



Bangladesh Air Express International Limited



PLEASE CONTACT:
Head Office Tel: 9565114, Logistics Office Tel: 9884851, Fax: (880-2) 9886531, E-mail: dac@aeilogis.com
Chittagong Office Tel: (031) 721085, Fax: (880-31) 710106, Internet: fedcp@spclnet.com.smtp.
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Midnight's children

Hartal or not, O Level candidates brave the night

By Navine Murshid

While most people were preparing for a good night's sleep, there were quite a few, preparing to get into action. Not the city muggers and thieves, nor the shoemaker's little helpers, but this year's O level candidates on January 26, 1999.

Human Biology at 1.30 a.m. and Pure mathematics at 4.30 a.m., the candidates could hardly imagine what befell upon them. Giving exams in the middle of the night or during hartal is not a new phenomenon in the Bangladeshi context. But this time it came as a shock because of its suddenness.

No one was prepared for this. But some students could certainly find comic relief even in the midst of tension.

"We did not expect it. We never imagined that we had to do maths at four o'clock in the morning. And this is an exam; in fact, it is our first serious exam. If there is any truth about morning showing the day, I don't think we can look forward to a very bright academic future," said a bubbly Maksuma Khatun, a private candidate.

Such dislocations have place once before, in January 1996. But when those exams were conducted during hartal or at midnight, the students were prepared for it. They had the opportunity to practice sitting for exams during the night. This time they were hardly prepared. They learnt only the previous day that their exams had been rescheduled for the next night.

It was like hell breaking lose for these people.

"I had such good preparations for Pure Maths, if I do badly..." trailed off Anami Karim of Scholastica.

Somaiya Shameem of South Breeze School was one of those ill-fated students who had to sit for four exams within the space of 20 hours. She had Human Biology, Pure Maths and then later Physics at three in the afternoon and Pure Maths II from 6.30 p.m. to 9 p.m. After her exams were done, she could hardly believe it.

"I was either in the car or trying to revise drowsily for the next exam or in the examination hall for the last 20 hours! I still can't imagine that the nightmare is over. I've been wide-awake from midnight. Now I can't sleep even if I



Unfazed by the night

While anxious mothers shiver in the dark, an O Level exam candidate laughs all the way to her ordeal

—Star Photo: Zahedul I Khan

wanted to!" Somaia said as she completed her marathon exam session on Wednesday.

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While the students waited by the gate, parents and guardians also felt a sense of pride.

"These students would possibly be better leaders than those we have, because they have the sincerity and ability to work hard and cross hurdles," said one parent.

"There really is not much scope for questions to get out, because the time gap after the exams is negligible. There is not really enough time to leak questions", said Sajidur Rahman, the examination services manager of the British Council. "Moreover, the question papers are not given to the students af-

ter the exams," he said.

Rahman said University of London rules require that exams be held within 24 hours of the scheduled time. This was the reason why Tuesday's exams had to be held at such odd hours.

The hartal affair hardly seemed to affect the turnout of students. There were 119 students for Human Biology and 329 students for Pure Mathematics. Those who did not come would not have appeared anyway because this was the second paper and they had not appeared for their first paper.

Therefore, according to Sajidur Rahman, the hartal had no effect on the number of students who appeared for their exams.

Waiting outside the British Council in Fuller road, most wore the expression of tension and frustration. Nervousness made them feel colder than it really was. Some of them stood in groups, huddling against one another trying to get warmer while some others went to their mothers for warmth and comfort. Unlike previous occasions where only mothers accompanied their children, fathers came along too.

"It was like a nightmare for the whole family," commented one father. But, it hardly seemed like night. With the lights gleaming across ends and the mad rush of people, it was like a midnight festival. Only no one was having fun, except perhaps the little "tokais" who were having a ball collecting money in return for "prayers".

There were many students bad-mouthing Bangladeshi politics, with the word "jai-zaam" being very popular to describe the opposition agitation programmes. Most had taken up an anti-politics stand and even suggested that kings and queens should rule the country!

It was quite apparent that these "aspiring" voters are most unlikely to vote for our dear opposition leader in the next elections.

"They have no consideration for anybody except themselves. I don't see the point of all these hartals, except that they are messing up the economy and making it worse than it is," Katrina Chowdhury from South Breeze School cried out in frustration.

However, the parents seemed more tense than the students themselves did and many were seen trying to console their parents. As the students huddled in through the gates of the British

Council, under the "protection" of the police, many parents were seen praying and crying out loud. Many said that they would not mind if their children did badly just as long as they were in good health.

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