

To the Home Minister

The main bone stuck in the government's gullet has been its failure to come to grips with the utterly untenable situation at the universities. The reason for this was the Awami League's student front — is a party to the undesirable armed confrontationist position in all the universities. To be seen to be fair, an essential prerequisite for effectiveness in a situation of lies and confusion, the government should have gone very resolutely after the armed elements of BCL so that they could catch the others as well. In this the government has been failing from the beginning in spite of repeated counsel, specially by The Daily Star.

The initial progress, made up of unremitting labour and boundless funds of tolerance and wisdom — all of it stands to be wrecked by one incredible act of sheer criminality, highhandedness and foolishness rolled into one. An Awami Jibbo League leader was nabbed with an accomplice in the small honours of yesterday at Narayanganj while trying to steal a whole consignment of garments heading for export. The suspected culprit was free within hours. Thanks to a telephonic call from an MP. Not only that, he was allowed to go away with his pal and the microbus with which he intended to take away the garments — and any trace of his being arrested redhanded and on specific charge was wiped clean.

We address it straight to the Home Minister — the alleged culprit must be put back into *hajat* and regular criminal proceedings started against him and his gang within the minimum possible time — say 24 hours. And, two, which is no less important, it must be made known to the public as to who the telephone call came from — who of the valiant AL MPs had this criminal idea of tampering with law flouting so flagrantly the party position on the point, stressed so many times by the Prime Minister herself.

Let not the proposed expedition led by Sheikh Hasina in search of accountable governance and development — a livable society in short, founder on such an absurdly small yet inordinately harmful boulder. We want to be assured that there is a Home Minister in the country and every act of crime doesn't need the PM's intervention.

Mad Rush to Sectt

National secretariat has been evocative of some very picturesque and weighty names like being the 'seat,' 'hub' or 'nerve-centre' of government. Thanks to the concentration of authorities in one labyrinthine work-house, the ministers and mandarins who sit there for a specified number of hours per week should have no time for distractions. Leave aside the sole clearing-house status of the secretariat, what with the vocal chord exercised over 'decentralization,' it is the collective responsibility of the ministers, to the parliament that obliges them to account for an efficient time-management.

A report in a well-known Bangla daily got our hackles up yesterday. It stated that on Saturday and Sunday as many as 35,000 members of public gained entry to the secretariat on the strength of passes duly issued to them. It guessed there could be at least 5,000 more doing it unauthorisedly. The figure for authorised entries was quite verifiable. Given the number of ministries it seems well over 1000 swarmed into each block of offices, scrambled for meeting a minister or a state minister virtually keeping their private secretaries and PAs on tenterhooks all the time. As the ministers remained surrounded in their chambers by party or constituency loyalists, the high officials balked at the thought of discussing any important matter with the ministers besieged of their own volition.

Favour-seekers or persons on party errand can see a minister at his residence or at the party office or when he pays a visit to his constituency. And where follow-up is needed it can also be done without having to visit the secretariat. It is not that there is no laid down criterion or procedure for issuance of entry passes — both in terms of the time-limit and the purpose — of a visit. This will have to be strictly applied and a maximum number set for daily entries to any ministry. Then there are variegated public interest clearance activists like the issuance of NOCs for one, which clearly admit of being carried outside the secretariat building.

A Carte Blanche?

It is only natural that when a political cause is vindicated by public endorsement, those who had suffered fighting for it should be given an instant reprieve. From this sharp-angled point of view, we welcome the government decision to withdraw political cases filed during the democratic movement spanning July, 1994 to March, 1996. We are similarly supportive of the government's move to remit prison sentences in genuine cases of outright political victimisation.

Since the time-scale and the frame of reference are wide and rather loosely-knit, it should be obligatory on the part of the government to ensure that no criminal element finds a escape route through the waiver. If there were destroyers of public or private property like car-smashers, arsonists etc, they cannot be let off without a powerful deterring message drummed into their ears.

They better not be allowed to slip through any lenient interpretation of 'a democratic movement'. Should this happen, an extremely dangerous signal would be relayed to their ilk who might take advantage of any political agitation launched by an opposition party in the future to commit criminal offences resting assured that they could eventually go scot-free.

We would like the government to err on the side of caution rather than allow any criminal to stalk out in the name of political movement.

Oxford of the East : Living with a Myth

We have had lot of platitudinous talk; the need of the hour is some hard thinking followed by tough action.

THAT the University of Dhaka was known as Oxford of the East is an oft-repeated claim that has gained in currency only in recent years. I do not remember to have heard this even once during my four years at the University, or for many years since then. If my memory serves me right, people started repeating this myth — myth in the sense I find no support to this brash self-aggrandisement in any text of respectable origin — as the good name of the university was all but lost. No definite date can be assigned. The university has been slowly but steadily sinking as an institution soon after the independence of 47, but it took some years before the symptoms of decay became perceptible. The clearest manifestation of the process was the decline of the Halls of Residence.

The Chancellors in particular took considerable pride in the university, as it answered to their idea of a model university, created in the lonely suburban Ramna of those days, with choice teaching staff, a small and manageable student body, and with a refreshing emphasis on healthy corporate life realised through the idea of residence.

As one reads these speeches, one is transported to a world which is lost for ever. There is a faint suggestion of imperial patronage extended to the Musalmans of Eastern Bengal, timely reminders that the university has come into being as an expression of imperial con-

cession to this community in particular, a compensation for what it lost through the annulment of the partition of Bengal. The tone of some of these speeches suggest as if the university was the adopted child of the Raj, conceived and fashioned by its god-fathers in Britain. Oxford and Cambridge are invoked because of the structural likeness. As early as

yet making no bones about the distance that separated them from the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge.

The University, it is true, reaped to the full the benefits of its early organisation. Very early in its career, it earned an academic reputation which has remained its historic asset. The first quarter century of the university might be called the

in its complete decline, in its third, the brazen phase, that a claim — Oxford of the East — could be made brazenly, presumably with one's tongue in one's cheek.

On the seventy-fifth year of our premier university, an old boy who just had a glimpse of the glory of the university as it was fast fading, should not be too critical of his alma mater in her decay and decrepitude. Everybody knows that the university is in bad shape, and is passing through critical times. The community, the faculty and a section of the student body must each of them share the responsibility for the present ills of the university. The pity of the matter is that, despite all the ills, it is still the one institution of higher learning that has the potential to become a major university. It still draws some of the best talents of the country, both in its student body, and in the faculty. It had a very auspicious start, and it saw some halcyon days. This good fortune eluded all the other universities that followed.

Dhaka had at least a chance, in its first phase, to prove itself in the world of scholarship, others never had a chance, born in evil days and fallen in evil hands. If Dhaka can, through the intervention of providence, be saved from its manifold misfortunes, that should signal a good future for the entire system of higher education comprising the universities of Bangladesh. Dhaka, to my mind, is the mainspring of the complex machinery of the nation's higher education.

Let us not make any false claims on behalf of Dhaka University. Let us forget about Oxford of the East. Dhaka has some claim to excellence, and the tradition is not entirely lost. Much of it can be reclaimed, given the will and the right leadership. The Senate should itself set up a commission of inquiry, with the purpose of a thorough check-up of its present state of health. Next, it should indicate the measures to be adopted with the aim of making it academically viable. We have had lot of platitudinous talk; the need of the hour is some hard thinking followed by tough action.

PASSING CLOUDS

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

the Nathan Committee, there was some doubt as to the naming of the Halls. College was too close to Oxford and Cambridge, and without the traditions, the wealth, the autonomy that Oxford colleges enjoyed, the residential units could hardly and appropriately be named colleges. A false analogy had to be avoided. A compromise was found in the term Hall, which put the units on a much higher standing than the hostels, and

golden period of its life, the second quarter century, its silver period; and the third could be called by any one of the lesser metals, brass or lead as one might choose.

It never occurred to any one, during the golden period, to call the university by any name other than its own. It would be considered improper, even in bad taste. Nor was it necessary to decorate it with false plumes during the silver period. Only

Transit Facilities: Geo-Economics, Not Geo-Politics

by Muhammad Shahiduzzaman

economy philosophy

Such prospects have almost literally undone traditional notions of state boundaries standing out as the gospel symbol of sovereignty. This does not mean, however, that all borders may be left unchained. India as we realise, feels obsessed with a so-called Bangladeshi demographic spill-over, and continues to threaten the implementation of border wire-fencing despite a visibly round-the-clock vigil over all of the border belt. And yet again, India wants transit rights as much as we want similar reciprocity to let our trade flourish with Nepal and Bhutan. The latter are interested to operate across the Bay, through our ports if India allows it at all. These are to be treated with a positive mind-frame if global trends of geo-economics are to be respected.

A part of the answer lies with the bureaucrats and policy planners in both these states, but a lot of it still rests on the sensitivity of politicians in and out of power. Not least of all is

insurgent activities might consequently shrink when the focus shifts on economic incentives and may inspire those who may prefer to make an honest income rather than die and struggle for a cause that swings between patriotism and state subversion. Traditional notions of state security are now more illusive than ever before. They only serve the cause of the ethically illiterate puritanists. Whipped-up passions of patriotism and soberly-worked out conspiracy theories proclaiming the sell out of sovereignty on the issues of transit facilities to India via Bangladesh, may reach emotional heights and absurd levels of cynicism, refusing to see reason and a global shift in outlook. But it may not be a majority sentiment at all unless the ruling party fails to deliver the logic, rationale, and a clearly comparable global picture of transparency as far as mutuality in such arrangements are concerned. In order to kill vicious conspiracy theories, there

is no better means than to open up the vocal basis for combative debate and stimulating factual and futuristic-biased discussions through the television or even better, privatized television, free from the shackles of security-obsessed bureaucracy.

Transit facilities for goods and services between our two countries, including Nepal and Bhutan's access to our ports through Indian territory must be reciprocal, on same heights, and not linking the water question — which has been reasonably clarified. The Indians have finally reached the decency to concede on this civilized course of action. Hopefully, this psyche ought to prevail, for a lot of good things need to happen in future between our two geographically inseparable entities. Within our political culture, there are large segments that tend to play on the fragile, sensitive chord, trying to attribute imagined designs of self-inflicted Indian hegemony — consistently nurturing odd, primitive visions of conspiratorial water-transit sell-out equations, even when they have been cautiously delinked through a painfully long and extremely hazardous spell of patience. A partially fragmented political culture as ours, like most other democratic entities, must have to reach homogeneity to the level of political consensus on an issue as this which is as vital and survival-related as the question

is the set target of World Trade Organization based on the GATT formulate to eventually abolish tariff barriers and open up markets fully within the next two decades. Trade and transit are simultaneously emerging as mutually supportive sources of expansive global economic inter-dependence. With India, continuing to exist on our three frontiers, it is a geo-political compulsion for both to share transit in the spirit of geo-economics rather than traditional geo-strategic perceptions of security.

The next century is more likely to be the age of super-highways spanning across continents with massive road networks linking up the Pacific rim with the eastern shores of the Atlantic. Goods and traffic would flow not simply across oceans and by air but perhaps eventually across the super highways all the way from Southeast Asia, South Asia into Central Asia and the Middle East and onward to Europe and Africa and vice-versa. India and Bangladesh are an integral part of that global communications culture. Or should we deserve to be left out of such dynamism simply because some of us feel so insecure with the physical size and the economic power of a huge neighbour?

If you wish to be a reliable, noteworthy and stable partner in a global network of transit and trade, the first step is to

that would span over Singapore, Thailand, Burma, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and onwards across Europe to London. Denying transit to India or even any hypothetical Indian denial of transit to Nepal or Bhutan over Bangladesh into to the Bay will be a weird proposition in such circumstances of a communications revolution.

Indeed, our small size and geo-political limitations, imposed by the natural reality of being surrounded in all three sides by such a large neighbour, clearly makes it a strategic imperative to look for opportunities that would rather enable us to inspire and encourage our larger neighbour to develop and maintain dependence upon our territory for transit and all sorts of support facilities. Such dependence is, in fact, the best guarantee for our security, prosperity, an international respectability. The last thing that we should ever allow happening is to push and compare our neighbour to look out and evolve alternative modes of transit bypassing our territory and reducing us permanently into strategic insignificance and ignominy. Nothing is more humiliating in such circumstances than to be left out in the cold with no price to offer and no bargaining to be made. Self-denial of such nature when upheld in the name of patriotism is undoubtedly the greatest

Perhaps the timing for a positive endeavour has almost reached an optimum point with new governments on both ends and a generally favourable international climate. Pakistan's frustrations with India are not for us to share or approve. All we can do is set examples of positive thinking so that the Pakistanis can envy us, as much as they have always envied at our claims at half of the assets which they have taken away from us without the slightest regret. Indo-Bangladesh relations can now grow towards a stable climax as the doors are unlocked for greater human mobility, fairer trade, Bangladeshi investments and open boundaries with the Indian north-east, as transit leads to an eventual economic partnership and civilized accessibility. A lot will ultimately depend on how the Indian bureaucracy finally chooses to approach the de-linking of geo-economics and geo-politics.

The writer is Professor, Department of International Relation, University of Dhaka.

To the Editor...

Sinking of Caisson of 2nd Buriganga bridge: A clarification

strucion. It may be mentioned here that further construction of the staining wall of the Caisson by about another 12 feet will be carried out in the 1st week of December when the present water level comes down.

Thereafter further sinking will be carried out to bring the Caisson down to its desired safe founding level, after which other necessary construction will be taken up to complete the construction of the Caisson, substructure and super structure.

S M N Quayum
Director
The Engineers Limited

Appointments in banking

Sir, We are concerned about the new appointments on the boards of directors of different commercial banks. The reports published in different dailies mentioned names of persons who were not well-known for their honesty and integrity but still were appointed as directors and chairmen of different bank boards.

Although there were some renowned professionals which the authorities of the banking sector and Bangladesh Bank were supposed to know better. There has been mention of one

M. Lutfur Rahman Sarker appointed first as director of Rupali Bank and then as director BSB with the identification as an ex-officer of Bangladesh Bank which is not true. He has never been an officer of Bangladesh Bank. We wonder how and why such willful misidentification has occurred. In the interest of the national economy in general and the banking sector in particular, the appointments should have been much more meticulously thought over. There is yet time to reconsider and revise these appointments.

A Wahid
20, Baily Rd. Dhaka

BRAC's back

Sir, The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) is perhaps the leading NGO devoted to the cause of rural development and upliftment of the down-trodden and helpless majority of people living in rural Bangladesh. The founder director of BRAC, Mr. Fazlul Husain Abed has deservedly earned many laurels from the international community of donor countries for the development and upliftment work being done by BRAC in Bangladesh. The international donors have contributed generously in the coffers of BRAC which is also receiving substantial financial assistance from the Bangladesh government.

The other day I read a report that BRAC has launched a private housing finance company, mainly for the well-to-do middle-class people in Dhaka city, called Delta-BRAC Housing Finance Corporation Limited. I felt very disturbed, as it appeared to me that BRAC is deviating from the very goal for which it was created i.e. to help the poor villagers living in rural Bangladesh to improve their miserable life. It seems to me that the new venture is more profit-oriented and is designed to cater to the moneyed people who could afford to buy an apartment or house. This is not for which it was founded and for which the international donors and the tax payers of Bangladesh have contributed generously and con-

tinued to do so.

I would like BRAC to clarify the position why is it getting involved in a money-making venture to cater to the rich in Dhaka city whereas it should be in the villages of Bangladesh with the poor. It is worth noting that the new company will have an authorised capital of Tk 50 crores and a paid-up capital of Tk 10 crores. It will also initially raise Tk 2.5 crores by floating shares in the stock market. Another opportunity for a selected rich to make more money as the present performance of the stock market shows.

The association of a group of retired bureaucrats, who are now cosily ensconced in well-paid jobs with BRAC and insurance companies, would make it easy for the new company to gain favours from the government and donor countries. The system of employing bureaucrats into highly paid jobs after retirement is one way to corrupt the highly placed public servants as shown from the example of Japan. It seems we are also regrettable falling a victim to the same situation.

I have great admiration for BRAC and its founder director who founded the organisation for the rural poor of Bangladesh. It therefore worries me as to why BRAC is constructing a huge and posh building in Dhaka at Makhali for its office at a cost of crores of taka if its aim is to help the needy and the poor millions in the villages of Bangladesh. This money could

surely have been better used for the upliftment of the millions or rural peasants and the poor who are now being forced to abandon their hearts and homes and are streaming in thousands into the juggles of Dhaka to earn a pitiable living.

I am also worried to hear

rumours that the huge multi-story building next to BRAC's building in Makhali belongs to Mr. Abed's wife which makes me wonder where she got the money from to construct such a palatial building. I would request to clarify the position.

Like many people I believe

BRAC is doing a wonderful job. But it would help to know how much contribution it is receiving from foreign countries and the government of Bangladesh and for what purpose. So far there has not been any publication of the audited accounts of BRAC and any report on its activities as is legally required of any enterprise. After all we have a right to know what BRAC is doing. Even the World Bank has recently recommended greater transparency in the workings of the NGOs who number more than 900 in Bangladesh. BRAC will do a great service to uphold its noble name by publishing a detail report of its activities — the money it has received from foreign and our government for the same and how the money has been spent on various projects, how many senior retired government servants it has employed.

Many people say the NGOs have become a parallel gov-

ernment and is wasting too much money on the upkeep of its officers. I do not think it is true. However, I would like a clarification.

Lutful Quadir
Dhaka

Electing the VC

Sir, The election for VC-panel of the University of Dhaka is scheduled for September 25. Already half a dozen candidates are seeking support of the electorate comprising members of the Senate. But those who are jockeying for power seem to be interested only in capturing power. Till today no one has come out with a manifesto explaining vision for the future development of the university and the contemplated policies for raising the standard of education. Certainly the university which was once known as 'the Oxford of the East' should no longer be run by a Vice-Chancellor who is a mere time server. I would therefore appeal to the distinguished voters to kindly consider this point while casting their valuable votes.

Dr Nurul Momen
Retired Professor
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