately take some decision on tax and tariff of those equipment in order to stop harassment by Customs officials, of the genuine importers. This encourages a lot of traders to smuggle the goods and sell them via electronic shops in the city. Selling these smuggled equipment cheaper, is not only an offence but is also leaving the government empty handed on tax. This should be solved immediately.

Syed Nasirullah (Ripon)  
80, Satmasjid Road, Dhaka