Founder-Editor: Late S. M. Ali

Summit Outcome

Under the nuclear shadows, it is the re-commitment to the SAARC process that seems to be the net achievement of the Colombo summit. While we appreciate this renewal of the spirit of South Asian togetherness in trying circumstances we cannot fail to note the minimalist frame of mind SAARC has been working with in an ironic contrast to a maximalist set of aspirations held close to its heart otherwise.

Colombo stole global limelight for the very special reason that it offered a rendezvous for the two nuclear states in South Asia to respond to the need for an early defusion of tensions accentuated by their recent underground detonations. Hopes got duly re-kindled as the Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif met and immediately decided on foreign secretary-level talks deadlocked since last September. The resumed contact saw a hardening of positions and resulted in a failure centring around the menacing territorial dispute over Kashmir. As if to attest to the hard talk they have had their soldiers exchanged mortar and artillery fire killing 52 and wounding 100 on both sides. Still this should be regarded as a temporary setback, hopefully a last flicker of offensive worthy of being extinguished by a peaceable change of heart to resolve the question by talks and talks alone.

On the economic cooperation level we note with satisfaction that the summiteers have adopted a concrete approach to the question of conversion of SAPTA to SAFTA. An expert committee is to draft a comprehensive treaty for a free trade area incorporating safeguards for an equitable distribution of benefits among member-states, especially to smaller and least developed countries, including a mechanism to compensate for revenue losses. The text for the regulatory framework should be ready by 2001, the date the Male summit in 1997 had prematurely fixed for the free trade area to come into being. There will be a binding time-frame through for SAFTA. There is a carry-over of vision and unfinished agenda from one summit to another. For instance, the time-table for poverty eradication by 2002 AD seems destined to be protected. The biggest challenge before SAARC, therefore, is how to accelerate the pace of realisation of the collective goals.

What Lesson the Deluge?

On Wednesday a crack developed in the DND embankment. And by Thursday six other cracks were detected in it. Local people met the challenge by plugging the breaches with sand and earth bags and mounted a 24-hour vigil. The Water Development Board personnel subsequently lent a very helpful hand and Water Minister Abdur Razzaque was constantly visiting the area. If thoroughly breached DND could mean such a disaster for Narayanganj and Dhaka as never experienced in centuries.

In a 56,000-square-mile picture of man being beaten by the elements, here are people who beat the waters back, without cost. The experts have already pronounced the DND embankment safe for the time being.

While congratulating the DND-side people we have a feeling that perhaps the capital city is being spared the hell it could be with the breaching of the Dhaka protection dam.

Rajshahi is not as lucky. The protection dam has already been eroded substantially and Padma is threatening as if to change its course and flow over parts of the town. The WDB people are trying their best to stop Padma at the picnic spot.

The floods are not a curse, it is as wonderful a boon as nothing else possibly is. But its fury has to be somewhat muffled and losses lessened. That is why the presumptuous name of flood control is here. Well, what kind of control we are effecting on our floods? To save the DND dam a 300-crore protection wall was built. It has been vandalised at a dozen places and into total ineffectiveness. What is the fate of the incomplete Dhaka protection dam? How come Rajshahi is so threatened?

We understand that 'flood control' is not a yearto-year thing. The present government is about half way through its term and yet we haven't had even a whiff of what it is doing in this regard and according to what. Information gap is one thing that has distinguished it in all matters.

Domestic Barbarity

Like Sohag, the young boy rescued months back in a similar state, Hawa was on the verge of literally rotting to death when the same Human rights organisation rescued her from a posh flat in the city Friday last. It was difficult to look at the battered, bloody and bruised picture of the teenage girl notwithstanding the blur and distance of the newspaper. Both of her feet and some fingers have become gangrenous. Hairs from patches on her pate have disappeared as have some of her teeth, thanks to the fearful mixture of bestial instincts and demonic strength of Ms Farzana Laila, the pretty wife of a young businessman. None of the fictional characters known as epitome of cruelty would hold a candle to these fair monsters of real life who seem to have spread like pestilence in our society.

We are at a loss to figure out what might have triggered such barbarity in a civilised human being. The lass, for argument's sake, might have been all the lady of the house accused her of to be: an incorrigible wetter of bed, a moron who would not or could not do what she was told to or any demerit one could think of in a housemaid. But do that give the employer the carte blanche to physically torture somebody? The employers are almost never pleased with their domestic aids. In fact Ms. Laila in her nervous agitation after being caught napping by the members of human rights organisation, law enforcing agency and press gave away this mindset. Her counter-question to Ms. Khan, leader of the Human rights watch agency "would not you beat to reform somebody like her" shows how deep-seated and expansive the problem is. Unless avatars of cruelty like Mrs Parvez are dealt with severely by law, we will continue to hear of

suffering Sohags and Hawas. In this connection we would like to know what happened to the family at Shahidbag whose collective torture almost killed little Sohag and robbed the father in him forever.

Dhaka Sunday, August 2, 1998

Postponement of SAFTA

T is gratifying to see that the In view of the recurrent losses incurred by the smaller members of SAARC, there is now a proposal to-postpone architects of foreign trade the launching of SAFTA for ten years from its initially stipulated date of 2001. Why should Bangladesh waste so much time and effort in trying to meet the SAPTA conditionalities to export to India and Pakistan with so little success? Isn't it a complete waste of scarce resources for Bangladesh?

L policies of Bangladesh Government have slowly, but surely, realised that entering into the proposed South Asian Free Trade Arrangement ganised by Export Promotion (SAFTA) will spell an Bureau (EPB), Bangladesh, and economic disaster to the country. This has been the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade (IIFT), in Dhaka on July painfully realised by the policy makers through the years of 26th, the Commerce and Indusimplementation of the first tries Minister Mr. Tofael phase of the proposed economic Ahmed has blurted out some integration, that is, the South harsh truths Bangladesh's trade relations Asian Preferential Trade Arrangement (SAPTA). with India and Pakistan under the framework of SAPTA. These go to the heart of the problems faced by Bangladesh

Bangladesh has remained a persistent loser at a colossal rate (at an annual rate of over \$ 500 million) in the so-called preferential official trade with India. In view of the recurrent losses incurred by the smaller members of SAARC, there is now a proposal to postpone the launching of SAFTA for ten years from its initially stipulated date of 2001.

However, I have been forcefully arguing against Bangladesh's joining SAFTA over the last three years or so through various articles in this column as well as in the SAARC Chambers' seminar held in Dhaka last year. It seems seem to be the only one who has held out his neck against a committed official position on SAPTA and SAFTA. (Interested persons can read my articles in The Daily Star, on The South Asian Economic Community", May 19, 1997, "Bangladesh in SAPTA and SAFTA", April 13, 1997, " SAFTA: Need for Reassessment", January 13, 1997, and " Export-Led Growth and Regional Trading Bloc", December 22, 1996).

Tofael Ahmed's Statement In course of delivering a speech in a seminar jointly orcurrent trade deficits with India and Pakistan under SAPTA but also has started to rethink about the whole future of SAPTA and SAFTA.

> Some Comments on These Issues

about

in committing itself to partici-

The points he made are the

following: first, the "trade gap

between Bangladesh and India

has been about \$950 million in

1996-97 which has come down

to about \$600 million in 1997-

98". Second. " we will get

nothing.... if the requirement

of 40 % domestic value addi-

tion of exports is needed to get

duty-free access to India, Pak-

istan and Sri Lanka. ... SAARC

Committee of Participants

(COP) had failed to reach a con-

sensus on the value-addition is-

sue". Third, "it is really impos-

sible for us to form SAFTA if

other SAARC members do not

remove tariff and non-tariff

SAFTA when we are not fulfill-

(All these quotations are from

The Daily Star, July 27, 1998,

page-6). The Minister deserves

congratulations for being so

clearly indicate that the gov-

ernment is not only deeply con-

cerned about Bangladesh's re-

However, these points

outspoken on these issues.

ing the obligations of SAPTA

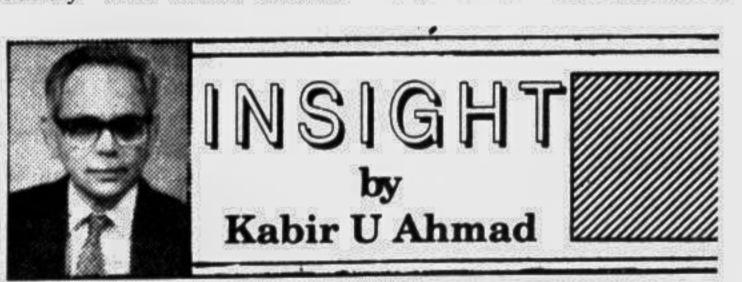
barriers. ... How can we go for

pate in SAFTA.

The points that the Minister has made are vital for the future pattern of trade and economic development of the country and hence deserve

the volume of smuggling with India reported in various local newspapers and takes the above figures as the constant yearly deficits, then the total annual deficits with India comes to over \$1 billion at a minimum. Such a colossal amount of annual deficits for more than a decade cannot simply be ignored as a temporary phenomenon. Something

fundamental is involved here. Second, the requirement of 40 per cent of value addition in



some comments. First, when he was talking about the trade gap. he was referring only to the official trade figures with India without mentioning the unofficial trade or smuggling. Hard data on smuggling are difficult to come by. But a study by the World Bank, "Trade Policy Reform for Improving the Incentive Regime", October 4, 1996, had shown that in 1994 there was a total cross-border import of goods of \$ 631 and export of about \$ 106 million leaving a deficit of \$525 million (page-8).

Even if one ignores the recent years' huge increase in export items to qualify for dutyfree access to India-Pakistan-Sri Lanka markets is simply impossible to meet. There is hardly an export item (except items like jute) which has 40 per cent value addition. Therefore. Bangladesh cannot export sufficient amount of manufactured or semi-manufactured products to India to eliminate the deficits. Such a colossal amount of trade deficit with India has become a chronic problem, which is a disease

rather than a healthy stimulus to, or an engine of, growth. On the other hand, whatever

manufactured (garments or

leather products which have about 25 per cent value addition) or semi-manufactured items Bangladesh is now producing have an easy export market abroad and have been earning substantial amount of foreign exchanges for the country. One should now ask oneself the questions: why should Bangladesh waste so much time and effort in trying to meet the SAPTA conditionalities to export to India and Pakistan with so little success? Isn't it a complete waste of scarce resources for Bangladesh?

Third, it is not the high nominal tariff rate that is blocking Bangladesh's exports to India, rather it is India's non-tariff barriers (local government's rules and regulations, officials' rejection of goods at the entry point on flimsy grounds etc.) that has become the major obstacle to Bangladesh's exports. It becomes a matter of long battle at the entry point with the officials. Ministerial negotiations on tariff cuts are irrelevant here. Further, former Prime Minister Dev Gouda's tariff cuts of 700 items for export to India has become a useless exercise because Bangladesh hardly produces those items.

Conclusions

Obstacles to Bangladesh's exports to India formidable. A friendly central government may reduce tariff substantially but the provincial government's myriad of

minor rules and regulations as well as the attitude of officials at the entry points of the ports become real hurdles to exports. Putting much less amount of effort, time and resources, Bangladeshi exporters are succeeding in entering the world

Why should the exporters break their heads against stone walls of the South Asian mar-

Finally, South Asia is a poor, slow growing region producing competitive goods and its demand for Bangladeshi products will be relatively small. It is therefore logical for Bangladeshi exporters to vigorously explore markets abroad especially in the high income regions of Europe and North America and the fast growing countries in all parts of the world.

Increase of exports to these countries will, in its turn, provide stimulus for faster internal growth in Bangladesh. The general trade strategy of Bangladesh should be to look outside rather than inside South Asia for export market It would be foolish to think that Bangladesh will be able to capture a significant portion of India's vast domestic market. It should, therefore, forget about SAFTA and have some limited interest in SAPTA as far as it has developed so far.

The future of Bangladesh lies in developing itself into a highly efficient, competitive and innovative manufacturing powerhouse for the outside world purchasing whatever raw material and semi-manufactured products are available from the region without antagonising the giant neighbour.

Will Colombo Declaration Improve Political and Economic Climate in SA?

shown reasonable degree of wisdom towards its development.

HE tenth summit confer-There are problems in the region in different ways, but the SAARC will move forward since leaders have ence of the seven South Asian countries ended in Sri Lankan capital Colombo by adopting the declaration which has been named ritualistically after the venue of the conference. The declaration will serve as the guideline for the South Asian Association for Regional matters. Cooperation (SAARC) till the next summit takes pla e in Kat-

mandu in the second half of The "Colombo" declaration emerged after several days of deliberations at different levels culminating at the summit by leaders of the seven members states. The thirteen-page document contains all the relevant areas - political, economic and social - that concern the SAARC, and the focus on the regional forum was much more this time on the political climate evidently for the fact that South Asia has become a flashpoint of international attention following nuclear explosions by two leading nations of

the region. While the forum is meant essentially to deal with economic and other issues that are linked with the overall welfare of the peoples of the region, this time the politico-military fallout of the new danger facing the region was the subject of discussions even though bilateral contentious political matters are not covered by the charter of the regional body. None of the South Asian leaders could afford to be Ostrich-like ignoring their stupendous bearing in the course of events. As such, the leaders in their speeches at the plenary mentioned of the new elements of danger that have been introduced in the region in the recent times and carried on this tenor of concern while talking at bilateral and infor-

mal levels. The "Colombo" declaration

mentions about this anxiety of the leaders while the document touches upon other vital fields like the trade, business, economic interactions and social

How far this declaration will work in improving the political climate in South Asia in the wake of sharp deterioration in the environment in the recent times? To what extent will the just-concluded summit lend economic benefits to the member nation and their peoples? Is the progress made so far by the SAARC since its inception in 1985 marks encouraging signal for the coming days? flas the Colombo conference given any definite indication that the ongoing cooperation in different areas is moving satisfactorily and holds good for further ex-

And finally, has the much talked-about summit succeeded in providing the much-needed stimulation to the SAARC that was required badly since the forum also needs cohesion and conviction of purpose rather than just providing a forum for

"meeting of leaders"? Certainly one can conclude with a large degree of confidence that the SAARC had a productive gathering in Colombo even though one can differ whether it has been successful in clearing the confusion and signs of dangers that have crept into the region during the interregnum of the Male summit and the Colombo summit. The summit itself took place under the lengthening shadow of dangers that stemmed from the nuclear detonation of India and Pakistan and consequenly, at one stage the very holding of the event had appeared to be somewhat uncertain within the

MATTERS ## AROUND US Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury

scheduled timeframe. When judged from that point of view, the SAARC leaders have shown wisdom by sticking to the staging of the event despite tensions in the area that also entailed on the personal security of the leaders. After all. host country Sri Lanka has been the site of an internal conflict for a long time and the Tamil terrorists there would obviously want that their presence must be felt through some form of disturbances particularly when they are known to be capable of undertaking dangerous missions dedicated by sui-

> cide bombers. In this context, the Sri Lankan government certainly deserves kudos for a smooth summit while the leaders of others countries can also derive satisfaction from the fact that they assisted a member nation convulsed with internal strife to stage the gathering.

> On the economic and other sides, the leaders have been pragmatic about the South Asian free trading area (SAFTA) which earlier seemed easy within a given timeframe which now appears more difficult than earlier because of manifold complexities. The summit has taken a realistic view of the issue and asked their governments to complete the regulatory works by 2001 so

that the proposal can take the shape effectively at later stage. The issue was certainly a key

matter for the leaders. However, the monitoring mechanism in the SAARC has to be more watchful so that the regulatory works related to the SAFTA are done as decided by the summit.

The leaders have discussed a variety of issues like poverty alleviation, progress of the South Asian Preferential Trading Arrangements (SAPTA), increasing people-to-people contact through easing travel restrictions and other measures, cooperation in the areas of communications, information, health, education, commerce and busi ness with private sector participation and several other areas including the environment.

It is known that resource constraint is a major handicap for the forum since it has several ambitious programmes. Poverty alleviation is the ma for area of SAARC activities but the resource here is too inade-

quate. The SAARC should intensify its efforts for effective financial links with different world organisations and forum like the European Union so that it could be economically assisted. The summit has mentioned about this link but follow up actions in this regard are necessary

now, the situation will be im-

possible and the plans will re-

main unrealisable dream for-

M A Haq 25/E Green Road, Dhaka 1205

New miseries of a new route

Sir. The Bangabandhu Jamuna Bridge has been inaugurated very recently which is the implementation of a dream of every citizen. But after travelling in the route of Dhaka-Rajshahi, it seemed to me that the bridge has multiplied our mis-

The fault is not with the roads of the route, especially the eastern part, are yet to be cause of the narrowness. In some places the roads are broken and totally unworthy of letting heavy buses and trucks to

Everybody travelling on the route will admit that it was much better to go by the previous route spending as much as three hours on the ferry. Before opening the bridge the government should have thought of making the roads smoother. request the authority concern either to take quicker step to construct the roads or postpone running vehicles by the route to avoid accidents.

Rokan Shahriar 120, S M Hall

which is often lacking in the fo-

In the political side, the leaders have stressed the need for informal consultations to ease tensions among member states. This is inextricably linked in letting the forum utilise its full potentials. This is particularly important as two principal members are always at loggerheads on their bilateral matters causing uneasiness in the functioning of the SAARC, which, however, cannot discuss bilateral matters. This has to be done sincerely so that SAARC can play its role in the constructive programmes linked to the welfare and benefits of the peoples. Tensions can always distract issues. India and Pakistan are known for

their rivalries for decades and this has compounded in recent times following their nuclear explosions. The SAARC at least has provided the opportunity for their first meeting since the tests in May last. Whether festering bilateral disputes are solved or not, it is with the two countries. Meeting during the SAARC conference — on the sidelines of the event — is SAARC's contribution.

The SAARC has made modest progress in many fields and its achievements are modest Against this background, the Colombo summit has been up to the expectations. SAARC will live so long this degree of cohesion and commitment are there. There are problems in the region in different ways, but the SAARC will move forward since leaders have shown reasonable degree of wisdom towards its development.

OPINION

Mr Siddiquer Rahman's ar-

"The Campus Revisited: Those Days" – A Postscript

M Gholam Mostafa

ticle "The Campus Revisited: Those Days" made a pleasant nostalgic reading. As one who was a student of Dhaka University in late fifties, experiences narrated by the writer touched the heart and renewed sentiments of those pleasant bygone days never to return in our twiight years. One feels like echoing Milton's "time the subtle thief of youth has stolen on its wings - "our golden years. The nostalgia becomes all the more poignant when one finds the present day academic atmosphere so world apart within a span of few decades. My youthful days in the hoary past appears only the other day at the great Alma Mater - details of memory so vivid. I feel, while passing through the verdant campus like a stranger. "a child from the womb and a ghost from the tomb." Any man mellowed in years always holds dear his values and sentiments. militates against new ones. One has to accept the change as a natural phenomenon. But when the change is for worse and in our case when it hits the rock bottom the nostalgia gives way

to deep sorrow and pain.

Mr Rahman succinctly

touched on our academic and extra-academic life style that we led which was many splendoured in its own way. I would only venture to add a few facts as it struck me. In the fifties, hall dining charges varied between 30 and 32 rapes a month. We were served 2 varieties of curry in small bowls - bhat and dal being generously free. Big eaters had the day. Our Fazlul Hug Hall (F H Hall) had a canteen beside the dining hall which served eggs, buttered toast and tea. Usual breakfast consisted of two buttered toast pieces, one egg - fried or omelette - followed by a cup of tea. Each item cost 2 annas those days — making it 8 annas in all (working out to 50 paisa by today's reckoning). Although the price may sound old grandma's tale to students of this generation, the more unbelievable part of the story is - even 60 per cent of hall residents did not afford the luxury of the said breakfast. Most would make do with beaten rice (chira) and wet gram (chhola) in the morning. Although this did not give the relish of the canteen catered break-fast the 'cereal' sustained a majority of us. Borrowing a few rupees was not unusual but it was only resorted to on pain of stark starvation. A large

number of families who sent their children to Dhaka University from different parts of the province could hardly afford to send their wards even 80 rupees a month - which by today's standard of living is simply unbelievable. Some of the students supplemented the paltry sum by coaching boys of schools and colleges skipping their valuable study hours.

Issues of national import were discussed and debated on but politics in its present connotation took its back seat. Summum bonum of life revolved mostly round appearing in the Central Superior Services exam and qualifying for Civil Service of Pakistan (CSP). Since proficiency in written and spoken English was a deciding factor of success in the said examination llack of it proved Achilles' heel) everybody aspiring for it let sip no opportunity to hone the skill in and out of place. Many of us came from mofussil areas where Bengali was the medium of instruction. This drawback ate into us and we struggled to speak in English whenever situation so demanded. Oftener than not, the exercise left us exhausted but it had its salutary

impact. Simple living and high thinking was none of our option—financial crunch thrust it upon us. A few among us had the enviable luxury of donning more than two shirts and two trousers. Still fewer were lucky who wore complete suits come as they did from affluent fami-

From the sixties onward this generation of students adorned top positions of country's bureaucracy and politics and were at the helm of affairs. Many of them made their mark nationally and internationally by dint of their talent and industry. Although to these brilliant sons of soil poverty, its pain and genesis, was not altogether a stranger, it is indeed a sad commentary that few remembered their roots, fewer still owned their genealogy, amassed huge wealth abusing power they wielded. As a consequence, the poor countrymen, whom they were intended to serve, continued to wallow in deprivation and misery even after many decades and through changes of various shades of government. That is, however, another

painful story.
The writer an Advocate, is Retd First Secy., National Board of Revenue

We want justice

Sir. The tacit approval accorded by other dailies to the police of their 'interrogation method' is appalling. I refer to an English daily editorial on July 26 under the heading Police As Killers where it was written: I "We also understand that the police at times have to take recourse to stringent and painful methods during inter-

rogation" The fundamental tenant of our legal system is that every person should be presumed innocent unless proven guilty. Bodily harm to a person by any person is a punishable act under the penal codes. It also infringes one's human right to live in a society free of fear and oppression. Nobody has the right to torture anybody physically be it in the name of inter-

rogation or whatever. When the newspapers are with stories of people dying in police custody, this kind of comment in an esteemed daily

is truly regrettable. I offer my heartfelt sympathy to Rubel's parents and other relatives. I also demand that the allegedkillers are brought to justice immediately.

Shahed Morshed Khan NS University Kamal Ataturk Avenue, Dhaka

Stop police brutality

Sir. Some ten years ago a British tourist girl's mauled body was found in a Kenyan bush. Foul was suspected, but the authority there, partly wanting to maintain a safe image of the tourist spots and partly wanting to protect the killers messed up the prosecution process, which resulted in people charged with the murder going free. The girl's father. however, had money, and thankfully, some grid and buldogish doggedness, synonym with British character. What followed then was one man's crusade to bring the real killer of his daughter to justice. He sent his own investigating teams, gathered evidences and witnesses and kept mounting pressures on authorities. Those who watch BBC news would know that a new prosecution has started in a Kenyan court recently opening it up as a murder case.

Whether justice will be done this time is another matter. The systems entrusted to dispense justice and maintain order in the societies, both here and in Kenya, are at best reminiscent of the hotchpotch of the systems left over by the colonial masters, if not jokes at other time. Money and power tilt the balance of the scale oddly against the poor and the oppressed. But most of all life is

cheap in Third World countries. Otherwise we could not have let war criminals go scot-free. without a trial, after the genocide in 1971. Our passivity and sense of nonchalance when fellow men's lives are brutally and unjustifiably taken away. speaks only of low self-esteem we have for ourselves; or the grim fact that there are too

many of us for our own comfort. This could not have been true for Rubel. For he was one of the few: to be good at what he was supposed to do at his age namely, study - and to be young and therefore to hold promise for his parents and for the society. I value lives of princes' and paupers' equally. But this life, I understand, was better because this was so much like my son's

and mine. I urge all parents of this country to mobilise opinion

and come forward, firstly in condemning this death and importantly to do everything in their means not only to secure justice but also to ensure that this never happens to anybody

Faisal Ahsanullah Khan House 16, Road 87 Gulshan, Dhaka

BJMB and domestic tourism

very short experience of the great bridge I venture to give some suggestions to the authorities that be.

that there are good plans to de-

velop the area of the bridge

From press reports we learn

vicinity into tourist spots. It is good as far as the plan goes. But for immediate, especially to save the land from encroachers and squatters, some make-shift arrangement can be made to facilitate domestic tourism. Some are: 1) Construct temporary

sheds with CI sheets and put in some long benches and stools with arrangement for simple and low cost snacks like water. tea and biscuit etc., for the rural visitors (and others who would not mind) visiting in thousands

2) Run shuttle buses across the bridge which will drive through the slow lane. Fares should be minimum to encourage people in using those. 3) There is said to be a shuttle train running between the east

and the west stations. Reduce the fare and increase the frequency After these measures, ban

the pedestrians on the bridge. If something is not done

University of Dhaka.

Sir. Having a first-hand but

bridge, rather it is with the roads of the route. Different constructed. They are embarrassingly narrow. Sometimes there is traffic congestion be-