Dhaka, Saturday, September 30, 1995

Opposition's Show of Strength

The question before us all is: how will the ruling party react to the new programmes of the opposition? Will our political dialogue of the future sound like so many broken phonograph records with the same lines playing all the time? As we said before that our people are quite tired of hearing the two sides say the same thing over and over again -"nothing but election under a caretaker govand "nothing outside the ernment" People want a peaceful Constitution." solution to our political crisis through a dialogue. But then that does not seem to be how the rival political camps appear to see the situation. Predictably, the opposition's programmes of the two-day and the four-day strikes, interspersed with a week's gap, are meant to mount pressure on the ruling party to act. Bouyed by their success of the last three-day strike and Thursday's showing, the opposition feels that they are being able to carry the people with them. They feel that the hardships that strikes impose on the general people are being borne by them voluntarily, and that they are not losing any public support because of it.

BNP, for its part, is premising its reactions on the assumption that public's threshold of tolerance will crack at some point, and that more the opposition calls for strikes, the

more it will loose popularity.

This is a dangerous game for the ruling party to play. Yes, people are getting fed-up of strikes but they are not singling out the opposition to blame for it. People are also faulting the ruling party for not coming up with a solution, and for not really trying to find a compromise formula.

What is happening — not so unknown to both sides - is that people are losing faith in our politicians in general and are questioning whether or not they are fit to govern us. These rising doubts are acquiring increasing credibility. Before they became firm opinions, grounded on facts, present leadership of both sides should change their course of action. The present confrontational course is leading the country to disaster. Can't our leaders see

Economic Reform

The World Bank mission chief Pierre Landell-Mills' reiteration of the need for a total commitment on the part of our political parties to the economic reform process has quite a convincing ring about it. An oft-repeated general statement like that could have entered through one ear and exited through another had it not been for the way in which he has amplified it.

Mills has rightly pointed out that the political decisions needed to carry forward the currently 'stagnated' economic reform process should be forthcoming because there are no basic differences between the ruling party and the opposition on the principal elements of the reform agenda. Secondly, we get the WB's mind on the issue when Mills makes an example of the stalemated Jute Sector Adjustment Credit Programme to illustrate

his point about reform stagnation.

There are losing jute industries in the public sector that are required to be either closed down or made over to the private sector under the JSAC. Closure of industries and their privatisation bring in their wake the problem of labour redundancy or retrenchment in varying degrees. The promises of safety net and rehabilitation being made to the vulnerable workers have hardly sounded to them to be as good as secure, even if, propped-up, employment in the subsidised public sector. So, basically the workers need to be persuaded to accept the change-over. And, here the major political parties have a role to play actually in extension of their stated public commitments to free market economic reform.

Thus when we talk of pulling the full weight of consensus behind the process of economic reform what we are practically asking for is the exercise of this crucial measure of political will. Without compromising their distinct characteristics, the major political parties may try and convince trade union leaders not to place any roadblock to the reform process.

The Greatest Show

The drum was being beaten for some time. But the actual event took place on Tuesday. That day 2 lakh and 24 thousand men and women took the literacy examination in some 600 centres of the Lalmonirhat district. One is not sure if this is enough to claim that the event makes Lalmonirhat the first illiteracy free district in Bangladesh. Undoubtedly, however, Lalmonirhat becomes the district with the least presence of illiteracy.

The Tuesday event indeed signifies much more than these claims would ever do. Imagine 224 thousand adult men and women impoverished perhaps of both health and means of life - bending their heads, all concentration, and answering questions testing their newly-acquired power to decipher writing and themselves shaping letters and

then letters into words and even sentences. The most correct claim for Lalmonirhat is that there on September 26 and between 10 am and 5 pm the greatest show on earth took place. The world has never before seen the like of it. And it is our fervent hope that this great show would very soon be copied and repeated and even surpassed by other districts of Bangladesh.

And the device which made all this possible was wholly of Lalmonirhat's own making. The programme of enabling 268 thousand identified illiterate people to read and write was taken in 1993, and two years later that was realised, to the last individual. The cost? Roughly about Tk 140 was spent from government coffers on each of these 268 thousand achievers — 45 thousand of them made literate before the Tuesday test.

Campus Violence: How Long the Lip Service?

Human security and human rights are enshrined in the Constitution and to uphold earnestly the verdicts of the Constitution, a government should mobilise its forces and have a crackdown on the weevils notwithstanding their political colour. ous developmental works

to eke a clean campus. It is, however, alleged that while the commitment of the government has always been on its lip, the steps taken so far were not deep enough to get the criminals on their neck.

At the beginning of its tenure of office, of course, the BNP government aroused a lot of campaigns in favour of clean campuses. To that end, the government also called upon all political leaders of different political parties to extend their respective hands in its vying for a violence-free campus. Few rounds of roundtable conferences were also held as could be in evidence by the courtesy of Bangladesh Television (BTV). The "groping" for a consensus on eradication of violence inside campuses turned into a fiasco with, as the government sources tend to allege forcefully, the "noncooperation" of Sheikh Hasina (the then leader of the opposition) as the villain of peace.

One would wonder to ponder as to why an elected government should seek others' opinion to have a crackdown on terrorists. Does the government, for example, consult the opposition (or for that matter Sheikh Hasina) to put criminals. smugglers, law breakers etc., behind bars? The other side of the argument is that despite opposition's absence (and hence of the non-coop-

eration), the parliament is running, various general activities are on, then why the crackdown needs opposition's approval? Human security and human rights are enshrined in the Constitution and to uphold earnestly the verdicts of the Constitution, a government should mobilise its forces and have a crackdown on the weevils notwithstanding their political colour. Therefore, the argument that someone else's

disposal of the government which it should deploy to confront them. But what happens: if the criminals belong to the government party and the law enforcing agencies belong to the government? The alleged reign of terror ushered by JCD in different campuses is considered to be the product of a direct patronisation from the government and if this allegation is true, the PM or her cabinet can hardly wash off

Beneath the Surface

by Abdul Bayes

non-cooperation foiled government's "earnest endeavour" to wipe out terrorism from the campus, in fact, holds very little water. Besides, we are shy of any empirical evidence available anywhere in the world where a government expresses its

innocence in that way. Yes, the argument is, perhaps, true that many political parties do in fact patronise terrorists within their respective student wings and to that extent, it is condemnable. But one can also safely argue that the law en forcing agencies are at the

their hands. To see a violence-free campus, the government must disown the terrorists in its student wing. apply the rule of the land on them and allow the law en forcing agencies to have an independent judgement on this vital issue. In its absence, mere lip services would generate only crocodile tears.

Vulnerable VCs

The PM asked the VCs put up their best to clamp down on terrorists that seemingly, tended to constrain the completion of vari

how sincerely the high-

prone to vulnerability on many counts. First, some of them are directly appointed by the government who are alleged to bear pro-BNP identity cards. Their allegiance to the party, more often than not, delimit their capacity to apply their own "professional" judgement on terrorism if it, particularly, owes to BNP-backed student wing. The length of their tenure is critically dependent on the impression of the ruling party, especially its student organisation. On the other hand, other VCs are the products of 1973 Act and elected by the Senate. Their capacity is constrained not by the allegiance per se, but by the fact that law enforcing agencies, allegedly, barely come to their rescue on time. Further, in the selection of one out of three from the panel, it is alleged that many VCs register their unwritten sympathy to the party-inpower and especially to its student wing, Unless VCs are endowed with forces of their own within the campus or unless they are free of ther any appeal to them about it.

The VCs in Bangladesh are

agree to the notion that terrorist activities on campuses have been on a wane in re-

would end in fruitful results.

Concluding Observations

One can, perhaps, hardly

cent years. May be that in some places our Hon'ble VCs do not hear the gun shots any more that they used to go to bed with before. But gun shots are not the sole indicators of the degree of terrorism. On many campuses, especially where commercial and passenger vehicles ply and where markets are located, students are said to be involved in extortions of money from passengers, bus, truck owners and shopkeepers. In some areas, where a student party (whether JCD. BCL, or other organisation) tends to dominate other party students are barred from enjoying their civil rights. A few of the terrorists tend to determine the examinations schedules forcing the vast pool agree to their ways. The modicum of calmness on the campus is, therefore, not a sustainable one and, apparently, stands as an illusion which might wither next morning, possibly, as it happened on the JU campus on September 26, 1995. Your Frankensteins today, may be of others tomorrow. So. clutches, it is doubtful whe- please do "truly" something

HINS GOD by Voyager

The Nightmare on Dhaka Streets

IME was when driving be controlled. We have fullminutes. Time was when one and regulate the flow of trafcould actually walk on Dhaka fic on the streets. The situastreets. Time was when tion is still controllable if a vehicles obeyed some traffic modicum of discipline and rules..... but that was then adherence to traffic rules can and this is now when the be enforced. But unfortu-Nightmare-on-Dhaka-Streets nately the malaise which is is the only show in town.

fic on the Shantinagar turn- Police Department, indeed ing and the rickshaws are the entire Ministry of Home, adding to the jam by manoeuvering into each little gap, I est honours for incompetry to remind myself that the tence and inefficiency not to ubiquitous rickshaw is actually an extremely environment-friendly mode of transport. Its manoeuverability British Government has given makes it ideal for narrow considerable amounts of lanes and byways. When technical aid and equipment walking long distances in the to the Police Department. city centres of the western The equipment can be seen world I have sometimes in the shape of computers longed to yell "Aei, Ricksha!" tastefully arranged on side and imagined the comfort of tables and often covered by taking the weight off my feet embroidered tablecloths and being trundled off to my adorning the offices of senior destination. However, that members of the Police was before the rickshaw be- Service. No doubt, they serve came the Demon of Dhaka and added measurably to the number of coronaries suffered by owners and drivers

of cars on our streets. While there is no doubt the rickshaw has earned its title of "Demon" and of course overloaded trucks country, specially in the rural driven by drug addicts are the "Badshas of Demons" it is True, it was heartening to actually quite difficult to desee Bangladesh, reassuring cide what rank in demonology to assign to the child, has endorsed the auto-rickshaws, the van rickshaws, the tempos, and of

There must also be a special place in the Hell reence to women's sexual served for all traffic policemen who stand so noncha-Having no certain lantly by and occasionally sip their free tea at a wayside masha at the Narinda cross-Mohakhali yesterday" or "Arre, bhai, that redfaced man in the white Toyota turned a most unusual shade of puce when he was having

> The incredible rate at which new vehicles are being added to our roads can surely

see how his driver yelled in

from Gulshan to Mo- fledged Police Departments tijheel took fifteen and Traffic Police to control gripping so much of the Each morning as I sit in country has the guardians of the middle of unmoving traf- law in its grip as well. The should be awarded the highmention apathy and corrup-

I understand that the

an ornamental purpose but what of the expensive training that has been given both at home and abroad to our police? Are they waiting for a divine voice to call out "Action boys" and waving their batons like magic wands they will swing into action and miraculously bring their training to bear to restore discipline and order on the streets? Of course, the voice will have to choose an appropriate time to call out when most members are relatively free of their onerous responsibilities and not actually raping young girls or covering up their lapses or angling for lucrative postings or

on training abread! Shall we wait for that special day or should we actually expect some action from the policemen entrusted with our safety and well-being? Perhaps if all VIPs drove in flagless cars and were to experience themselves what the citizens contend with every day some action would result. And dare I suggest that occasionally the Prime Minister herself could drive out in an unmarked car the way we ordinary mortals do. Should we sit patiently on choked up streets and hope for this to happen or do we say "this is now and that was then", as we succumb to The Nightmare on the Streets of

Beijing Was No Miracle for Women

by Ekram Kabir

FTER all that China went through during the last week of August and the first half of September, at least some Chinese have seen light at the end of the tunnel. Despite the hassles of security officers with video cameras who, reportedly, prevented Chinese delegates from taking part in controversial discussions, some 6,000 Chinese women had active participation at the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW).

HE day the members

of the Bangladesh

University Parishad -

the standing committee of

the VCs - called on Prime

Minister Khaleda Zia on 26

September, ramps and ram-

pages rocked the boat of Jah-

angirnagar University (JU).

When, possibly, the VCs were

briefing the chief executive of

the government about the

"relatively better" campus

situations, heavy gun fights

between the delirious groups

of BNP-backed student wing

(JCD) went to crack the si-

lence that JU is in need at

the moment to downsize its

session jam and to gear up its

various development works.

The clash, according to the

newspaper reports, left a

dozen seriously wounded and

perhaps more importantly.

invoiced a sense of horror in

the minds of the new admis-

sion-seekers who were there

to face oral tests. Given this,

the reported submission of

the VCs that "academic atmo-

sphere had improved signifi-

cantly with the stopping of

terrorist activities on the

campus" could sound as

mere adulating and devoid of

The Cup and the Lip

learnt to have reiterated her

government's commitment to

witness campuses free of vio-

lence - a commitment that

the present regime has been

chewing and forcefully prop-

agating since its coming to

power four and a half years

back. The PM is also re-

ported to have asked the VCs

to clamp down on terrorists

The Prime Minister is

any empiricism, whatsoever.

When the UN conference went to Beijing, the city thought it was prepared, the opening ceremonies were suitably elaborate — this is what China wanted for its capital — a high-profile international event, orchestrated, choreographed and spectacular. But according to international wire agencies, what it got was at times rather different : for the first time, foreign political activists were meeting, arguing and demonstrating. Viewed in the Chinese context, it was a memorable clash — making a culture of protest against the culture of control.

But the plenary sessions

by describing as violations of human rights the practices of forced abortions and sterilisation, and the denial to women of the "right to plan their own families."

While advocating "microcredit" for poor women, she often became too American with a recent realisation of US's disintegrating symptoms of family values that are compelling the country's women into impoverishment. This is particularly so because female-headed households in the US are increasingly going into poverty. According to a recent issue of The Economist of London, in 1994, more than three out of five African-American households with children were headed by a lone mother typically young, poor and never-married. The situation is worse when it comes to violence against women: a 1994 New York Times survey reveals that in 1990 alone. one in every five adult women in America had been raped.

It is surprising to think that the USA and other western nations started using

billion poor world-over.

Well, don't the figures imply the real situation of the world's female population? Such inequalities stretch to other sectors as well: women own only 10 per cent of the world's property and earn simply, again, 10 per cent of all income. And in the employment scenario, when it comes to holding positions of influence — only one per cent executive-level posts are held by women worldwide.

The FWCW identified that women are still denied education — two-thirds of the world's illiterates are female, and girls in most of the countries still have unequal access even to primary education. After the Beijing meet, it is now well-established firmer than the past — that increased access to education has an extraordinary impact on health, family-planning and overall economic wellbeing of women and their families. It is heartening to know from the UNESCO projections at the conference that 300 million more girls tion (task) force to look after will be enrolled in the

sounding objectives are pursued at both national and international levels. Bangladesh's part, it certainly made its presence felt at the FWCW and at the paralle gathering of NGO Forum. Although the Bangladesh delegation didn't feel like that of Mrs Clinton, it certainly did ask for more resources from the developed countries Unlike the US phenomenon of deteriorating family values, Bangladesh has, with all alike problems, the problem of increasing number of destitute women which has to be taken care of on its own.

One way to solve it is to orient these homeless women in small-scale in come-generating activities which the Grameen supremo Dr Mohammad Younus emphasised in China while asking the world's banks to lend more to the poor and not only to the rich. The other is to equip the Women and Children Affairs Ministry with more manpower, more educated in women-related development activities. In other words, it needs a rapid reacwomen's issues all over the

Having no certain promises from the world financial institutions for women-oriented development like poverty elimination and changing world-wide economic systems and consumption patterns of the rich which pour out global injustices, it will be hard to implement the draft document effectively in the backdrop of fast-changing society.

went much better than what many have criticised to be nothing but a talking-shop. This was the first UN (women's) summit to have escaped being dominated and divided by highly political debates on apartheid, Cold War-time and Palestinian issues. But the war-time afflictions on women — with particular reference to Bosnia-Herzegovina - were put to the discussion agenda.

Still then, the US First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton - whose arrival in Beijing was ensured only after the last-minute release of the Chinese-American human rights campaigner Harry Wu - couldn't avoid subtle political tone in her speeches. Mrs Clinton was speaking in a rebuking manner which seemed too "foreign" on the Chinese soil: "Let me be clear — freedom means the right of people to assemble, organise an debate openly."

Though she was supposed to watch her words on Chinese way of life, she delivered - among many of her sweeping speeches — a clear slap at the country's methods

women as sexual commodities. Publications as Playboy. Penthouse and the like are glaring examples. On the other hand, the demise of communism has brought the Russian women to the streets as prostitutes. Even in industrialised Japan, income disparities still exist between men and women and domestic violence against women is on the rise there.

In almost all the countries, women face obstacles at workplaces and in society because of their sex. They are more likely than to be poor and over-worked. Those with formal jobs earn, on average, 30 to 40 per cent less than men for comparable jobs. For example, in the rural African farms, women work far longer hours than men and often for no pay at all.

There are more global realities which was revealed by UNIFEM Development Fund for Women) at the FWCW: twothirds of world's 900 million illiterates are women. Adding to that is the poverty indicator, which is of women who comprise 70 per cent of 1.3

world's elementary and primary schools in 1995 than in 1960.

The basic idea of equality is followed by the concept of world as a platform where the contributions of both the sexes are valued in equal terms. Any sort of deviation from it will end up in depriving the one half of the humanity - within the global system of behaviour — of making its rational contribution to the entire development process of the society.

As the UN in Beijing came up to recognise the importance of gender within a wide range of issues for the first time in its history the FWCW document - a 149-page Plan for Action — defines women's sexual rights and pledges to promote equality. But, of course, the document was not a binding one, because, according to available reports, it didn't promise or made any commitments for fund-mobilisation. It is then a frustrating point to ponder, particularly on the part of the

Third World countries. The future lives — wellbeing - would depend on

its commitment to the girl-Platform for Action without any reservation, though at the course, the thelas. outset and in the end it had some difficulties with refer-

promises from the world fi- pick their noses as they connancial institutions for template the relative beauties women-oriented develop of completely snarled traffic. ment like poverty elimination One can almost hear them and changing world-wide compare traffic jams as they economic systems and consumption patterns of the rich stall - "Oh no. today's tawhich pour out global injustices, it will be hard to im- ing was much more enterplement the draft document taining than that ordinary effectively in the backdrop of one hour holdup in fast-changing society.

After all, the women a large are no more satisfied shouldn't be - with the discussions of the afflictions they suffer : this time, they his heart attack and did you want to see the remedies against those. They will be panic." waiting for the beyond-Beijing agenda — the implementations of the Plan for

Save Dhaka

Sir, This is to congratulate through your esteemed daily the residents of Dhanmondi for their united and persistent protest against filling up of the Dhanmondi lake. This is the voice of the people against the unwise and motivated move of the concerned officials. Some officials being unable to foresee the long-range interest of the people, and beautiful landscape of the capital city, venture to fill up the lakes. In order to facilitate recreation facilities,

lakes and parks are as important as other facilities in a modern city. In an increasingly congested city like Dhaka lakes and parks should be considered very important for guarding against environmental hazards. Filling up lakes in Gulshan and Banani started in the 1980s to create some residential plots with ulterior motive totally ignoring the interest of the residents and ecology of the township.

There is growing demand for the preservation of environment in the country. Impressive papers are pre-

sented in seminars and conferences at home and abroad. Recommendations are made to preserve environment but in practice, in Dhaka city, nobody cares to implement those recommendations. urge upon the authority concerned to develop a comprehensive plan in order to achieve environmental balance in the city. Instead of filling up Dhanmondi, Banani and Gulshan lakes and other ponds for constructing highrise buildings, lakes and parks should be developed available for residents espe-

cially for children who need this for social, and mental development.

As a matter of fact, filling up of Dhanmondi, Banani and Guishan lakes will never solve the housing problem of the expanding city. Maybe a few fortunate people will enjoy the benefit having plots at the cost of environment. So a policy decision against occupying vacant land and filling up lakes for construction of buildings should be formu-

lated to save Dhaka city. May be The Daily Star, and attractive facilities made BELA. BUET and conscious citizens will take initiative for

an awareness raising seminar recent 72-hour hartal has to help the citizens and government officials. Let us do it for our chil-

dren whose right it is to live in a pollution free Dhaka city in the 21st century. Mrs Mahmur Rahman

Mrs S Elora Rahman Dhaka

Stripping during hartal

Sir, The incident in which a gentleman was forcibly stripped of his clothes on the first day of the

drawn attention of all people. The incident has been condemned vehemently by all sections of people. In the name of political rights perhaps, the political parties have allowed the picketers to do anything. The people who are completely devoid of normal sense can do such inhuman things The political parties

should cancel membership of such supporters who dare to do such types of stupidity.

Md Mustafizur Rahman Dhaka