

WTO Threatens UNCED Gains

by Abdul Hannan

JUST three years have passed since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) and already many of the principles arrived at through a hard fought process of consensus-building are under threat. Of the many challenges that have taken shape since 1992, one is emerging to become a major (if not the key) issue on the international economic agenda: trade and environment.

G7 and other industrialized countries spent the concluding years of the Uruguay Round of talks on the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) gradually bringing the trade-environment linkage to the fore of the negotiating forum for the new World Trade Organization (WTO). Although not a fully-fledged aspect of GATT's Final Act, April 1994's ministerial meeting in Morocco produced a Marakkesh Declaration which agreed to set up a new Committee on Trade and Environment. At this meeting, the ceremonial end to the Uruguay Round which was concluded at a technical level on 15 December 1993, the ministers also revealed the GATT 'Decision on Trade and Environment'.

It is the approach of Northern industrialized countries to the trade-environment issue, rather than the issue *per se*, that has elicited responses in the South ranging from concern to distress. Many observers feel that the industrialized countries are using the trade-environment interface to hatch yet another manoeuvre to undermine the development priorities of the South by introducing novel forms of

protectionism, and in doing so subverting the guidelines established at UNCED.

Recalling UNCED

The Rio Declaration was one of the five policy instruments to emerge from UNCED. Principle 12 of the Rio Declaration emphasized international cooperation, stipulating that trade policy measures for environmental purposes should not constitute a means of arbitrary or unjustifiable discrimination or a disguised restriction on international trade. Principle 12 therefore rejects the use of environmental issues as an alibi for unilateral acts of aggression based on sanctions and embargo.

Furthermore, UNCED recognised three broad principles pertinent to the trade-environment interface, which it discussed fully in Chapter 2 of Agenda 21 (the document described as the 'blueprint for action' towards Sustainable Development in the 21st century). Firstly, Agenda 21 reiterates Principle 12 of the Rio Declaration by emphasizing the resolution of trade-environment problems through international cooperation and mediation. This additionally requires a rejection of the adversarial posturing from members of the international community that today is commonplace. Secondly, Agenda 21 stipulates that issues of trade and environment cannot be seen in isolation from fundamental considerations for and orientation towards Sustainable Development. Finally, Agenda 21 clearly recognizes that countries have different domestic characteristics that affect their performance in the trade-environment

context, differences in resource endowments, rates of degradation, legislative and policy frameworks, political cultures and so on.

As a result, it was considered vital that the work done by the international community to resolve trade-environment issues was based on a close reading of the particular circumstances of the country or countries in question. In brief, then, UNCED recognized three elementary considerations for tackling the trade-environment question: (i) the need for international cooperation, (ii) adherence to Sustainable Development as the primary, overall concern and objective, and (iii) sensitivity in response to country trade-environment specificities.

Revisionism under WTO

The GATT 'Decision on Trade and Environment' exhibits near-impeccable faith towards UNCED guidelines, referring to "the avoidance of protectionist trade measures and the adherence to effective multilateral discipline to ensure responsiveness to the multilateral trading system to environmental objectives set forth in Agenda 21 and the Rio Declaration, in particular Principle 12". What is more, in 1994 the 'Decision on Trade and Environment' invited "the sub-committee of the Preparatory Committee and the Committee on Trade and Environment... to provide input to the relevant bodies in respect to appropriate arrangements for relations with inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations referred to in Article V of the WTO: [italics added].

So far so good it seems,

though it is important to note that both of these clauses appeared in the 'Decision on Trade and Environment' at the behest and express insistence of developing countries in order to secure multilateral involvement in international negotiations on trade and environment. However, the insertion of the word "appropriate" gives sufficient scope to industrialized countries to interpret "arrangements with inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations" to any extent and degree that serves their interests.

The argument posited by many developing countries is that UNCED's Commission for Sustainable Development, UNEP, UNCTAD and the Conference of Parties on environment treaties should all be fully involved in the resolution of trade-environment issues. Because of its narrow trade focus, today's WTO lacks the jurisdiction, competence and capacity to deal with the interlocked issues of trade and environment. Indeed, Article 57 of the United Nations Charter requires every specialized agency such as the WTO to be "brought into relationship with the United Nations." Such a move would have significant benefits. Foremost amongst these would be that the WTO will become less prone to the manipulation by major economic powers that it faces if it functions from within the Bretton Woods system.

This, however, appears to be exactly what the industrialized nations want from the WTO. They prefer the WTO as the agency of choice from

within the Bretton Woods system to take charge of more and more issues like trade and environment (and away from the UN technical agencies with their more democratic and open decision-making systems). This is because the Bretton Woods system is less democratic and easier to control and also, more specifically, because of the WTO's instrument of mediation called the 'Dispute Settlement Understanding' and the potential for recourse to trade sanctions it presents that enables Northern industrial powers to quash Southern economic insubordination as and when it wishes.

It would then be possible for industrialized countries to use the issue of environment as a potential instrument of coercion rather than as a starting point for international cooperation as stipulated in Agenda 21. It poses the real danger that the WTO will be used to impose uniform (and protectionist) environmental measures such as 'eco-labelling' of products and 'process production methods' to 'internalize' environmental costs on developing countries, again in contravention of Agenda 21.

The Mexican delegate to GATT, Jesus Seade Kuri, commented on these inversions of international principles by the North thus: 'The entire Agenda 21, including the trade, development and environment chapter had already been discussed, negotiated and adopted at the highest levels of government at Rio de Janeiro [UNCED]. GATT delegates, under the

guise of discussing trade-environment linkages cannot sit in judgement over their heads of government and rewrite the chapter'. This, however, is exactly what they have been doing and are continuing to do.

In practical terms UNCED is being ignored and even the WTO's own 'Decision on Trade and Environment' is being renege. The WTO threatens, according to the Third World Network, to pull "the location and rights and powers away from the local and national levels to an international agency that skews the treatment of the matter in favour of the powerful parties. As a result, the process by which local communities lose control of their natural resources is accelerated". Indonesian Trade Minister Dr Joedono has forewarned that this latest trade-environment manoeuvre of the North risks "unravelling the hard-won balance of rights, obligations and interests of all parties as embodied in the Final Act [of GATT]". India's Pranab Mukherjee adds a moral tenor his observations of the scheming of the major industrial powers: "It is ironic that while developing

countries have accepted the logic of competition based on comparative advantage, the industrialized nations appear to be shying away from the playing field and seeking a tilt in the rules of the game."

Business as Usual

Much, if not all, of what we can feasibly desire from environmental communications exists in the letter of the policy frameworks of UNCED and WTO. But the conduct of the industrialized countries, particularly the USA, towards Sustainable Development is one of continuing indifference. This can be seen in the way that the trade-environment nexus is being used as a pretext for global economic cooption rather than cooperation.

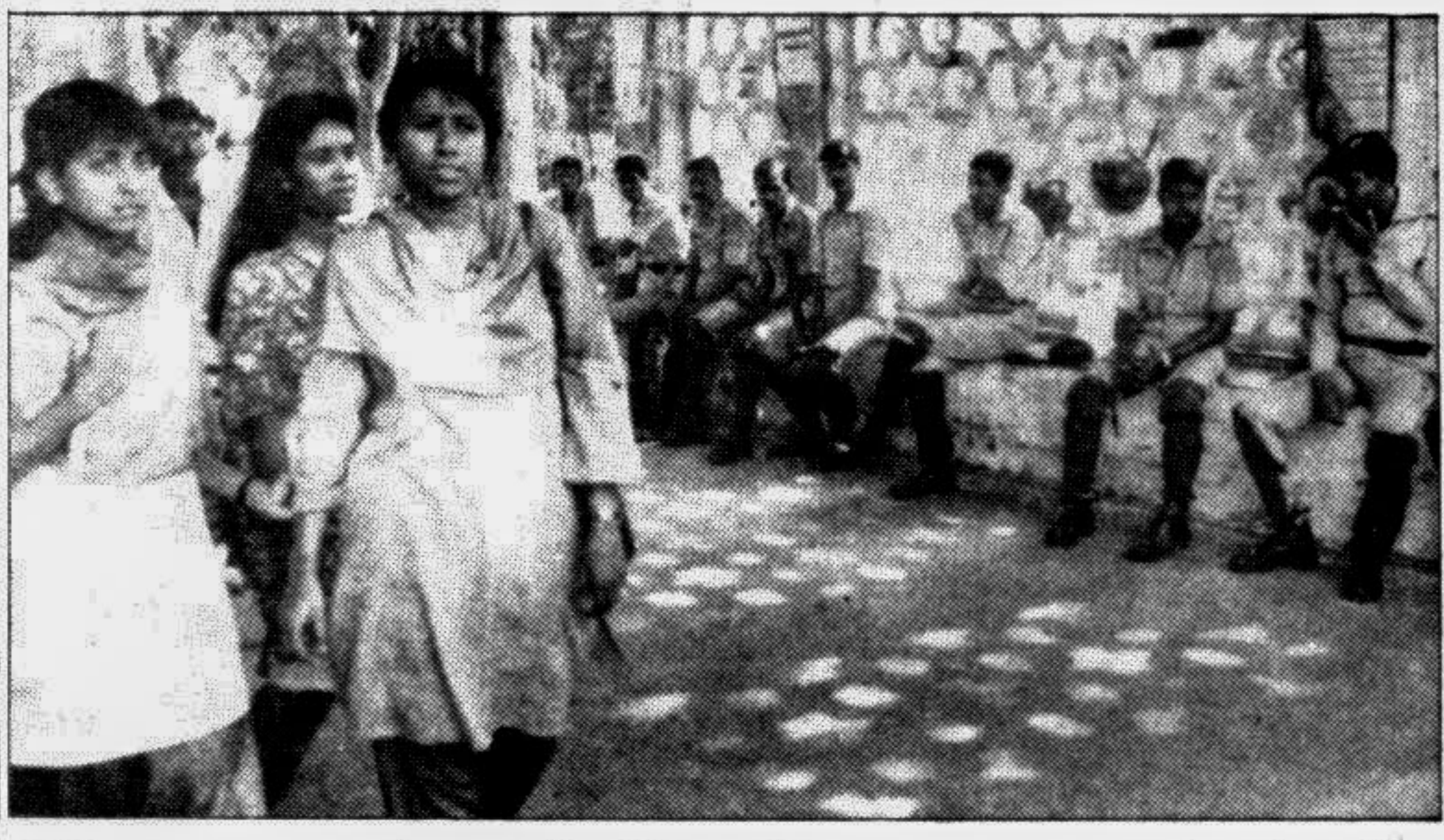
The first concrete indication that the trade-environment issue would be used through the WTO as an instrument of control came at the sub-committee meeting on Trade and Environment at last year's WTO Preparatory Committee, when the USA made a statement that unilateral trade measures may be necessary for pursuing policies of environmental protection. The statement was

roundly condemned.

Most of these developments in the trade-environment linkage of the WTO have been 'behind-the-scenes' in nature. Currently, as we know, the limelight is being occupied by so-called issues of 'labour and human rights'. The relative obscurity of the trade-environment issue in the WTO context can be attributed to one overriding factor. Industrialized countries are taking their time to align their positions, including reducing differences within and between their trade interests, government and other lobbies. Only when they consider themselves ready will the WTO come into its own, as the North-dominated instrument of economic control under which the South will have to bear the load of renewed Northern economic hypocrisy in the guise of trade and environment 'principles'.

It is then that we shall see how far the WTO will go to reverse the commitments made at UNCED, using the cause of environmental protection as a euphemism for Northern trade protectionism.

Fixing the Wings of Eastern Icarus



THE "Oxford of the East" — an epithet unfortunately inappropriate for the Dhaka University these days — celebrated its 75th founding anniversary on 21 September with the joyous day's organisers and participants promising to revive the institution's lost glory. A glory that dates back... (can anyone really recall the day on which the University of Dhaka was honoured with the name: "Oxford of the East?")

According to newspaper reports, while emblazoning the university's platinum jubilee, which was organised by the DU Central Students Union (DUCSU) — and not by the university authority — the "day" wore an *en fete* look. A large number of present and ex-students, teachers and other employees assembled on the campus to recollect their sweet memories of the last 75 years.

At the same time, the invited guests — most of whom were ex-Vice-Chancellors — while making speeches, tradition aside, lamented over the plight of the DU students' output in the society. Their articulations were emphatic in pointing out the declining quality of education at the Oxford of the East.

As a former VC — namely, Professor Shamsul Haq — regretted, "Nowadays, neither the students, nor the teachers are sincere in their academic pursuit". There is not a scintilla of doubt in his observations. Well, then, what exactly they — both teachers and pupils — have been doing all these years?

This is a candid question any mindful citizen can ask — and one has every right to do so — to the university authorities as well as the country's polity. Since independence, till today, Bangladesh witnessed the increasing politicisation — one won't deny its negative sense — of this particular institution in the form of indiscipline and violent armed clashes among the student wings of mainstream political parties of the country with, of course, many a death on the score.

According to CCHRB (Coordinating Council for Human Rights in Bangladesh) Reports of '93 and '94, three and four persons — respectively, all students — were killed, died due to gun-battles or used fire-arms at the DU premises. This is only 'tip of the iceberg'. Surprisingly enough, the deaths — or killings — that occurred on the campus were never settled, as to who the fratricides are, at the court of law.

In other words, the court, through the help of law enforcing agencies, could never identify any hatchet man to

Moscow Smiles at a Little Independence

THESE nationalists! laughs a prosperous businessman in the central Russian republic of Tatarstan as he watches bands playing and a small demonstration. "They only come out on public holidays."

Only a handful of people, mostly children, stand and watch as the demonstrators struggle past. They are protesting over Russia's lack of recognition of the five-year-old Sovereignty Declaration, a document the Russian government refuses to recognise as legal.

The adults of Kazan generally show little enthusiasm for the Declaration either. This apathy in Tatarstan comes as a shock to those outside Russia who have followed the breakdown of the old Soviet Union and the emergence of its successor, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

In 1992 Tatarstan seemed to ally itself with Chechnya and Chechen methods for gaining independence when the two joined forces in refusing to sign President Boris Yeltsin's new constitution.

Three years later, the two allies are, in terms of nationalistic fervour, miles apart. Chechnya has forced Russia and the world to recognise its existence through its bloody and prolonged civil war, while Tatarstan has faded quietly from the nationalist arena.

This apathy does not surprise Airat Alishev, head of the Kazan department liaising with protest groups.

"The people were never behind the movement", he

Five years ago Moscow was worried by Tatarstan's moves towards independence, in alliance with Chechnya. Today, Moscow is unworried by the few nationalist demonstrators. Gemini News Service examines the republic's about-turn.



Rebecca Paveley writes from Kazan

But if they can take advantage once, can they not do so again?

"No. It was always a question of follow-my-leader. Before, the nationalists had leaders to unite them, but now they have drifted away and the groups are falling apart. The nationalist wave is ebbing."

Could the tide turn again in their favour?

His answer comes after a pause and is quiet. "I don't think so, no."

Kazan has a harmonious atmosphere. The most radical group, Itifak, which demanded the exile of all Russians from a Tatar republic, has disintegrated. Alishev presents official figures to demonstrate that today only a few hundred people in Tatarstan belong to the nationalist movement.

The region's ethnic integration is matter of pride to most Tatars. Alishev included. The Russian government is keen to accept Alishev's official interpretation of the situation in the once rebellious republic.

Says the Russian Minister for Nationalities, Alex Kotnikov: "Let them have their public holiday (to mark the Sovereignty Declaration). It's good for them to have a little independence." He is complacent. He can afford to be.

Last year he signed an agreement with Tatarstan which effectively nullified the original Sovereignty Declaration, handing over control of all law enforcement agencies, financial structures and institutions of higher education to Moscow.

Moscow's complacency marks a complete volte-face.

In 1992 the perceived threat from the Tatar nationalists was giving the bureaucrats in Moscow a huge political headache.

At one point, the then Deputy Prime Minister Boris Fyodorov declared the government to be more worried about the political situation in Tatarstan than that in the Ukraine, with which it was arguing over the ownership of the Black Sea Fleet.

To outsiders, Tatarstan seems to pose little threat. The republic's lack of borders, both geographic and historical, has prevented independence in the past and looks set to carry on doing so.

But Tatarstan possesses great bargaining power

A Social Force Conquering Prejudice

BD is not only characterized by alarming numbers pertaining to a poverty stricken population but is also threatened by an increase in its proportion. Moreover been shown that the burden of poverty falls more heavily on women. Among the poor in Bangladesh, rural women are the most isolated and deprived. Social and economic dependence on men is the norm for poor women. Most of the women are confined to the homestead and the area immediately surrounding it and their contacts with the world outside of the family are extremely limited. Their isolation constrains their potential to generate income and makes it difficult for them to take advantage of any economic activities unless the services are brought to their doorsteps.

The attempts of Grameen Bank to reach poor women with credit is exceptional in the current modality of operation of other banks and financial institutions which require collateral against loan that the women would never be able to provide except through their hus-

bands. Grameen Bank maintains that if the rural poor are provided credit on reasonable terms, they can judge for themselves how best to increase their income and need only the inputs that they can purchase themselves. Based on this principle, Grameen Bank creates the social and financial conditions to enable credit by identifying a source of self-employment. As days go by, landless poor women are coming forward in large numbers to take loans from the Grameen Bank and are engaging themselves in income earning activities. About 90 per cent of the Grameen Bank loanees are women and they received nearly half of the current loans issued by the Bank.

Grameen Bank generated new employment for women increasing their participation rate in the labor force in the area of operation. As a result, the financial viability among the women borrowers has increased their consciousness and in turn, elevated their position in the family and society. Credit is changing their lives and giving them the opportunity to solve the problem of poverty in whatever small way they can. Women's dependency on male members is decreasing and a new relationship pattern is emerging, in households and in society as they are becoming earning members. Today Grameen women borrowers and other landless women of Grameen Bank are not only gaining economic independence but also emerging as a social force to fight away prejudices and obstacles.

The women's movement in Bangladesh has focused on the issue of poor women and a great deal of energy has been generated in addressing some of their problems. Government and Non-Government Organizations have already prepared to support programmes for poor women, thereby, creating an "economic" and "social" space for innovation and boldness of action. However, the poor do not divide their lives into the purely "economic" or "social" or "credit". The overall problem of the poor women should be responded to the basic needs of the poor and other inter-related social issues.

Richer in output than the entire Baltic States put together, the republic occupies a strategic location on the main trade artery of the Volga river. Its potential secession would have left Moscow and the rest of European Russia cut off from the resources of the Russian Far East.

More significantly still, in 1992/93 it seemed likely that where Tatarstan went, other republics would follow. Tatarstan is one of the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSRs) created by Lenin in the 1920s. Their continued presence within Russia is essential to the survival of the CIS.

The ASSRs of Chechnya and Bashkortostan followed directly on Tatarstan's heels when the republic pushed through plans to issue local currencies and levy their own taxes.

Today only Chechnya is fighting the war of independence with Moscow. Tatarstan's recent silence has weighted down other independence movement which once looked for Tatarstan to lead the way. The rouble is still the official currency. Apathy has resulted from the squabbling of local nationalist groups, uncertain of their goals.

The Sovereignty Committee, created to fight for independence, seems doomed to failure. It demanded Russian government recognition of the already defunct Sovereignty Declaration.

The most basic claims of the Sovereignty Committee have not been fulfilled", claims Nasim Faleyev, assistant to the head of the Sovereignty Committee and a poet. But he is uncertain of what his group wants for Tatarstan.

"We don't want a war like that in Chechnya," he asserts. "Our aims are more than just nationalistic."

What those aims are, he cannot convincingly explain. They seem to have something to do with culture and poetry and the first edition of the Committee's own magazine, in which Faleyev's poems figure prominently.

Faleyev prefers to talk about love: "We want to show our love for our own people, not to hurt others as they do in Chechnya."

Perhaps the Tatars are just too nice to achieve the independence they once craved, for a few years at least. When other republics were being torn apart by bloody riots and mass demonstrations, all Tatarstan produced was a few minor scuffles and a torn Russian flag. They were able once to take advantage of the Russian political situation to declare their sovereignty but since that has been superseded it seems they will not try again.

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result was the independent Bangladesh. Having done so in the political freedom, in fact — struggle in the past, it's time they decide whether to keep on playing such roles as "really" necessary or desirable, at all.

While, reportedly, some teachers too much involved in their consultancy jobs, outside the classrooms, have hardly anytime for devoted teaching, VC Emajuddin Ahmed said: "I can tell you, the teaching staff is one of the best in the region. We are fully capable of not only teaching but also carrying out various research work within the institution."

Professor Ahmed further said: "The political parties, of course, can rid the University of violence only if they agree not to use the students for the interest of the parties. Moreover, we have to create enough employment opportunities for the students who come out of the university."

Well now, if the VC is correct about the teachers' ability (or is it capability?), why then, the passing-out students are getting less priority by the employers than those who carry foreign-university certificates?

It is like this: if a person holds a certificate from any western-country university — or even from India — he or she will get instant employment here in Bangladesh, topping a DU-educated boy or girl, no matter how sharp and able he or she is. There may be exceptions, and even controversies, but it is the prevailing situation, according to many unemployed educated youths, of the job market.

Why — if true — is this happening? Are the home-educated people too dull to compete with those who come from abroad? Is the curriculum a 'misfit' to meet present-day needs? Are the teachers really indulging themselves in matters other than sincere teaching? Or, are the political leaders, like in the past when they were student leaders, think there's another war to be fought, other than poverty-eradication?

Well, may be the DUCSU — which was elected in June '90 — and the speakers at the DUCSU reunion (that's how United News of Bangladesh coined the 75th anniversary) know the answers better. Any suggestion from the people affected by DU anomalies will be unheard. After all, it is "they" who with their high-sounding speeches pledged to bring back Dhaka University's past image and face the challenge of the 21st century.

Do they really want so, deep down their hearts?