

Disciplining Rivercraft

It may sound unbelievable but a report carried in a Bangla daily is quite categorical that the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) is not in the know of the number of unregistered river vessels operating in the country. Nor is it aware of how many vessels are lying idle after getting registered. No less surprising is the fact that a large number of the vessels ply without survey certificates which in effect are fitness certificates. It is obligatory for each vessel to obtain such a certificate after an accident or repair. But, according to the BIWTA's own admission, hardly a vessel does bother to get its certificate so renewed.

So the picture that emerges from the report is chaotic, to say the least. This should explain the frequent launch and trawler accidents that occur all across this riverine country. The problem with most of our agencies and departments is that rules and laws are sparingly enforced for them to run smoothly. Our river transport system is no exception to this. The BIWTA has long neglected the important job of monitoring the vessels carrying passengers and goods in the long and hazardous water routes of the country. Happily, it has initiated a move to keep a count of the vessels lying idle after obtaining registration, and vessels plying without registration and survey certificates.

The sea directorate under the Port, Shipping and Inland Water Transport Ministry has been charged with the task. Although belated, we hope the move will be able to bring about discipline and order in the river transport system. However, the task is not easy. A lot of backlog is there, which needs to be cleared first of all. Even more daunting is to fight the mental jadedness of the owners of the vessels, who are long habituated to making the most of an ill-managed sector. Other vices are not quite absent either. This however should not deter the authority from taking a hard line against the faulty vessels and their almost incorrigible owners. If not anything at least a series of motor launch accidents point out why the sector needs disciplining.

In fact, all the irregularities — if not more — of the road transport business are to be found in respect of river transportation. Identification of the types of vessels, their fitness or the lack of it is indeed a first step towards streamlining their operations. A lot still remains to be done. Regular monitoring of the vessels to check if they are following the rules such as carrying goods and passengers within their capacities is a must. But this needs a manpower the authority does not have. Without such monitoring, the violators of rules cannot be penalised. And once the erring vessels have avoided penalties, a precedent is set for others to do the same.

What is therefore needed is revamping the BIWTA through increasing its manpower, particularly at the field level of survey and monitoring. Even this may prove inadequate or, in the worst case, something of an unwanted growth, if the staff are not made highly accountable for their job. The survey men at this level can take advantage of their position to compromise the set standards for graft. That has to be stopped by any means. Only then one can expect a thorough streamlining of the system at work. Improvement of physical facilities cannot wait for long. For our experiences with launch disasters make it an overriding necessity.

Wanted Some Grave Space

Where will you go after death? Thus a vernacular national daily headlined on Monday a report on a serious problem of the citizens of Dhaka. The report forcefully made the point that of the two questions of where will one be interred and where would one be privy after the Day of Judgement — the former was by far the more urgent for Dhakaites. Simply because Dhaka has no graveyard-space big enough to take on an 86 hundred thousand population. You want to have the grave of your most beloved person marked and preserved so as to afford you a sentimental journey to it whenever you feel like? — No way if you don't have 150 thousand in cash and now and rush within minutes to book the place and put up an epitaph with his or her name and bearings clearly laid out — although the person may well be living for another 40 years. The thought of marking grave-space for someone alive and dear may give you the creeps. But think of the kings who themselves built their mausoleums and you will be comforted.

Although Evelyn Waugh was cruel without malice in depicting the undertaker's business in Hollywood and that fantastic Czech Milan Kundera brought out the irony of the problems of disposing of one's mortal remains as though more as a joke in one of his impossible stories, the Dhaka citizen is condemned to suffer the raw side of the situation. A day will come when everyone now living in the city will have been dead. It will take around 4000 acres of land to bury them one beside the other. And Dhaka has hardly more than 200 acres of burial space. No wonder, the far-seeing amongst the citizenry are looking for their resting place somewhere in the villages.

This is part of a package of problems that comes with the growth of the megalopolis. And to compound it there is this Judco-Christian-Islamic tradition of burying the dead or letting the dead occupy some land-space even when he or she will have no use for it. Islam, as the forward looking religion it is, however, made injunctions against man's ancient urge to eternalise a grave. And living courageously upto true Islamic injunctions Kamaluddin Ahmed, a noted writer, will that he be interred in the Azimpur common graveyard so that soon enough his grave could house other bodies. His will was done. But such an exception cannot be prescribed as a solution in an area involving the deepest emotions of man. While the enlightened keep on trying to follow in the footsteps of Kamaluddin, whose spouse Sufia Kamal we prize as a godly gift to us, the city corporation must give the question of grave space a serious thought, and come up with some solution on a priority basis.

Next General Election: Time to Cut the Gordian Knot

THE question is whether the next general election should be held under a caretaker government or not. This is a very vital issue, because the very fabric of parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh may founder on this issue if it is not properly handled. In the last general election, the BNP won and the Awami League lost. After that, many elections at the local and national levels were held under the supervision of the Election Commission which, though supposed to be an independent and statutory body, is not above the government in our type of society. So it is quite possible that even such a body is susceptible to government influence. But then many local and national elections were held under its supervision and the Awami League accepted the results, maybe, with criticism.

The Magura (3) election was a critical one. It may be that there was, or there was not, some corruption there. One version is that the Awami League candidate monopolised election there for the last 30 years or so. But then the Awami League candidate came from a certain region or thana of the whole constituency. Maybe such monopoly of one region in the election was not desirable to the voters of the other regions where not much

development was taking place for years. And this 'fact' was mainly used as a strategy by the BNP against the Awami League. This is quite understandable also. So the long-deprived other areas voted for their own candidate who belonged to the BNP. On the other hand, it was reported that the Election Commissioner went to Magura to supervise the election the previous day. But whether it was for lack of accommodation or for other reasons that he left Magura and was sitting at Dhaka. This event perhaps has given rise to the suspicion that there was a lack of supervision and the BNP adopted widespread rigging. This is what I was told by some people. Now what was true and what was not true remains shrouded in mystery. The end result, however, is that there is a total lack of mutual trust and confidence between the BNP and the Awami League.

It may well be that because the BNP had a crushing defeat at Dhaka and Chittagong Mayoral elections it was bent upon winning the Magura election. The defeat in the Mayoral elections was too sour a stuff to swallow and as such they employed all their resources, both human and financial, to win the election which was rather crucial for the BNP leaders.

However, I have been told

by Prof M T Haq

that even the election in 1992 under the Interim Government, when Chief Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed was the Acting President, was not above criticism; but then the whole it was admittedly free and fair. I remember a veteran politician's statement who said that "a country gets the government it deserves". So within some limits there may be some in-built corruption in our elections. This is perhaps inevitable.

Now after the Magura election, the Awami League decided, as a protest, not to participate in the Jatiya Sangsad sessions. This has created a very intricate problem for the nation. In fact the ordinances or the Acts passed by the Sangsad without the presence of the main opposition party should not be regarded as valid at least from the ethical point of view.

Second, the matter has not yet been solved in that the official Opposition Party has not been persuaded to come back to the Sangsad. This situation has rendered the Jatiya Sangsad very ineffective. The opposition has taken to the streets. No solution is in sight. The whole country is now in such a political distress, which could perhaps be avoided with apt statesmanship. In addition there are murders, turmoils,

accidents, terrorism etc which must be contained. The dissatisfactions of all kinds may eventually lead the country to a real crisis which will mar whatever development has been taking place in the country with assistance from the international institutions and donor countries. Meanwhile, it seems, the BNP is trying to hurriedly execute the development programmes in order to show better results to the electorate. But the building of roads and other works like the construction of bridges and culverts hurriedly completed may be qualitatively worse.

I have seen that the BNP has proposed a bill to the Jatiya Sangsad to bring about a reorganisation of the Election Commission in an effort to strengthen the independence and the trustworthiness of the Election Commission for holding a free and fair election. In order to save the nation from a catastrophe, all parties should come back to the Sangsad, instead of fighting each other in the streets, and jointly work out a whole range of conditions which may enable the Commission to hold a just election in the interest of the country. In the absence of such an arrangement, the whole election without the participation of the opposition parties will be just a mockery

of the purpose. So intensive efforts of both sides are extremely necessary to cut the "Gordian knot". The failure to do this may have disastrous results. And in the event of a chaos, even the armed forces may not like to intervene now.

If the warring parties cannot come to terms on the Election Commission reforms issue for holding the next election, one may suggest an alternative arrangement, namely, the formation of an Interim National Government for holding the national election with Begum Khaleda Zia still remaining as the Prime Minister, and the opposition holding an authority in that. I feel no sensible person would have an objection to this alternative. Whatever arrangements or formalities are necessary to ensure the formation of such an Interim National Government for three months, should be worked out jurisprudentially.

Another requirement is the introduction of an identity card for every voter on a national basis. This is a stupendous task, but this is a must. The undertaking of this work will result in the creation of jobs also, in a country like Bangladesh where unemployment is a very serious problem.

Finally, the women members of the Jatiya Sangsad need to be elected and not nominated. The nomination is virtually a colonial concept. The

seats for the women members may be fixed and reserved but they must come to the Jatiya Sangsad through a system of election. Although the women of Bangladesh are mostly illiterate, they are sufficiently intelligent. And more so are the educated women. The adoption of the suggestion will involve a constitutional amendment which should pose no problem for such a non-controversial matter.

When the Constitution is based on democracy, some of the policies which the present government has been following are, on some counts, against some of the principles of the Bangladesh Constitution. For example, some of the reform policies which are now being followed in the country under pressures from the World Bank, IMF, ADB, donor countries etc are virtually acting against the general public interests. The reforms should be accepted and adopted on a selective basis. Most of the reforms so far adopted may have the effect of making the few rich richer and the vast majority of the poor poorer. In other words, this is not desirable in democratic ethics.

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CAUGHT between a small and sometimes illusive opening for reform provided by the Bill Clinton administration and the belief that only a radical alternative can address the country's real problems, American leftists have been unable to halt the process of fragmentation that began at the end of the Cold War.

Respected left thinkers such as Stanley Aronowitz claim that the socialist movement in the United States has finally come to a dead end, perhaps to be replaced eventually by a new ideology that is more critical of hierarchy, privilege and centralised authority.

Activities meanwhile continue a decade-old argument over whether the appropriate tactic is to influence mainstream political institutions or build a united progressive movement outside the two-party system.

According to the Committee of Correspondence (CoC), one of several recent formations that hope to pull together what is left of the left, there are two irrefutable facts of American politics today: discontent is widespread and the two dominant parties are not invincible. However, progressive forces are marginalised, fragmented, and hardly ready to take advantage of this situation.

The CoC — an outgrowth of a split in the Communist Party USA — hopes to lay the foundation for a mass-based political party that can transform American society.

At least five other groups are vying for the same position. These include the 21st Century Party, launched by the National Organisation for Women; the Labour Party, spearheaded by trade unionists; the Green Party, with support rooted in the environment movement; the New Party, a community-based alliance; and the Campaign for a New Tomorrow, a black-led coalition.

Opting for a "local first" approach, the New Party is backing grassroots campaigns. It is also pushing for proportional representation.

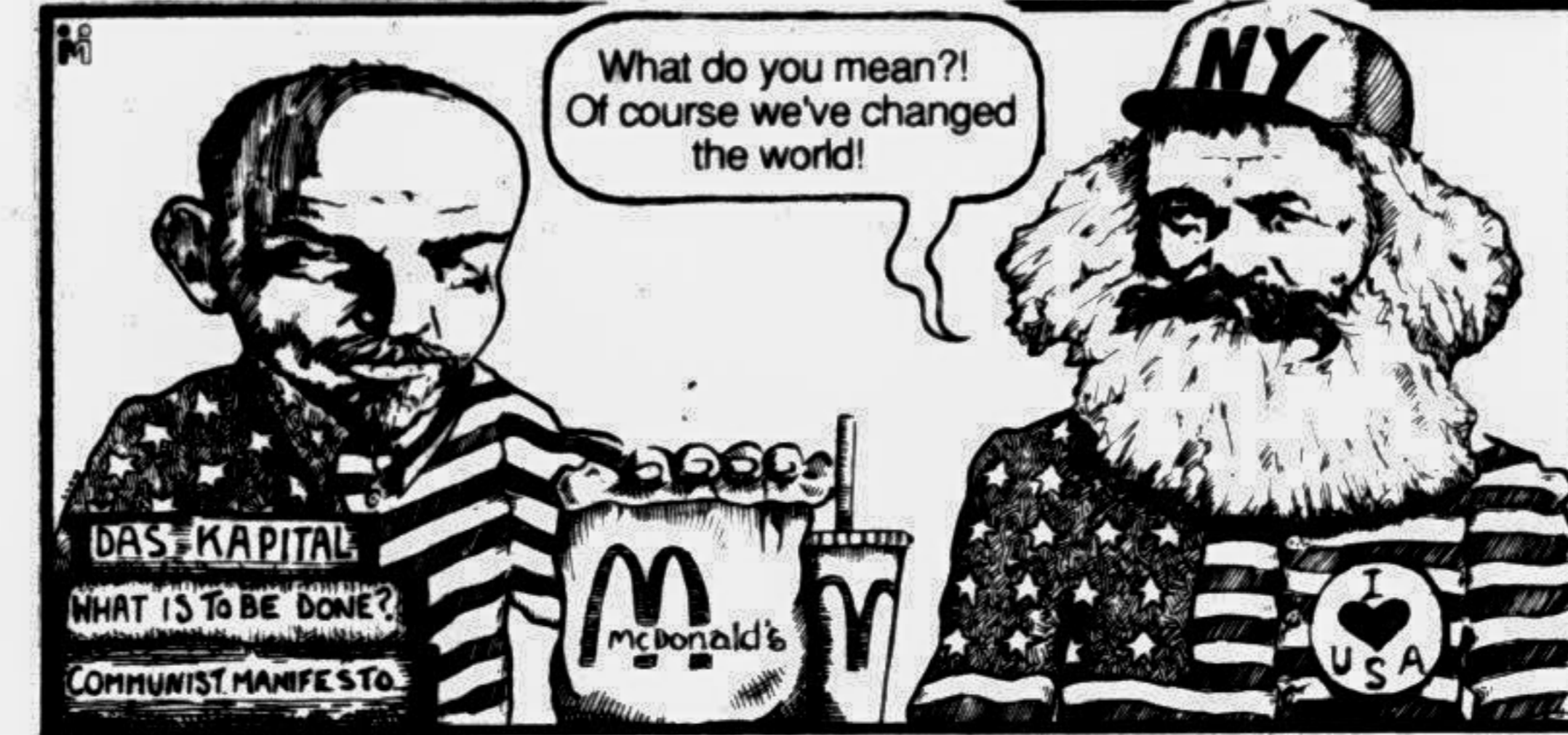
With race questions taking a centre stage in what is rapidly becoming a "multicultural" nation, ballot access and other voting issues will take on increased importance in the future. Within 50 years whites could become a minority population in the US.

Despite a handful of success stories, none of the new parties have managed so far to

US Left Gropes for the Right Line

Greg Guma writes from Washington

Famous American author Gore Vidal once remarked that the United States has only one political party with two right wings. But the centre of world capitalism is also home to a diverse progressive movement. Though marginalised, the left is rethinking, reports Gemini News Service, how it could grow out of being a minor actor in America's political drama.



create an umbrella attractive to the diverse membership of the left. In the meantime, more pragmatic leftists are looking for a way to make the best use of a Democratic presidency.

Launching a debate on this approach in *The Nation*, historians Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin argued that, "For at least the remainder of this century the fate of the left will be tied to Bill Clinton's political health."

While admitting that Clinton can not be relied upon to carry out a progressive agenda, they suggested that leftists have little choice but to spend the next few years rethinking ideas and recruiting new allies.

Others argue that neither mainstreaming nor breaking away is likely to rescue the left from its current confusion, unless its underlying flaws are acknowledged and a new philosophy is adopted.

The end of the Cold War has raised thorny questions about nationalism, ethnicity, environmental threats and global economics to which leftists thus far have offered few convincing answers.

If internal disputes were used to celebrate diversity while underlining a basic unity, the left might find a way to influence national debate on key foreign policy and domestic issues.

But debate has led mainly to a cacophony and paralysis, and

as a consequence, progressive perspectives have been all but absent from national discussions of foreign intervention, trade, crime, health care, and other hot topics. While the media can be blamed for refusing to provide equal access, there has rarely been a better chance to win hearts and minds than the past few years.

According to Aronowitz, a major cause of the left's immobilisation has been its refusal to acknowledge the importance of social, psychological and cultural demands. Under the continuing sway of Marxism, the left has focused on economic issues and class struggle, while failing to recognise the dangers of nationalism, authoritarian institutions, and charismatic leadership.

Another criticism centres on its refusal to fully incorporate the insights of the Green movement. As activist David Orton recently explained in *Canadian Dimension* magazine, communism and capitalism have as many similarities as differences. Both systems, argues Orton, devote most of their time to "trying to stimulate economic growth. It is this growth which is the problem; undermining our planetary life support system, and disregarding the environment and its ecological constraints, as the foundation of human society."

Many socialists consider

such concerns as "deviations" from the main tasks. The CoC, for example, is "dedicated to the attainment of political power," according to national co-chair James E. Vann. The central task, he says, is the formation of an independent political party.

OPINION

Both Sides Need to Cool off in National Interest

Sadeq Khan

The leaders of the three major Opposition parties in the Parliament have together embarked on a dangerous gamble. Alleging the ruling party's misuse of executive powers and propensity for manipulating elections, they appear bent on precipitating a crisis in governance by their prolonged boycott of parliamentary sessions followed by current chain of blockades and hartals in the capital and major cities. Holding the nation hostage in this manner to force adoption of a partisan agenda conceived mid-term, never yet presented to the electorate nor processed for parliamentary debate is certainly not democratic behaviour.

The siege of Dhaka turned out to be an exercise in calculated violence and profligate vandalism. The actions failed to attract crowds. Some reporters sympathetic to the Opposition covered that failure by saying that the number of activists seemed more than in 1987 siege of Ershad's government. The difference is, at that time road-side onlookers actively expressed sympathy for the protesters, this time they did not. At that time protesters and photo-journalists had to face not only police charges but also trigger-happy armed hooligans of the Jatiya Party. This time the same hooligans were firing at the police and photo-journalists, seriously wounding some. The public remained aloof. All responsible Dhaka newspapers reported the crowds of protesters to be in hundreds. The certificate of the BBC reporter that protesters in thousands gathered in the streets to break police cordon on the day of siege was belied by the actual pictures shown by BBC itself.

The most dangerous thing was the police discovery of the live grenade thrown near the Awami League office. In that crowded area, if the grenade exploded and killed or maimed hundreds, the reaction could have been beyond control. Luckily, police precautions have by the next day, during or after hartal hours,

are the people of Bangladesh who work so hard to make both ends meet and who really contribute to the growth of the economy.

The calculations of the Opposition camp, leaving aside the desperate bid of Ershad's supporters to fish in troubled waters, appear to be off the mark on three counts. First, the charges of corruption against the ruling party do not stick, as the general feeling is that although official-level corruption is still the order of the day, high-level corruption has declined. Secondly, the charges of economic mismanagement by the ruling party do not stick either since a remarkable degree of exchange rate and price stability accompanied by vulnerable group support efforts has restored the basic health of the economy, although deregulation and liberalization have yet to be properly implemented to achieve results and off-set the pains of structural adjustments and withdrawal of protections. Thirdly and most importantly, the raison d'être of the Opposition's demand remains controversial in so far as non-elected government as electoral arbiter between contesting political parties in effect justifies scope of civil and military bureaucratic intervention in public life, that goes against the fundamental principles of democracy. The avowed purpose, free and fair elections, is certainly a common cause, and political leaders from both sides of the divide should put their heads together to ensure that, if necessary by provision of an all-party government before elections. If the ruling party is planning counter-demonstration against Opposition leaders for willful disruption of economic life, it will be as unproductive as the Opposition play to put the ruling party on the dock by a pre-condition admitting contrary agenda ahead of discussions. It is time for both sides to cool off in national interest.

The writer is an eminent columnist, and writes regularly in *weekly Holiday*

To the Editor...

BTV's indifference
Sir, It is a known fact that BTV news has become so hackneyed and state controlled that hardly anyone places any weight on its reporting of local events. But we are appalled and outraged at the total disregard for crucial events happening in the country.

On August 5th, while almost all the daily vernaculars published reports, some quite detailed as in *The Daily Star*, of the horrifying gun shooting on DU campus where a professor was shot and others terrorised, BTV's 6 o'clock news began with the Prime Minister's inauguration of a prize distribution ceremony of Natun Kuri, a children's TV talent competition. While we do not deny that children's events are important and newsworthy, it is ludicrous that they should take precedence over something as serious as the DU shootings. Throughout the news there was not a single mention of the incident.

This, of course, is nothing new. There have been numer-

ous cases where people have been killed or injured during political skirmishes, especially on the DU campus, that have been completely ignored by the TV media. What does BTV take us for, a bunch of brain-washed morons? This is just an example of how farcical the terms 'freedom of the press' and 'democracy' so much harped by the government are.

A MA Cantonment, Dhaka
Clean the public roads

Sir, Most of the people living in the central part of old Dhaka city at Wari use Joginagar Road for going to Thatar Bazar for their day to day marketing. Over the last two months a huge pile of garbage is lying on this narrow but busy and important road which not only creates health hazards, emits foul smell, pollutes the area but also causes obstructions in the movement of the traffic by blocking the road.

We, the sufferers, would request the Dhaka City Corporation kindly to look

into the matter and take immediate steps to clean the public road.

O H Kabir
Dhaka-1203

Honours text books

Sir, Most of the good text books of medical, engineering and other disciplines of the Honours level available in our country are mostly imported from foreign countries.

Usually these books are old editions dating back at least by 6-10 years. So the students are deprived of the latest information about their subjects. Besides, the books are very costly. If these books are printed in our country with the permission of the authors and publishers, the students can have them at a lower price and they may also get the recent information about their subjects.

I hope that the authority concerned will give necessary attention to this matter of immense academic importance.

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