


# Alternatives

In collaboration with  centre for alternatives

## Let There Be Light

From the *Alternatives* Desk

LET me begin with an apology. When the Centre for Alternatives decided to take up the issue of "Deteriorating the Campus," it did set its agenda with two things in mind. One, not to limit the discussion to Dhaka University. That is, the campus situation of other Universities would be a subject of discussion as well.

And two, not to limit the discussion to past and present ill-experiences but to figure out ways to "deteriorate" the campus for good! It seems that we have failed miserably in the first, while succeeded only partially on the latter. There are good reasons for this, however.

Few will deny the fact that it is after all Dhaka University that matters most. If Dhaka University can manage things efficiently and that again, peacefully, other Universities will have no problems in doing so. The converse, however, may not be true. Indeed, as it is being increasingly witnessed, some small Universities, including one or two private ones, are run quite efficiently and in the midst of an almost total absence of violence and strikes. But then, how much weight do these little Universities have in organizing and reproducing higher education in Bangladesh? So far very negligible, indeed. And this somewhat strongly justified making Dhaka University the focal point of our discussion.

Despite our best efforts, some discussion on the past and present ill-experiences could not be helped. If it reflects certain elements of a pseudo-scientific method, one that is best reflected in the poetic lines of T.S. Eliot that — Time present and time past/ Are both perhaps contained in time future/And time future contained in time past — it also carries with it the rudiments of a polarized civil society, where an individual wastes no time in getting at another individual on grounds of self-righteousness and group politics. This, however, does not cancel the merit of an argument, and it is in this spirit that positions and prescriptions of various individuals here ought to be viewed.

A plethora of ideas has been put forward to make campus tranquil and safe. Where should one begin then? Let me highlight the urgent tasks in each of the three areas that has been referred to in the "workshop report." Firstly, in so far as Government-Dhaka University relationship is concerned, the urgent task is to de-governmentalize the University by way of reducing the latter's (financial) dependence on the government. A committee consisting of "group" and "non-group" members need to be established on an urgent basis to look into ways and means of achieving financial autonomy for the University and that again, within a reasonable timeframe in mind.

Secondly, teachers' involvement in the management of the University needs to be reinvented. Again, a committee, consisting of partisan and non-partisan members, needs to be constituted to look into the matter. The committee could begin its task by meeting the Chancellor and getting some ideas from him on this.

Lastly, in so far as student politics is concerned, it is important at this stage to concentrate on the following three activities. One, reforming DUCSU and on that, initiating serious discussions with student organizations, non-partisan students and both partisan and non-partisan teachers. At the end, a "referendum" may be organized on the various suggestions. Two, dialoguing with both governmental and non-governmental agencies for part-time jobs for the students both within and outside the campus. And three, introducing new types of recreational activities, ranging from amusement centers to the running of slow music in the afternoon in the corridors of the various faculties to displaying movies regularly in the evening at the TSC. And in so far as evening recreation goes, one thing must be ensured and that is, the TSC must be heavily lighted after sunset. Only light can overcome darkness!



Student Union activists demonstrating against terrorism.

— Star file photo

## Campus Violence: Whose Baby?

by A K Monaw-war Uddin Ahmad

Who is responsible for campus violence? What are the immediate and underlying factors that should be accounted for terrorism in the academic institutions? What are the possible ways and means to bring an end to this devastating situation in the campus? Who will bell the cat?

IN Bangladesh no other phenomenon has bewildered us more than pondering over causes and remedies of campus violence. While the origin of campus violence can be traced back to Pakistani days, the armed terrorism in the academic institutions is an episode of post-independence era. The cost due to campus violence measured in terms of lives lost, working hours wasted, lack of sense of security and deterioration in the quality of education etc., has been enormous.

In this context, certain questions may be raised: Who is responsible for campus violence? What are the immediate and underlying factors that should be accounted for terrorism in the academic institutions? What are the possible ways and means to bring an end to this devastating situation in the campus? Who will bell the cat? These are formidable questions and obviously there is no simple answer to them. A crucial distinction must be made between immediate and underlying parameters responsible for terrorism in the academic institutions.

The easily identifiable immediate factors accounting for terrorism are student parties and their armed wings. In the post independence era the rival student parties in order to show their physical strength and demonstrate their hold over the University affairs started illegally occupying seats in the residential halls by muscle power. This physical clash ultimately proliferated in the academic buildings of the University. Soon the student parties found it not only convenient but also very profitable to maintain

armed wings of their own to establish their brutal power in the residential halls as well as in other buildings of the University.

The armed wings of different student parties flourished in the campus on the moral and material support of the respective student parties. The armed cadres are engaged in collecting tolls not only from the tender distribution of the University but also from hotels, shops and other business centres of the greater metropolitan area. The armed wings of the student parties were built over time through a selection of not only internal members from within the University but also that of many professional outsiders. The cadres are involved in crimes like murder, kidnap and rape in the campus as well as in the city. There is no doubt in our mind that the student parties and their armed wings are directly responsible for the violence in the campus.

However, the underlying factor emanates from our national politics. It is well-known that the mainstream political parties of Bangladesh maintain their own student wings. These parties are largely dependent on their student wings for promoting their own narrow political interests. The student parties in this country have flourished on the moral and material support of their respective political parties. The student organisations play a dominant role in the day to day affairs of the University. The student leaders have direct links not only with the University administration but also with the leaders of the political parties and the gov-

ernment. The political leaders trade with the student leaders.

It can be argued that it is the political parties who are the guardians of student parties and, therefore, ultimately responsible for the activities of student organisations and their armed wings. Consequently, the real source of strength of the armed wings of the student organisations are the political parties. The law enforcing agency, i.e. police have consistently taken the side of the ruling party. Their role has been only an eye wash. But that is not all.

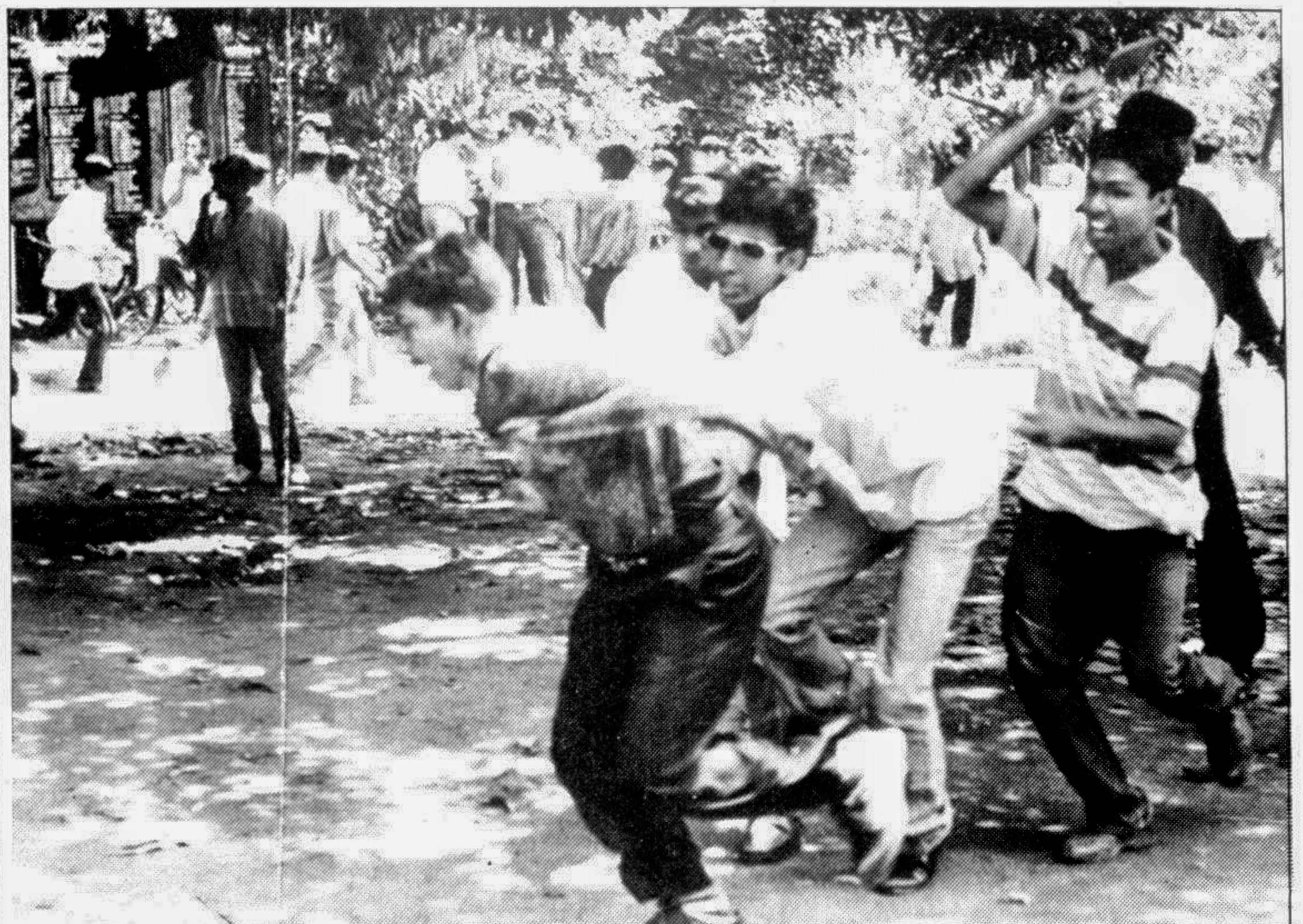
The teachers of higher academic institutions and universities are divided into different groups. The group-based politics has thrived on clearly identified political party lines. The elections of different bodies of the University are held on party lines of our national politics. The constitutional autonomy containing the provision for elections to key bodies and administrative posts of the University has divided the teachers into colour groups. This scenario is viewed negatively by the general students.

The general teachers and students are largely non-political in their attitude. However, they have been rather silent spectators of the deteriorating campus situation. In many cases the decisions at the academic institutions are taken on political consideration rather than academic. The general teachers and students have also failed to perform their historic duties by not resisting the sinister political designs of the colour groups, student parties as well as political parties.

In the light of the above discussion, I would like to recommend the following measures for curbing campus violence.

1. All political parties, i.e. both the ruling and opposition parties must dismantle their student fronts once and for all.
2. The armed wings of student parties must also go along with them.
3. The Hall unions and central student's Union must concentrate on literary activities, sports, debates and other student welfare oriented works.
4. The University Order must be reformed by reducing the number of elections to the minimum.
5. The Chancellor at his own discretion should appoint the vice-chancellor.
6. The old idea of a residential University must be given up. There should be more than one campus of the University.
7. The present proctorial rules, which incidentally do not recognise any student parties in the campus, should be strictly followed.
8. The service rules of the teachers elaborately outlined in the University Statutes should be strictly applied.
9. The highest executive body of the University, i.e. the Syndicate must have representation of the guardians of students.
10. Finally, there should be a separate chancellor's secretariat so that the honourable president can give effective supervision to University.

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Bloody clash between BCL and JCD activists.

— Star file photo

## The VC Speaks:

### "There is no Terrorism in the Campus..."

by Alternatives Correspondents

Professor Azad did not agree with the team's suggestion that the present tranquillity may be due to a balance of terror situation prevailing in the campus. Instead he opined that a fundamental change has taken place in the psyche of the general students. They are determined to resist the terrorists and terrorism in all its forms.

PROFESSOR A K Azad Chowdhury, the Vice-Chancellor of Dhaka University unveiled his plans of a safe and tranquil campus to the Alternatives team in an exclusive interview on 7 August 1998. The VC appeared most relaxed and open to suggestions, as he responded to the various queries of the team. Following are the excerpts of the interview, which the team has attempted to arrange thematically for its readers.

**Campus Terrorism:** The VC reacted very sharply to our suggestion that terrorism prevails in the campus. He strongly felt that the term 'campus terrorism' has been over used, inappropriately, inaccurately and irrationally used. He observed that the restiveness and restlessness prevailing in the campus should not be equated with terrorism; rather the situation is one of restiveness and over reaction. In this context he urged upon the people to take into account the age factor of the students and described it as a case of restless adolescence. But the VC did agree that there might be some unwanted persons, or troublemakers among the students, but he refused to categorise them as terrorists. He emphatically denied that there are terrorists living in the campus. He emphasised the fact that the campus is much more peaceful than the other areas of society and violent activities within the campus have calmed down significantly.

Professor Azad did not agree with the team's suggestion that the present tranquillity may be due to a balance of terror situation prevailing in the campus. Instead he opined that a fundamental change has taken place in the psyche of the general students. They are determined to resist the terrorists and terrorism in all its forms. He also attributed the present peace to the cooperation that he has received in this regard from all his colleagues, the law enforcing agencies, the student leaders of the political parties, the political parties themselves, and the government.

**Mastans:** In response to our query whether the VC has taken any steps to outwit or isolate the mastans, Professor Azad said that he has not taken any specific steps but felt that the mastans have been isolated due to the VC's policy. He said that the general students do not like them and as the VC of the university he keeps contacts with the regular students only. In the halls the provosts and house tutors check the rooms regularly and rooms are being allotted on merit basis. The VC also pointed out that he has placed a proposal with the Youth and Finance Ministry for providing summer jobs for the students. The plan is to involve the students in the administrative jobs of the university, barring the examination section. Any initiative in this regard on the part of the NGOs would also be welcomed.

**Dependency Syndrome:** The Alternatives team wanted to know whether it was due to Dhaka University's almost total dependence (94 per cent) on government funds that the administration repeatedly faced interference from the government. Professor Azad quite cat-

egorically pointed out that Dhaka University always enjoyed a special privileged position and full autonomy. There had been no interference on the part of the government in the administrative affairs irrespective of the political beliefs or ideologies of the vice chancellors. In this context he pointed out that there had been situations in the past where the VCs did not enjoy government's favour, yet Dhaka University continued to enjoy its full autonomy. This according to him might be due to one's love for the university as many of the bureaucrats and politicians is alumnus of this university, or due to the fear of political backlash that an interference might create. The VC however believed that in order to exercise its full autonomy the university needed to have its financial autonomy as well, so it should generate its own resources. In this regard he discussed his aspirations, expectations, plans, and frustrations in this endeavour, with the team.

**Development Plans:** Professor Azad envisioned that the university could involve itself in real estate business, build a private hospital of its own, create markets and shops. He pointed out that he had planned to build a super market at a place near New Market. The University could have earned a revenue of Taka 5 crore alone every year from rents out of this venture. The University needed to invest Taka 30 crore and the banks were willing to provide loans on soft terms. The VC pointed out that the loan could have been repaid out of the deposit money of the shops. But he failed in his plans as the land belonged to the Fine Arts Institute and the students and teachers of the institute opposed it for sentimental reasons.

The VC also emphasised the need for students' participation in this endeavour. In this context he pointed out the need to

increase the fees of the students. Elaborating on this he pointed out the cases of the western universities, even in India and Pakistan about 50-60 per cent university funds come through tuition fees, but in Bangladesh it is only 4-5 per cent. The rise he suggested is required to improve the teaching and research facilities, not for increasing teacher's salaries. He pointed out that he had been trying for the last two years to increase the fees, though apparently the rise seems very high if taken in percentage terms but in real terms it is not so. Then he had also suggested the introduction of an educational development fund of Taka 300 for a student. This, the student had to pay only once for a period of 4 years. But again the plan failed as the students could not be convinced. The VC regretted that there is stalling of his plans, and he did not rule out our suggestion that this might be due to political factors. On a positive note he however added that though the university had to reduce all the proposed increase in charges by almost 70 per cent yet they had been able to increase the tuition fees. This was a very unpopular decision and nobody ever dared it. He emphasised the fact that in order to improve the standard of the university the VC should have some kind of financial autonomy.

The VC hastened to add that he did not believe in the commercialisation of education. The Dhaka University belongs to the nation and it would continue to be so. But at the same time it was necessary for the students to make at least some kind of contribution in the development of the university. The university has an annual development fund of Taka 70-80 crore, and it is absurd to expect the government to pay this amount for 25000 students. He then posed the question, what the government would do for the rest of the students of this

country. **DUCSU Reforms:** The Alternatives team raised the issue of reforms in the structure and electoral process of DUCSU in view of the fact that most of the students are non-residential. The VC refused to give his own views on the issue given its sensitivity; instead he deliberated upon the various suggestions he received from time to time on the issue. According to him such suggestions could be divided into four types: (a) DUCSU elections should be regularly held and merit should be the basis for contesting such elections; (b) it is imperative to bring about structural reforms in the DUCSU by transforming it from the halls to the department. The best students of each class should be nominated for DUCSU positions and it ought to concern itself with student issues; (c) DUCSU has a historical responsibility to the nation and it should continue as before; and (d) given its present role there is no need for a DUCSU.

The VC pointed out that at present he does not envisage any change in the system, rather his main objective is to keep the academic activities going. The VC however responded positively to our suggestion on holding a 'referendum' amongst students and teachers on DUCSU reforms and added that he would not object to it if any institution or centre like the CA does it, but his administration could not hold it for obvious reasons.

**Cheer up DU Students!** The VC has promised a movie hall and an amusement centre for the DU students at the TSC premise on CA's request. The movie hall would run 'good movies' every evening at a subsidised rate and the amusement center would have computer games also at subsidised rates. The facilities would be exclusively for the DU students. Are we for a change then? We have the VC's word for it!



Police searching students' dormitory for arms.

— Star file photo