

Why Hartal?

ON the first day of the New Year and the New Century the opposition political parties greeted us with a seven-hour hartal call, to be enforced tomorrow. It was somewhat predictable, though. The government's decision to get on with the Chittagong City Corporation polls on January 3, despite an opposition boycott and Election Commission's recommendations for a deferment, had us anticipate an agitational programme. Still, we kept hoping that, in the spirit of the New Year and, of course, the holy month of Ramadan, not to mention the approaching Eid festivities, the opposition alliance would refrain from hartal, thereby the path of confrontation. Unfortunately, that was not to be. For the residents of the port city, the scenario is even bleaker with two consecutive days of hartal on the cards. The dire consequences it would have to the country's economy cannot be overlooked either. Already, the Chittagong Port is in total disarray after a turbulent year that included 30 odd days of hartals and innumerable hours of workers' strike. The two-day shutdown would surely make things untenable and there may be another cargo congestion in the offing. Even the logic for hartal in Chittagong where the polls will take place tomorrow is assailable, not to speak of drawing the rest of the country into the vortex? That too, in the holy month of Ramadan. We cannot help notice the avoidability of it, the opposition rhetoric regardless.

On the other hand, what compulsion was there to reject an Election Commission recommendation for deferment? With the opposition staying off the race and the predictable certainty of a low voter turnout how credible will the election be? Besides, such a unilateral election will beyond doubt put a question-mark over the capacity of the local body to function smoothly.

Therefore, our passionate plea with both the ruling and the opposition parties as to settle their differences across the negotiation table being duly imbued with the spirit of the new times.

Relieved, But Not Quite

WE share the sense of relief felt worldwide at the resolution of the eight-day-long air hijack crisis in Kandahar. That the 155 passengers of the ill-fated Indian aircraft made it home safely must have been a New Year gift to their near and dear ones. It is one of those hijack incidents that came to an end with a minimum loss of life; but then how much we wish the newly-wed passenger who was knived to death had not left his young wife widowed. That said, we would like to term the denouement as a gift coming on the millennium eve in the sense that the hijack poignantly brought to the fore the universality of humanitarian concern and sympathy for the passengers and crew, regardless of political and ideological beliefs across the board.

The Talebans have admittedly shown maturity in handling the crisis on their soil. Apart from the cooperation they extended to the Indian government and the UN together with the life support system they kept functional for the people in captivity, even in terms of taking forward the negotiations and bringing the matter to a close the Talebans did play a crucial role. For instance, they were instrumental in persuading the hijackers to drop the demands for ransom money worth US\$20 crore dollars and return of a buried Kashmiri militant's dead body after exhumation. They reportedly pinned down the hijackers on the observation such demands amounted to 'banditry'. All this in spite of the fact the Taleban do not have diplomatic relations with India and are yet to be politically recognised by most governments.

The incidence of air hijacking has been globally on the rise, but it seems that regional flights may have become quite vulnerable to it. It is another wake up call for the Indian Airlines, or for that matter other airlines of South Asian countries and their airports to guard against sneaking of arms and explosives into an aircraft. And, in the event that a hijack has actually taken place, it is always advisable to begin the process of negotiations sooner than later to avert complications.

Since there is always a trade-off to end a hijacking drama and innocent passengers have to take the brunt of it all, air travel in no way should be allowed to remain even slightly vulnerable to the tyranny of terrorism in the mid-air.

Turag Under Threat

WHAT was leased out to be a landing pier along the river Turag has been turned into an encroaching jetty where huge cargo boats carrying construction materials including illegally logged wood from the Sunderbans have been berthing. The important river that connects the Buriganga and the Balu on the north of the metropolis has been constricted at that point. The southern bank portion was leased out by the Dhaka City Corporation but the Water Development Board and the District Administration are responsible for the other bank. So we have three agencies responsible for the use or otherwise of this river.

The photograph on the frontpage of this newspaper on Friday showed that a long stretch of the river has been filled up in the name of a landing ghats that poses a threat to the bridge. Experts are saying that a change in the natural course of the river could affect the bridge. Encroachers are also alleged to have eaten up land on the north-western bank endangering the bridge, as it is.

The DCC, as usual, pleads their ignorance about the encroachment and promises to investigate the allegations and are supposed to come out with a statement today (Sunday). On the other hand, the Water Development Board claims that it has been decided by the government to bring all rivers under the PWB's jurisdiction. The board laments it has no power to take action against the encroachers. May we ask: who has? In the absence of appropriate authorities to oversee the conditions of the rivers we may come across more such problems in the future. The water resources ministry must wake up to it.

The Third Millennium Has to be Better

DOES history march forward purposefully, or backward peevishly? Or does it just zigzag aimlessly? Any division of time is artificial. Even birthdays. But they can be moments for deeper reflection. We look backward, most often in gratitude, and then forward with new resolve.

Some thinkers argue that human events cannot help but proceed in such a way as to advance the species — in other words, that history crawls forward. So whether the second millennium was a boon or a bust, here's a toast to the new one: it's bound to be better. But as we stagger to its doorstep, a contrary view emerges out of some sobering developments. The ethnic cleansing in Europe, Asia and parts of Africa cast doubt on the notion of human progress.

In that skeptical vein, this century has yielded some nightmarish vision of the future. Witness Alex Huxley's book "Brave New World", George Orwell's book "1984", or Paul Verhoeven's movie "RoboCop". These gloomy works doubtless flowed from 20th century horrors. For all its claim of being the pinnacle of human advancement to date, the century that's drawing to a close is likely the bloodiest ever.

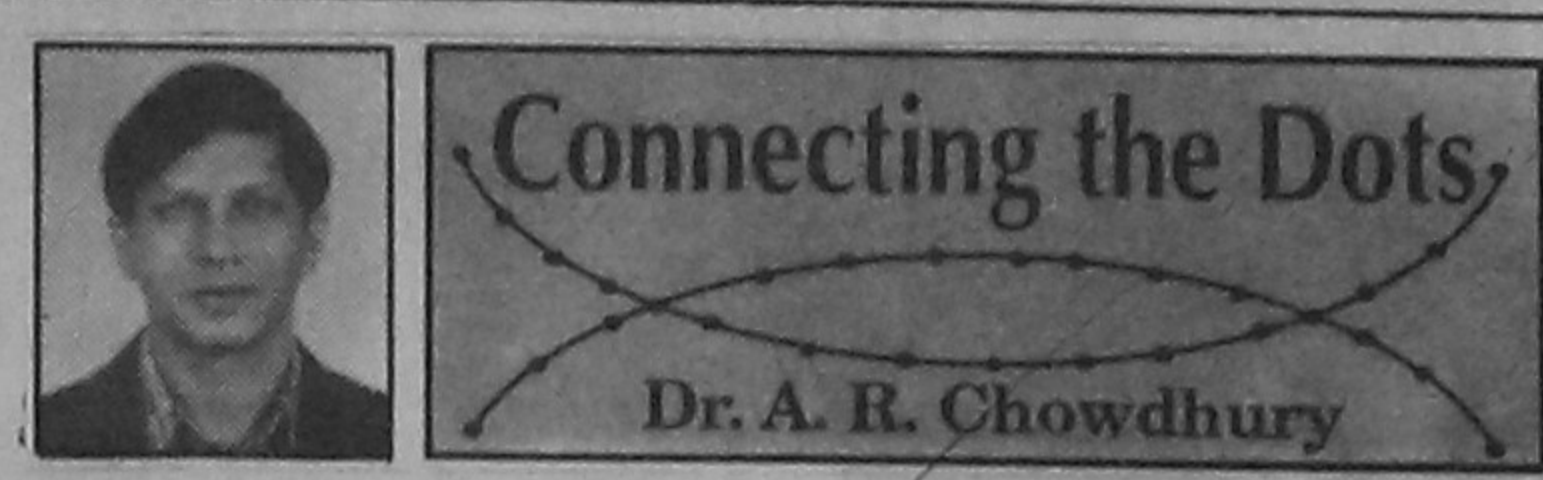
Surely no earlier villains matched Germany's Adolf Hitler or Cambodia's Pol Pot in body count. Surely the most ferocious army of earlier centuries came nowhere close to inflicting as many casualties in one swoop as did the US in Hiroshima, and then Nagasaki. The atomic bomb serves now as the classic example of technology gone awry. Our tools propel us into the future, but perhaps a menacing future — a source of worry for writers like Alex Huxley.

George Orwell got his inspiration from the rise of totalitarianism in the form of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, where the state attempted to control what the citizens wanted to think. For Orwell,

We can take this occasion to call on the developed nations for writing off the existing foreign debt that strangles the poor of so many nations, preventing them from living truly human lives. At the same time, we must help these people to overcome the internal hold that corruption has often had on their nations, so that any debt-relief truly helps those in need and does not end up increasing the Swiss bank accounts of a select few.

rather than living up to its promise of liberating humans, technology furthered state control. The Detroit of "RoboCop" is not totalitarian. Rather, its focus is the widening gap between the haves and have-nots, between the suburbs and the city. The movie rides that trend line into a grim future.

In contrast to the gloom vision of the science fiction writers, Francis Fukuyama is optimistic about the future. He stirred up much debate in 1992



with a book titled "The End of History and the Last Man". He takes up the 200-year-old ideas of German philosophers Immanuel Kant and Georg Hegel, who argued that history had a beginning, several middle ages and an end. The end comes when a society becomes free. Karl Marx borrowed Hegel's story line, but argued that the philosopher concluded the freedom was only for the bourgeoisie. The final stage is the classless society, Marx contended.

The dramatic collapse of Marxism-Leninism reaffirms Hegel, Fukuyama argues. The end point of history is liberal democracy.

Sure, many nations have yet to reach the finish line. But a growing number have. What's more, many of the lagard recognise liberal democracy — that is, a political system in which the people elect the leaders and basic laws safeguard individual rights — as their only legitimate destination.

Perhaps the second millennium takes on special significance because it is the first to be celebrated since the advent of the notion of globalisation of the domestic economy. Our neighbours are no longer just those we live near. Rapid communication has brought the whole world immediately before our eyes, as never before in history. Because of that world plat-

form, we must ask not only who is left behind in our nation but also who is left behind in the world economy. We can take this occasion to call on the developed nations for writing off the existing foreign debt that strangles the poor of so many nations, preventing them from living truly human lives. At the same time, we must help these people to overcome the internal hold that corruption has often had on their nations, so that any debt-relief truly helps those in need and does not end up increasing the Swiss bank accounts of a select few.

Perhaps the triumph of the second millennium merely ended Book 1 of the human story, though. Perhaps Book 2 includes the struggle to live up to the promise of liberalism, to fashion a society in which citizens are equally free to fulfill themselves. Perhaps the next text will focus on efforts to end hunger, poverty, war and ethnic cleansing and to protect the thin web of life that hugs the planet.

Surely, such struggles will shape the beginning of the new millennium.

South Asia and the New Millennium

When a beneficial forum like the SAARC, despite its slow progress, suffers from fund constraints and can take no decision when to convene the postponed next summit, an optimist has reasons to despair. Let us hope that leadership in the region will demonstrate greater prudence for the sake of the peoples in the South Asia most of whom are mired in abject poverty.



tion of the atomic bombs by both in early 1998 following a series of explosions turned the South Asian region the flash point of global attention. The peace efforts like that of landmark Lahore Declaration by the heads of government of two countries notwithstanding, things often return to "square one". Incidents — unexpected or those not unusual in the given situation — add only fuel to the grueling conditions. The latest is the hijack of an Indian Airlines aircraft to Kandahar in Afghanistan. The regional impact of this incident remains to be seen. However, the effects are unlikely to be something positive. Evidently, Indo-Pakistan relations remain the mainstay of the entire uneasy situation in the region and there is little likelihood that there would be effective relaxation of the tension in the foreseeable future.

The countries of the region are experiencing political tensions, turmoil, and even convulsions. The largest nation, India, has overcome a phase of avoiding bloody confrontations, stemming from failure of any party of combine to win decisive verdict in the elections. The government that has come

through the recent polls is on a firmer ground but the character of multi-party governments makes the future unpredictable. Differences and ruptures in the alliances can always throw the government into the wind. Such possibilities, on any issue, cannot be totally ruled out. A more determined opposition on such issues like demanding deletion of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi's name from the charge-sheet of Bofors scandal and positions taken by the parties in government to bar Indians of foreign origins from adorning high offices like president and prime minister may spell bitter government-opposition trouble. Obviously the target of this stand is the leader of the opposition Sonia Gandhi because of her Italian background.

There are internal troubles in parts of India that may cause headache for the country. Pakistan is definitely in the midst of political uncertainty following the army take-over on October 12, 1999 toppling the elected government. That the government of ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif earned unpopularity due to political excesses and corruption despite

having a sound majority in the parliament is an accepted conclusion but the dismissal of the civilian government by the army has been widely criticised and condemned. The deposed prime minister is now on trial on a sensational and interesting case as he is charged with attempt to hijacking a PIA airliner that was carrying army chief General Pervez Musharraf from Colombo. If convicted, he could even be executed.

The trial of Nawaz Sharif, the dealings of the military government with politicians and its plans to restore civilian rule will remain cynosure of all eyes in the coming days in a country where the military has ruled the roost for most part of its history.

In Sri Lanka, there is no sign that the long civil war over the Tamils' demand of an independent country is nearing a solution. The military and the militants are locked in a protracted do-or-die war. The recent victory of President Chandrika Kumaratunga for a second term in the office does not initially look a positive omen for settlement of the conflict, since the Tamils are known vehemently opposed to her. Her miraculous escape from an assassination bid may propel the militants to try their abortive attempt on her life a success in the future. The otherwise beautiful island-state is unlikely to get rid of the bloody civil war in the near future.

Nepal is back to the political stability after the latest par-

liamentary elections but the conflict between the Prime Minister and Nepal Congress Chief threatens instability. It is an internal problem of the ruling party but may have serious consequences unless contained.

Tiny Himalayan state of Bhutan is not much in the reckoning but signs that the Monarch is slowly relaxing his authority towards involving people in the governance of the nation is welcome signs.

The Maldives — the Indian-Ocean island-nation — with its small population remains relatively calm and quiet. But another major country in the region is showing all the signs of political unrest. It is already in the midst of a political tussle involving the government and major political parties on the issue of early national elections on which the former is unwilling to concede and the latter hell-bent to extract. Consequently, concerns increase in all circles about the shape of things to come in the future.

The country is set to witness more political turmoil in the New Year and the nation is Bangladesh. South Asia does not promise much of a better political climate in the coming days. If the countries which can play meaningful roles in improving the situation, only then the conditions may change. But when the beneficial forum like the SAARC, despite its slow progress, suffers from fund constraints and can take no decision when to convene the postponed next summit, an optimist about the region has reasons to despair. Let us hope that leadership in the region will demonstrate greater prudence for the sake of the vast multitude living in the South Asia most of whom are mired in abject poverty.

THERE is much talk about the global political scenario on the eve of the New Year which incidentally and happily is also the beginning of the new millennium. As the world steps into the new century, it is the general expectation that animosity, belligerence and apathy for harmony that have largely characterised the global political psyche in the past years, will disappear to a great extent in the coming years to make the universe a better place to live in for the fellow human beings. Undoubtedly, hopes are pious and often belle expectations, and there is also a logical corollary to this conclusion because perception of peace and disharmony, good and evil, and finally interpretations of all these high-sounding philosophical expressions vary. Not surprisingly, this too once again form basis of the disunity that eventually lead to hostilities ignoring the calls for peace and stability. No wonder, much of the ill and acrimony caused to the people are done by the fellow human beings while nature only occasionally demonstrates its fury.

With the advent of the New Millennium, the political climate across the world happily gives the impression that there would be improvement of the situation in the immediate future. For, the crisis spots are being reduced on the one hand, but exacerbates on the other. If peace is established in the eastern front after protracted efforts despite complexities, there is flare-up of another imbroglio in the western front or other areas. If the Balkan becomes quiet, the Caucasus becomes the international focal point. While economic, social and

other issues also play their roles in heightening or lessening of the tensions, of different nature among the peoples, it is essentially the politics that determines practically everything. Certainly, most talked-about region in the present-day international situation is the densely populated South Asian region where nearly 1300 million people live, crammed in a relatively smaller space. There is no denying that trouble spots dot the global map, ranging from Chechnya to Western Africa, but South Asian problems are more permanent in character showing little signs of a thaw.

The problems in different parts of the world have mostly temporary ramifications but the South Asian scene continues to cause anxiety for many, and in fact, the very anxiety have turned into alarm — new elements have added to the tensions. The US President Bill Clinton in an interview just before the new century has described the "Kashmir" issue as the most serious crisis point now. His observation certainly is based on the ground realities.

President Clinton said the possession of nuclear powers by two traditional rivals, India and Pakistan, against the background of their belligerence makes the situation really alarming. Undoubtedly, the acquisi-

tion of the atomic bombs by both in early 1998 following a series of explosions turned the South Asian region the flash point of global attention. The peace efforts like that of landmark Lahore Declaration by the heads of government of two countries notwithstanding, things often return to "square one". Incidents — unexpected or those not unusual in the given situation — add only fuel to the grueling conditions. The latest is the hijack of an Indian Airlines aircraft to Kandahar in Afghanistan. The regional impact of this incident remains to be seen. However, the effects are unlikely to be something positive. Evidently, Indo-Pakistan relations remain the mainstay of the entire uneasy situation in the region and there is little likelihood that there would be effective relaxation of the tension in the foreseeable future.

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OPINION

"The Present Political Impasse: The Way Out"

K M Rabbani

I would like to congratulate Mr Enam A Chaudhury for his article under the above heading published in The Daily Star on 12 December, 1999. As a way out of the present political impasse he has given two suggestions e.g. (a) all elections, both national and local should be held under a caretaker government and (b) there should be discussions and consultations among the political parties to find out ways of avoiding bloody confrontations, of shunning destructive hartals, of re-establishing shattered confidence in democratic process and elections.

These recommendations imply that people have lost their faith in the present democratic process as practiced by the political parties in Bangladesh. This seems to be the case in almost all cases the pundits opinions and articles published in the newspapers. Some time ago, I saw a letter from an expatriate Bangladeshi in the letter column of The Daily Star suggesting that we should have a caretaker government for the next five years.

What is the reason for this lack of confidence in our democratic process?

After thousands of years of evolution of human society, the democratic form of government has been adjudged to be the best. Such governments are functioning smoothly in many parts of the world. Then why is it that it doesn't work in our country although we have all the paraphernalia of a democratic form of government? There is a saying that people get the government they deserve. If we accept this then we should have no cause for complain because we deserve what we are now having. So why bother? But is it really the case? Do the people of our country deserve what we now have? Whether we deserve it or not, there is no doubt that the people are not satisfied with what is going on in our country in the name of democracy. Being dissatisfied with the state of affairs, people have been groping for good governance. The situation has reached such an extent that even our foreign development partners have started worrying about it.

About a couple of years ago, the UNDP in association with others held a seminar in Dhaka on good governance in Bangladesh. In that seminar I was participated, among others, by the leaders of different political parties it was reportedly stated by no other than a leading political personality of our country that our present political culture is not con-

ducive to good governance. This seems to be the correct diagnosis and this is the crux of the problem.

Coming to the recommendation of Mr Chaudhury that all elections should be held under a caretaker government, I would like to say that Bangladesh has perhaps created a precedent by making constitutional provision for holding national elections under a caretaker government. It was necessary in the context of Bangladesh style of politics as people apprehended that the party in power would not be fair and impartial in conducting the elections. It may be of interest to mention here that the movement for a caretaker government was spearheaded by the political parties themselves although it implies a sad reflection on the ability of a political party to perform while in office. Now Mr Chaudhury suggests that not only the national elections but all the local elections should be held under a caretaker government and a formula has to be found out by which no by-elections would be held by the party in power.

One can understand the logic behind this suggestion. But we should not overlook the fact that election is not an end in itself rather it is a means to an end — the end being good governance as per the wishes of the majority of the people. Moreover, elections are only a very small part of the whole gamut of governmental functions. If one cannot trust the government for holding even a local election, by what logic one can trust the same government for performing all the other important national tasks during its five year tenure? Mr Enam Chaudhury says "... it has been experienced under all governments, that during elections undue influences are exerted and the permanent administrative machinery utilised by the party in power." Does he mean to say that this happens only during election time and not in other times? The common perception is that this is happening all the time and that is one of the reasons for the people's dissatisfaction with the political process in our country.

This brings me to the other recommendation of Mr Chaudhury. He has suggested that there should be discussions and consultations among the political parties to avoid bloody confrontation, etc. This is a very good suggestion but how do you

implement it? Many people have been suggesting this since long but without any tangible result. The high office of the Honourable President of the country made a number of public statements on the need for dialogue between the political parties regarding student politics and campus violence to arrive at an agreed solution. But has there been any result?

What I would like to say is that holding of elections under a caretaker government may seem to offer a remedy of sorts but in the larger context it is no remedy as long as we do not find ways and means to change/improve the political culture of our country. Left to themselves the political parties are not expected to change their ways. They are not likely to enter into a meaningful dialogue for arriving at a consensus. Capturing power and retaining power by any means seem to be their main occupation. This attitude leads to the acute confrontation in politics as a result of which the interest of the people and the country at large, and the age old concepts of neutrality, justice and fairplay are relegated to the back seat.

The big question is — what is the way out? The answer is not far to seek. The answer was hinted at in the UNDP seminar mentioned above, it is implied in the article of Mr Enam Chaudhury and is perhaps in the mind of many people. We should change our political culture. Two key elements of our present political culture which seem to be the root cause of our problems have rightly been mentioned by him e.g. — (a) politics of confrontation and (b) undue political influence on administration. These two elements are also somewhat interlinked. By confrontation in politics we mean the unhealthy confrontational relationship between the party in power and the parties in the opposition. By undue political influence we mean the undue influence exerted by the functionaries of the party in power on the administration to promote their party interests. Such influence on the administration obviously goes against the interest of the parties in the opposition thereby further accentuating the existing confrontation between them.

There are two other elements which also contribute to the present unhealthy scenario in national politics. These are the alleged linkages between the political

parties (both in power and in the opposition) and the people having muscle power and black money. If we really want to come out of the present political turmoil in our country we should evolve a new political culture which will be free from all these undesirable elements. In the present circumstances it definitely looks like a pipe dream or a pious wish. But there is a saying that if there is a will there is a way. If by any means we can develop a strong will then it should not be difficult to find a way.

We, Bangladeshis are not inferior to anybody in the world in intelligence and also in political consciousness and so it should not be an impossible task. The need of the hour is for someone to take the leadership role to do a job which the political leaders would not do or are not able to do in the given circumstances. I would, therefore, venture to suggest that the leaders of the civil society particularly the legal and constitutional experts who are not actively involved in politics should take the initiative and try to do this difficult job in the interest of the country and its people. A series of discussion meetings may be arranged to invite suggestions and then formulate concrete recommendations to improve the political culture of our country. This may involve changing some rules and regulations and perhaps some constitutional provisions. After a set of recommendations which are generally acceptable to the civil society, a civil movement may be launched to win over support for the same from the people at large to create a strong popular will and then persuade the political parties to accept these recommendations which may be subsequently formalised and approved in the parliament.

The Daily Star has taken laudable initiative in arranging round-table on many important matters. They may also consider holding discussion meetings on this subject. If, by some stroke of luck, we could evolve a decent and acceptable political culture by which we can avoid the present destructive and confrontational relationship among the political parties and also the undue interference of politics in administration then there would be no need of a caretaker government to conduct national or local elections and the people would not mind having elections under a political government as happens in other civilised countries.

To the Editor...

Host, indeed!

Sir, Recently, the city mayor Mr Hanif asked the police not to arrest anyone inside Nagar Bhaban following an incident of arresting a terrorist. This instruction of the mayor seems really father-like. It is indeed an evidence of his sense of responsibility to save the citizens including the terrorists. We can't but appreciate(?) the hospitality of our mayor.

Turjo Mohammad
Zia Hall, DU

The DU convocation

Sir, The DU convocation 1999, the first ever held after the fall of Bangladesh, had its weak points (DS editorial, Dec 20), and highlight (the Sen factor), but the spirit of entrepreneurship displayed cannot be ignored. Three birds were killed with one stone (to update an inapt proverb): Hasina and a Bengali Nobel Laureate were brought together; and together they helped to find ways of funding the Taka two crore ceremony of disunity, when a section of the students of the alma mater had to be kept under purdah, as the right to demonstrate peacefully is not recognised at the highest seat of learning in the country.

When student politics has long since polluted the academic campus, with the full cognate of the authority, it appears to be pointless, academically and theoretically, to discriminate in the right to think otherwise (a point touched upon by Amartya Sen himself in his convocation address), before, during, and after, a convocation. It is a pity that the university had to take some unpleasant practical steps, based on local expertise, which is not at all complimentary.

Politicians, prey not on the concept of unity; and do not divide the academic pursuits. What is the difference between hemlock and arsenic? We got both at different levels! Before the next convocation some home work has to be completed.

AZ
Dhaka

Private jobs

Sir, Government servants may take jobs in private business concerns, commercial houses or industrial organisations after going on full retirement. This is beneficial for those who need and can manage to get one to supplement their drastically reduced monthly income and other perquisites.

Syed Tariqul Islam
Dhaka