

## DU's Dig at the Press

The Dhaka University Vice-Chancellor and Teachers' Association (DUTA) on Friday gave a bit of their minds to the press. The former castigated 'some newspapers' for their 'baseless and fabricated reports' on alleged sexual abuse of some female students by a couple of teachers. And the DUTA made it into a chorus condemning 'the malicious campaign' and asking all concerned to 'refrain' from it 'when an investigation into the allegations is in progress'; but, let's add it is an internal probe led by Professor Shahadat Ali.

So long as I am not criticised or my dirty lines are not washed in public I am a respecter of newspaper freedom marvelling at its wonderful merit and defending it to the hilt. But when it grills me, maybe in public interest, so what, I cannot help saying: 'curse be on your freedom.' That about sums up the dual attitude towards newspaper exposes. But for consistent media vigilance and reportage on sexual harassment on the campus, girl students who these days are coming forward with allegations of sexual exploitation would have been as reticent as before buckling under threats of black-mail. It can hardly be overstated that were it not for the mind-boggling exposes made of Jhangirnagar University orgies which generally sensitised people about indignities being committed upon our daughters and sisters, the DU female students who felt wronged might have preferred not to volunteer any information about the goings-on.

If newspapers had not reported extensively who would have known, for example, that the girl students had duly informed the authorities concerned about the gripping sexual perversity on the campus making a havoc with their lives? It is the newspapers' duty to place facts about such aberrant teacher or student behaviour under close public scrutiny and demand justice for the victims. So, report we must, comment we shall. All that is sought to be underscored is: please listen to the female students' complaints and respond adequately.

The tendency to blame others may be construed not only as blinkered self-righteousness but also as an attempt to cover up or shield misdeeds by a handful. If in the name of protecting image we allow the rot to continue, then will it not be a contradiction in terms, will it not be cutting the roots of the tree as we try the futility of sitting on its branches?

The public have the right to know. We urge the VC and DUTA not to stay focused on the wrong end of the issue.

## Firemen on Holiday

The damaged Titas Gas pipeline on the Turag riverbed is yet to be repaired and gas supply fully restored to parts of the city. The damage was detected last Tuesday when pressure in the pipeline fell appreciably and consumers in the western part of the city suddenly faced untold miseries. The supply position of gas has been fragile for sometime now due to short supply from sources compounded by additional consumption because of winter and Ramadan. The already unhappy situation was exacerbated by the damage in the pipeline at Mirpur. Though the damage has been detected by the Fire Brigade divers quite a while now no attempt could be made to plug the hole until Saturday as Titas Gas authorities apparently failed to impress upon the firemen the necessity for an urgent action.

According to press reports the Fire Brigade personnel refused to work on their weekly holidays and it now appears that they would not work before Sunday to repair the damage. Titas Gas authorities have also sought the help of Bangladesh Navy, now appears but nothing positive has come out so far. They are still discussing the matter with the Navy.

While the firemen enjoy their weekend and gas company finalises with the Navy, thousands of gas consumers suffer silently for months on end. The once-efficient gas company responsible for supply of pure natural gas to its customers has been showing signs of slip-ups. Why should they take so much time to do a job as essential as that? And in particular how can the firemen refuse to work on weekend in an emergency? Isn't Fire Department under essential services category? It seems that there is hardly any coordination or cooperation among various public organisations and there is a total lack of accountability too. If the public utility bodies like the gas company and Fire Brigade create problems instead of rendering services to the taxpayers then the people have a right to demand an early government intervention in the matter. Should we request the fire goddess not to visit us on weekends? What a pity!

## Deal At the Port

At last, there is light at the end of the tunnel for Chittagong port. After months of labour troubles, which threatened to paralyse the port from time to time, three unions representing dock workers and the port authority have signed an agreement that offers handsome incentives for enhanced productivity. The deal, if implemented with total sincerity by both parties, could lead to 25 per cent increase in workers' wages and 40 per cent increase in productivity. Now, given the importance of the port to national economic life, the agreement certainly comes as welcome relief.

However, it remains to be seen whether the agreement has the desired effect of establishing long-term productivity and efficiency at the port. Chittagong port is not known for its productivity even in best of times. Recent labour troubles had even threatened to force international shipping lines to blacklist Chittagong. In recent months, the unions, with active encouragement of local political leaders, have also been campaigning to thwart government plans to set up a container terminal in the private sector. Obviously, it would take an incorrigible optimist to expect the agreement to lead to better times.

The offer of incentives to enhance productivity is a sound management move. But much would depend on the sincerity of the union leaders to ensure that the agreement succeeds. The idea should be to free the port of all disruptive agitation, and turn it into the most productive and efficient port in the Southeast Asia region. At the same time, the government ought to press ahead with its plans to privatise port operations, because competition is the only guarantor of productivity.

# Congress Concentrating Power in Sonia

Just as power got concentrated in Indira Gandhi, it has happened so in the case of Sonia Gandhi. She is the one who nominated leaders of legislatures in Delhi, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. There was no meaningful election to find out who had the majority of members behind him or her. The AICC has authorised her to select persons for the party's bodies, whether in a state, district or city.

back not only the Muslims but also women (33 per cent reservations) and Dalits (20 per cent reservations) indicate that the party is seriously trying to rectify its mistake of alienating them. But if the party does not change its habit of playing court, it is bound to come a cropper once again. The AICC session has evoked the same old fears: the *durbari* atmosphere of sycophancy. Speaker after speaker sang Sonia Gandhi's praises. Not even once did she object to the adjectives they used. Flattery was the undoing of Indira Gandhi and her son, Rajiv Gandhi. Sonia Gandhi should know this.

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The AICC session has at least ended the ambiguity about who will be the Prime Minister if and when the party comes to power. It was argued earlier that because of her Italian background, she would nominate either Dr. Manmohan Singh or former Speaker PA Sangma. Now it is clear that she wants to be the Prime Minister. Madhya Pradesh chief minister Digvijay Singh has even set the year: 1999! Whatever message it may convey, humility is not the one.

INDIA suffers from a fallacy: its system is stable but its politics is not. The country is facing yet another mid-term poll. People are talking about the presidential form of government or having the fixed tenure of five years for the Lok Sabha. There is, however, no consensus. As for people, they do not want election, as a sample survey held recently has shown. They have had too many, three in the last three years.

Yet the situation, as it prevails today, leaves no other option. The working of government is like that of lame duck administration. The parliament session showed that it did not want to transact any business, betraying lack of confidence. But when Congress showed interest in the bills on Insurance and Patents, the BJP came alive. As many as four bills were introduced just a day before the end of the session.

After the reverses in the assembly elections on Delhi, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, the BJP, which leads the coalition at the Centre has lost credibility. Its allies have also begun to embarrass it by criticising the government openly. They see other possibilities also. It can be argued that the BJP has suffered because of coalition: the needs of government could not be reconciled to the demands by the allies on one hand and RSS, the BJP's mentor, on the other. Yet the fact remains that the Vajpayee government has failed to administer. Even the BJP members have pointed out its non-performance.

Since the bad governance

was the plank, which Congress adopted in the assembly elections, it believes it would reap more dividends if it were to push the fight further. The pressure is to do it sooner than later. Even the time for fresh elections is being fixed, some time before October next. The party does not want to wait because there are fears that the atmosphere may change to the disadvantage of Congress.

The argument is valid up to point — but only up to a point.

The vote in the assembly elections was not so much for Congress as was against the BJP.

There was no third choice before people. In the Lok Sabha elections, Congress will have to reckon with the non-BJP parties, which have the same secular, pro-minority and pro-backward appeal. In fact, the way in which they have hampered the BJP in the recent months has helped Congress in the assembly elections.

Congress has yet another problem. Four states — Bihar, Tamil Nadu, UP and West Bengal — which return some 200 MPs in the 545-member house, have strong regional parties.

Congress has no showing there so far. Assuming that the party is making some headway in Bihar and UP, as Congress president Sonia Gandhi has claimed at the AICC session in Delhi, the gain is not so much

as to convince anyone that the party will come to have an upper hand in the next 12 months.

It took three elections to dominate Congress in UP and Bihar. It may not take that much time to destroy Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party in UP and Laloo Prasad Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar. Still they are no pushovers. If at all, more than one election will be required for Congress to gain in UP and in Bihar, particularly the last where Laloo Prasad Yadav has won all the

state, district or city.

government had pushed her misdeeds to the background.

There was no other party to which people could turn. The emergence of Congress is primarily because of the BJP failure to govern.

True, the BJP did not pursue its agenda of building the Ram temple at the site where the Babri masjid stood once. But the party's image remains soiled, thanks to Human Resources Minister Murti Manohar Joshi on one hand and the alliance partner Bal Thakerey of the Shiv Sena on the other. Both have not allowed the BJP to live down its old image of purely communal outfit.

LK Advani, the hard-core, has done less harm to the party than Joshi, who has further alienated the Hindu intelligentsia and the minorities through his flats in the fields of education and culture. But he has beaten Advani in popularity with the RSS for his staunch Hindu stance. Joshi is, however, not to be blamed for commanding the patriotic song of *Vande Mataram*, even though the UP government withdrew the order. A *fatwa* by Muslim theologian Ali Mian, against the song smacked of fundamentalism, which looks like contaminating more and more Muslims.

The Congress moves to win

tour assembly bye-elections.

How can Congress get in outright majority if it wants to go it alone? Sonia Gandhi is reading too much in the victory in Delhi, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. Congress can go up to 200-220 from the 140 it has at present. Still it will need 60 or 70 more to have a majority in the house. On the one hand, it wants to cash in on the atmosphere and, on the other, it does not want to depend on any other party. The two are contradictory.

There is yet no polarisation in the country as Sonia

forgiven the demolition of the Babri masjid, which took place at the helm at the Centre.

The main advantage of

Congress is that there is no alternative to it. The BJP and the communist parties are strong in only certain states. In such a situation, the recovery of Congress is more negative than positive.

This happened in 1980 when Indira Gandhi returned to power. Although she had committed untold excesses during the emergency (1975-77), yet the non-performance of the Janata

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