

Built-in Unsafety

It was a height of irony that a building in Dhaka should collapse killing two on the day following the World Habitat Day with Safe Cities as its theme for this year.

The Islamabad structure was but an apology of a building — a lime and brick powder thing almost jutting into the Buriganga. It stood on the flood waters all the while the deluge was there.

There must literally be hundreds of such structures, housing thousands of people in this overcrowded city. This is, by that known factor, a very unsafe city.

If houses and roads are unsafe can bridges remain as dependable as they should? It is reliably reported that at least three bailey bridges — or those steel structures thrown across rivers etc as an emergency matter, have developed cracks.

Unsafety, it seems, is being built into our houses and roads and bridges. This must stop.

Clinton Remains on Hook

Apparently insensate to converging world and US public opinions fatigued by the information surfeit on Clinton-Lewinsky scandal and the constitutional wrangles raging over it, the US House Judiciary Committee in a partisan vote has launched an open-ended impeachment inquiry against the US president.

It is interesting to note the incremental manner in which the House Judiciary Committee has seen the battle lines being drawn between the Republicans and the Democrats on the question of pressing ahead or setting at rest the controversy over the US President's conduct.

It would seem from the revelation of fresh details which Kenneth Starr allegedly deliberately screened out from the report he submitted before the Congress Judiciary Committee that there are countervailing points that Clinton's defence lawyers can vigorously stress in favour of the US President to place him in a better light.

Inform the People Also

Bangladesh is poised to submit a report on the status of its military hardware to the United Nations. Although it hardly smacks of any novelty since, over the years, this has been an internationally abided norm, with most, if not all, member states of the international body complying with it, the decision nevertheless reaffirms Bangladesh's commitment to UN's objectives in real terms and also, heralds a belated, slow but welcome dawning of maturity in its politics.

For long the authorities in Bangladesh have maintained an unnecessary veil about its military affairs. Even the most privileged citizens of the country have hardly any clue to the most common defence statistics of the country.

But to be a nation aspiring for a truly democratic culture we have to address issues like these. If an extremely security sensitive country like the US can provide information on its military hardware what stops us from being little more open and little less hushy with military affairs in this country?

Credit for Whom, When and How?

Only speeches and posters are not enough. Specific institutional arrangements are necessary to close the gap between what is said and what is done. It may be noted that in spite of mounting a combined effort of all concerned, the task is monumental.

thereof is the key issue. Will the combined efforts of all rural branches of government-owned banks located in flood affected areas be sufficient to accomplish the huge task? Has it ever been tried before — anything near around this massive scale? What has been the performance in the past? Can the capacity be increased within a short span of weeks, not months?

Credit should reach not only on time but should those who deserve it most should get it. How do we ensure this through bank managers and ad hoc committees supporting the selection of borrowers? Is the management infrastructure sufficiently geared to properly identify and disburse credit every day for 50 distribution days? How?

The answers to all the questions are in the negative. The notoriety of local banks is well known. As much as 40 per cent of the loans paid in the past throughout the banking system are long over due. In case of agricultural credit, the performance may be worse. Most likely those are considered to be grants rather than loans and in practice, the cost of credit to borrowers is too high if 20 per cent is deducted at the source as informal service charge or sim-

ply the bribe money. Therefore even if one is eager to pay back, it becomes too difficult, when the real rate of interest shoots up to over 40 per cent. It is foolish to assume that Bangladesh or for that matter any country, is full of saints but at the same time, there are scarcely few countries with so many crooks and criminals, in particular, on the rural credit front when government is too eager to off load

eight million families can never be reached on time nor the huge amount of 3250 crore Taka will be fully utilized. Most important, there will be leakage of funds, more so because of the required speed of distribution and among those who receive, many may not fully deserve the benefits.

The problem boils down to effective measures to make the post-flood rehabilitation plan

mately reaching the target group on time is the critical issue.

Let us all work together, win or lose doesn't matter — I think this should be the first principle of work. The devastation that we faced was a national calamity. It was not a calamity of, for or by the government. Therefore why government alone should bear all the responsibilities? Why the massive agricultural rehabilitation credit programme should be an exclusive government activity only. In addition to government-owned banks, other banks and NGOs with years of experience to deal with micro credit should be involved since they have the appropriate management infrastructure for the purpose.

For example, Grameen Bank's micro-credit programme now involves over 38,000 out of 68,000 villages of Bangladesh covering 2.3 million landless rural families. Around 51 per cent of these families have been badly affected by the flood. Also NGOs like BRAC, Proshikha and several others have developed effective micro-credit programmes entirely confined to landless poor households.

Thus if a part of the massive agricultural rehabilitation

loan is channeled through these organizations, the capacity to distribute and the effectiveness will be augmented. This is what is necessary at the moment and the credit will entirely go to the government. After all, these are government funds and the outcome of a bold government decision. The purpose is to reinforce the implementation capacity of the government. It can never be a question of competition. It is the complementary role of Grameen Bank which was set up by the government itself as well as other capable NGOs which may be taken into account since relief and rehabilitation is not the responsibility of the government alone. Any one who can should cooperate but the government may first create the opportunities to cooperate.

Only speeches and posters are not enough. Specific institutional arrangements are necessary to close the gap between what is said and what is done. It may be noted that in spite of mounting a combined effort of all concerned, the task is monumental. It may not be possible to complete the task on time; nor the benefits to reach all the intended beneficiaries. There may be leakage since corruption is so rampant in the country. Nonetheless, we must do our best and as Bangabandhu pronounced in 1971: "We must confront with whatever we have".



Window on Asia

Shahed Latif

tons of money within a short time.

The agonizing reality of devastated villages in the flood plains are entirely different from far away air conditioned meeting rooms where ambitious decisions are taken in comfort and with confidence. No doubt, starting with the Prime Minister, all the big wigs will visit some villages and find out that credit programme is going on smoothly. But it calls for no foresight to predict that

much more meaningful so that intended benefits are maximized. The credit money government plans to distribute is like transfusion of vital life-saving blood to millions of highly anemic patients who are all bleeding. No doubt, the highest authority of the government as well as top management personnel of the banks are fully aware of the predicament which itself gave rise to the bold and ambitious credit programme. However, ulti-

Why Do Serious Crimes Like Rape Occur in the Campus At All?

by Dr M Masum

Students being one of the most organized and vocal segments in the society, all political parties maintain their student wings in all campuses. The armed cadres of the student wing of the ruling party, backed by police, invariably turns out to be the most influential group, exercising tremendous power.

RAPES at Jahangirnagar University hit headlines during the last few weeks, and were a central topic of discussion virtually everywhere. Every segment of the society expressed its deepest concern. As a teacher of Jahangirnagar University for the last two decades, I also had to face a number of embarrassing questions, sometimes in the form of accusations, as if we as teachers were a party to it for failing in our duty. I deeply thought about the issue and decided to share my thoughts with others. The outcome is the present article.

Universities as the highest seats of learning are supposed to be centres of excellence. But are they really so in Bangladesh? Universities are institutions where students and teachers are supposed to be deeply engaged in studies, training and research respectively promoting and disseminating knowledge; but are they doing so? The answers are clearly no.

Simply because the system and the environment act more against than in favour of achieving the above lofty ideals. The 1973 University Act introduced democratic principles

in university administration in Bangladesh. The Vice Chancellor, Deans and Teacher-Members of the Syndicate, the highest decision making authority of the university, are now elected representatives from the respective bodies. Democracy as a principle may be good for governing a country, but in nourishing and administering a university as a centre of excellence can it serve any useful purpose? In my opinion, no. Because excellence and democracy are not mutually compatible. Democracy is the rule of the majority — and mediocres form the majority while excellence, by definition, is rare. The moment democracy is accepted as a principle of governing a university, the mediocres take over at the cost of the excellent and the university can no longer serve as a centre of excellence. Voters, not teachers, are recruited. So the quality of teachers suffers. Requirements for promotion to higher posts get diluted under pressure from mediocre

majority, allowing mediocres to move up the ladder to professorship and through the democratic process to the elected positions of Dean and Vice Chancellor. And what academic leadership can you expect from a non-academic Dean or Vice Chancellor? The Chairpersons and the Deans, responsible for running the academic programmes of the department and the faculty respectively can hardly be effective for fear of losing votes if they aspire to hold elected positions or intend to get re-elected.

The Vice Chancellors, especially those aspiring for a second term would never like to antagonize their electorates, and therefore no active interest in monitoring the academic programmes of the university. The electoral process keeps most teachers busy for a considerable period within an academic year which itself is quite short. As a result, classes

and examinations including tutorials are not held regularly. The students under no pressure for studies get involved in "more rewarding" non-academic pursuits including politics, hijacking, chandabaji and what not.

Students being one of the most organized and vocal segments in the society, all political parties maintain their student wings in all campuses. The armed cadres of the student wing of the ruling party, backed by police, invariably turns out to be the most influential group, exercising tremendous power.

They share the contractor's profit (allegedly brokered off by the Vice Chancellor himself) for construction activities that go on in the campus. They provide protection to the professional gang comprising students and employees of the university, engaged in leaking question papers during admission tests and thereby expand their armed cadre by legal

means i.e. through the prescribed admission procedure besides sharing the booty generated from such activities. The Vice Chancellor, already indebted to them for his own appointment to the current position (it is well known that from the three-member panel, the one, favoured by the student wing of the ruling party, is usually appointed Vice Chancellor by the government), suffers from strong disincentive in taking any punitive action against them even when adequate evidences are made available. Moreover, he wants to retain his position, hard-earned through sizeable investment in time, energy and money as active member/supporter of the ruling party during his entire career often at the cost of students in

terms of classes not taken. Given the above system of university governance the armed cadres of the student wing of the ruling party know fully well that they can indulge in any activity, however immoral or criminal may that be, with full immunity. The Vice Chancellor owes his position to them. He would retain his position so long they are pleased with him. They have direct access to the Education Minister, even the Prime Minister. They know fully well that the police are also at their service given the fact that the police assisted them in capturing the residential halls ousting the armed cadres of the student wing of the major opposition political party. They are not arrested by the police even while carrying illegal arms and even when charged with murder and other crimes. Under these circumstances, incidents like rapes at gun point are rather inevitable.

The writer is a Professor, Department of Economics, Jahangirnagar University.

OPINION What it Amounts to?

Sumon Mahmud

I am writing this note in the backdrop of the on-going protests of JU students against rape by some members of BCL JU unit. We, at Jahangirnagar University strongly condemn such heinous act and urge stern action against the culprits.

However, my point of writing this note is a theoretical one, precisely speaking, to put things into perspective. I have been wondering for quite some time now how people react to incidents such as rape? How our intellectuals have reacted to such incidents? What are the dominant expressions in these events?

Let me start with my own experience. As a student of Jahangirnagar University now a days, I'm often faced with questions like: "Hay! What's wrong with your University? Is it true that students have raped three girls? What was the time when the incidents occurred? Was it at night? Was the girl alone or with a friend? By the way, I hear the girl was at the swimming pool quite late at night. Is it correct?"

After having all these queries, comes the inevitable question, "Don't you have sunset rule in the campus?" Then suddenly remembering JU students having protested the imposition of sunset law, these curious people hurriedly come to a conclusion: "Oh boy! It was a great mistake to wave-off the rule. It could have ensured the security of the female students." Some even goes a step forward: "Had there been a sunset rule, the rapes wouldn't have occurred in the first place! Your authorities should reconsider it."

I have noticed that most of the times these inquisitive people don't even bother to listen to my arguments or pay heed to what I have to say. Rather they indulge themselves in their own remarks and statements like: "It's a shame... In our times these were not common things" And then remembering something of significance or simply being nostalgic they say: "Yes there were bad boys who used to tease female students, at best they would follow a girl on her way back home from the university, but never dared to... So, the outcome of all these analysis and remarks leads them to a conclusion: "See! What happens when girls get too much of freedom. Excess of anything is bad", they would say now.

A friend of mine recently told me that while he was having a chat with a reputed daily's editor; the editor sahib expressed his views on JU happenings in the following line: "Yes, rape is a seriously condemnable offence, the culprits should not go unpunished, but you cannot make an issue out of it... It is a matter of shame." Presumably the editor was reflecting on the ongoing protests and rallies against the incidents of rape, being simultane-

ously held at Dhaka and JU campuses.

Recently many of the eminent personalities of our society have also commented on the recent events of JU. In fact they all have expressed their utter disapproval about the fact that even the members of the best institutions, the highest pits of education in the country are not safe. They all have argued that the culprits responsible for these acts should be punished. But again many of them were quite modest in saying that rapists do not belong to any party. In saying this they have reiterated their concern not to characterise the on-going protests against rape as an anti-AL movement.

What is frustrating about all these is that on issues such as rape, our intellectual's opinion is invariably the same: "Yes, rape is a very sensitive issue, of course condemnable. But again they wouldn't see it as a national level problem. Rather they would try to define incidents such as rape as an isolated phenomenon, works of some people having psychic problems and the likes. Statements like, "rapists and terrorists cannot be members of any particular party" or they are the enemy of our society sounds a bit like that. True though that rapists are like enemies of a society but statements of these kinds does not overshadow the truth that a rapist or a terrorist don't become a rapist or terrorist out of his own in isolation. We all know how obviously he requires some sort of backing and shelter from the upper quarter of influential and powerful people. So why be so modest in isolating terrorists and rapists from their party affiliations. Why our intellectuals are so unassuming?"

It has become quite a fashion now-a-days to talk about and protest against incidents like rape. Whoever you ask, every one will agree with you that rape is a heinous crime, rapist should not go unpunished. They will even agree with you about enactment of new laws for rape victims. All said and done, they will indulge themselves in discussing about all these I have been saying so far, which amounts to nothing but a male way of thinking and evaluation of the problem. Scattered may it seem at first but only looking carefully at the remark can we realise how coherently same, invariable and also representative they are of masculine ways of thinking that it could be termed as male ideology. I don't know how long it will take to bring in change in our minds. But before that day comes I would like to conclude with an optimistic note. Let all of us start to realise the main issue of all these talk: Rape is not justifiable under any circumstance.

The writer is a student of Jahangirnagar University.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

An appeal

Sir, Situated on the Gangetic delta, Bangladesh, due to its geographical location, is prone to natural calamities. But this year's flood which lingered nearly eighty days left a disastrous effect on the country. Out of 64 districts, 52 were directly hit by floods affecting some 60 million people. The calamity shattered the fragile economy of country damaging severely the agricultural and the industrial sectors.

I, therefore on the behalf of my country, appeal to the world leaders, non-governmental and philanthropic organisations to come forward to help the distressed, many of whom are now passing days without adequate food, shelter and medical care.

Yasmin Sultana House No 47, Road No 3, Block-B, Section-12, Mirpur, Dhaka-1216

Cleanliness of roads and parks

Sir, At present the country is in a grave situation because of the devastating flood. The government is to engage all its efforts to cope with this situation. But along with all those activities relating to relief and rehabilitation, we expect that our cities and towns remain neat and clean. It seems that there is none to look after this aspect. Why are dustbins full of garbage overflowing? Why not the streets, lanes and by-lanes are cleaned nowadays except a few VIP roads?

Particularly, I would like to mention about the parks in Dhaka city. I am sorry to say that none of the small parks in this mega city (!) is taken care of. They look like garbage spots. Time will come when people will throw their wastes products in parks, because garbage bins are always full.

Are not some people in the Corporation responsible for cleaning and maintaining parks of the city? If so, why are they not carrying out their duties? Why should we pay taxes to DCC, if our outside environment remains so dirty and polluted? As citizens we can take care of places around our homes, but not the streets and parks. I draw the attention of the Mayor of Dhaka City Corporation to this aspect and request him to take necessary steps for the sake of health and hygienic environment. Dr Rowshan Jahan Banani, Dhaka

One person's wish?

Sir, We never heard of Mukul Begum's name before — only recently her name came up relating to Rubel's death.

We learned that she is a local leader of the Awami League, otherwise we certainly have heard her name, still it did not prevent AC Akram and his force to arrest Rubel and beat him mercilessly until he died.

AC Akram reportedly acted on her request to punish Rubel as she was feeling annoyed with his presence along with some of his friends in the street in front of her house.

It is just like medieval days, when a queen was displeased with someone and asked to chop off his head — it was done instantly.

Six-day fix

Sir, The DS editorial "Five-Day, Six-Day Fix", appearing in the 28 September issue is very gratifying. We are very grateful to the FBCCI for their clarion call for the resumption of six-day week. And we are very grateful to the DS for suggesting that this weekly holiday be on Sunday as it used to be some years ago. Among other cogent reasons, the DS have correctly pointed out that this would be "in keeping with international official and commercial practice, to facilitate contracts, transactions and operations."

As the Prime Minister of Pakistan took a bold step to realise this in his country, we earnestly request our Prime Minister, to take a decisive step to realise this in Bangladesh.

Md Razzak Sonadanga, Khulna

Military police and traffic control

Sir, I want to thank the members of the armed forces and those who took the decision to post military police in Mahakhali area. Knowing very well that this is not a permanent solution, at least it has given a big relief to people like us who have to cross this area several times a day. This has also exposed the inefficiency of our police force. Will the rank and files of our police force retain this lesson? Will they ensure that the standards set by the armed forces are maintained after they are with-

Right to smoke?

But from experience it does not seem so. The military will be withdrawn soon, and soon we will be back to the usual anarchic traffic, the shameless inefficiency, the damn-care corruption of the police. And this time possibly the intensity will be higher to cover the income losses of the past few weeks. I wish this lesson could create a social pressure — but possibly it will not. Don't we have any solution to these simple problems without being pushed or told by the donors?

Rashed Uthara, Dhaka

Pro-nuclear to anti-nuclear

Sir, I have seen many transformations over the years. But nothing could be as dramatic as changing from pro-nuclear to anti-nuclear. Commander Robert Green's write up "Nuclear Deterrence is a Dangerous Illusion" (DS 6-8-98) is a must-read item for all new nuclear trigger-happy nations.

Commander Green made detailed observations as to how nuclear devices were used, its gradual changes, the cold war, few real life examples as to how close nations were in using their nuclear weapons, using these for blackmailing purposes etc. What I liked about his article was the varied views he expressed upon this topic. Commander Green analysed this weapon of mass destruction from a humanitarian, military, diplomatic, scientific and technical point of view. His entire article kept on playing one particular note, and that is nuclear deterrence alone cannot deter nations from using their arsenal. As a matter of fact nuclear deterrence will encourage the use to a great extent.

Well, we have no conflict with the smokers but our concern is with youngsters and non-smokers. In order to protect the younger generation including the children and also the non-smokers from developing smoking habit we have to take some pragmatic measures. I think an international consensus is necessary to discourage people from smoking cigarettes or taking tobacco products.

The king, queen, president, prime minister, social and political leaders of different countries of the world can take a leading role in generating public opinion against smoking. President Bill Clinton has taken a bold initiative in passing a legislation to protect younger generation from the evil of smoking in the United States. The international leaders and personalities have to come forward with a concrete resolution to banish smoking. M Zahid Haque BAI, Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka-1207.

Clinton and conscience

Sir, I congratulate Kenneth Starr for presenting the best pornographic report of present time. I wonder whether the American law-makers thought of their children, particularly the daughter of the president who must have and will continue to

receive psychological trauma in every sphere of her life. Does American constitution give the right to the American law-makers to inflict injury upon the American children in particular and children of the world at large?

They should have thought of the consequence before allowing the Starr report to be published on the Internet. In American society, where "sex" is freely allowed and to which the law-makers are also not probably free from, should have given a serious thought before exposing the behaviour of the parents to their children.

M Haroon 208, Mahakhali Dhaka-1206.

Telecasting BBC and CNN programmes

Sir, Since the BTB has stopped telecasting BBC and CNN programmes, only a handful of rich and affluent persons who have costly dish antennas installed with their TV sets are viewing and enjoying BBC and CNN programmes, but most of the common people are deprived of many important news, views, comments and information of national and international affairs and they are kept in dark of day-to-day developments in the world.

We would request our Minister for Information to kindly order telecasting BBC and CNN programmes in view of great public demand and in the interest of public service. O. H. Kabir 6, Hare Street, Wart, Dhaka-1203.