

Utilise the Respite at Shahjalal Varsity

WE would have been amply delighted had the syndicate decision to postpone the extremely controversial decision about naming some academic and administrative buildings of the Shahjalal University of Science and Technology come earlier on. The tension prevailing on campus and in Sylhet for over two months psychologically affected the rest of the country so much that they expected a thaw in it at the earliest. Unfortunately, despite a major shift in the syndicate's position on the issue, uncertainty still lingers over resumption of academic activities and, of course, about future of several thousand general students — thanks to the All-Party Action Committee (APAC)'s attitude to have things on their terms.

Now that the syndicate has postponed its decision "as per the directive of Chancellor of the University, President Shahabuddin Ahmed" until such time as the new senate considers the nomenclature issue and makes a decision on the matter, the rational response from the APAC should have been to suspend all its agitational programmes as well. As the election of teacher's representatives to the senate, scheduled for March 1, has been suspended *sine die* upon the closure of the university, it is highly likely that *status quo* would continue for several months, if not a year. So, the syndicate's decision has actually brightened the prospect of an unhindered patch of academic activities at the embattled university. And clearly APAC's position has got in the way.

Throughout the disquieting episode, the student committee has displayed a degree of intractability in its approach that, more than anything else, has closed options for any early resolution of the crisis. Moreover, by resorting to intimidation and issuance of death-threats to certain members of the faculty it only succeeded in reviving some of the dark memories of 1971. That they have been dubbed as 'anti-liberation' forces was only inevitable given their uncompromising stance.

However, the time has come to put the nightmare behind. The syndicate has certainly shown farsightedness, greater understanding of the situation and, most importantly, commitment to the welfare of the students. Now, the ball is in APAC's court and responsible behaviour from the leaders and activists could only put an end to the stand-off once and for all. We expect concern for the future of so many students would get precedence over politicisation and the university would be allowed to reopen and function without any further hindrance.

Reassurances from EU

IT is heartening to note that the European Commission (EC) will continue to give aid to Bangladesh as before, only that it will be in the form of cash rather than food-based. The reassurances came from Poul Nielson, EC Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid through an interview he gave to *The Daily Star* prior to his departure after a three-day visit here with a five-member EC delegation. The EC provides around 100 million euro every year for development projects under the Food-for-Work Programme and in the family planning, health, micro-credit and communications sectors. And EC will give around 80 million euro in the next three years under food security project.

There is every indication that the EC will identify new areas of cooperation in consultation with the government of Bangladesh. The attention that the EC Commissioner evinced in the Dhaka-based International Jute Organisation's effectiveness is welcome.

These are all very positive signs from the EC. However, another important aspect of our relationship with the EC deserves to be underscored. We hope the GSP will be extended to our garments exports to the European Union beyond 2005. The exports to EU constitute 46 per cent of our external trade in apparels. Let's draw the attention of the EC Commissioner to the fact that we need continuation of such a facility until such time as we have developed backward linkages to the garments industry by way of beefing up local value addition to a point of self-reliance in the sector.

Good News

THIS is indeed a good piece of news. The Vice-Chancellor of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Medical University (BSMMU) has directed the hospital management committee to investigate the situation in its prison cell where quite a number of under-trial prisoners have been staying for "suspiciously long periods". There are allegations of collusion with some physicians at the BSMMU. In the face of criticism the authorities took the tiny step of sending one of the prisoners back to the Dhaka central jail. But others are still living at the hospital.

However, we note with some satisfaction the fact that the vice-chancellor has acted on the report published in *The Daily Star* on February 16. We thank him for responding to the allegations of aberration highlighted by our newspaper. This probe is expected to shed light on the dreadful aspect of political culture in which vested interests bask. The members of the public will await its outcome with keen interest. When the report is readied it should be made available to the press following its submission before the government. We will then be able to keep track on the implementation of the findings and recommendations of the probe committee.

Alongside we request the relevant authorities to start looking into other hospital-cells whether there are identical cases. And there is an urgent necessity for overhauling the prison management in our country.

WHEN Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was Pakistan's Prime Minister in the seventies, I asked him what his country's ethos was. He did not say Islam. By then the 90-per cent Muslim Bangladesh had seceded from West Pakistan. He argued that the very existence of Pakistan for 25 years gave its ethos.

It is debatable whether the mere length of time provides a country with its ethos. I have no quarrel with those who believe so. But the characteristic spirit, as of a people or institution, constitutes ethos. It is an ideal, universal quality. I feel this is what is under attack in India at present. Our ethos was forged up when the country was fighting its battle for independence. The national movement knew no religion, no caste and no language. It was a war in which all participated with one purpose: to throw out the alien rulers. The ethos, the distinctive feature of the struggle, was togetherness, the spirit of understanding.

That was precisely the basis of our constitution which, among other things, enunciated in the preamble:

"Liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship." Although India, after partition, had some 82 per cent Hindus inhabiting it, yet it did not declare itself a Hindu country. That was not the ethos. The freedom movement kept religion separate from politics. So did the constitution and the government under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

Some who did not believe in that ethos embarked on their

agenda to convert India into a theocratic state from the day the British left. But Mahatma Gandhi's assassination at the hands of a Hindu fanatic gave such a jolt to the nation that it asserted itself to regain the territory which the communists had usurped. Hindu chauvinists ran for shelter. India heaved a sigh of relief for almost 45 years. For the last decade the same people, who are opposed to the country's ethos, have reappeared in the shape of different outfit at different places. And they are trying to undo the country's sense of tolerance and its composite culture. Liberty of thought and expression, which the constitution guarantees, is their first target. The ramparts they have created over the shooting of film *Water* is a warning given by them that they — and they alone — are the custodians of Hindu culture or whatever they interpret. (Home Minister L.K. Advani was a party to the permission given to the film. He was reportedly against a close scrutiny of the script.)

How one wishes if the Hindu zealots would concentrate on the removal of ills in the Hindu society, whether that of caste or that of widows' death-like-living? But they are not interested in reforms. Their purpose is to

helplessly watched how some persons at Varanasi got away after destroying the costly sets of the proposed film. Again, even the socialist-inclined parties have seen how some others at Delhi have got away with the withdrawal of two history volumes relating to the freedom struggle. Some at the helm of affairs, who were nowhere when the war for independence was fought, do not like the credit given to those who participated in it.

Chief Editor Gopal has rightly questioned the withdrawal of

tions he has listed in his belief in *Hindutva*. If some people at some place can be worked up some time, as it happened when the Babri masjid was demolished, it does not mean that they have forsaken tolerance for good. The heat generated cools down quickly because people are basically accommodative and secular. This was proved by the defeat of the BJP in UP and Madhya Pradesh in the assembly elections, which were held in the wake of the Babri mosque's demolition.

Before the demolition, the

Vajpayee's Laxman Rekha

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simple.

I visited Afghanistan in the sixties to meet Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the Frontier Gandhi. He said that when they were fighting for freedom under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, they were confident that after the departure of the British, the issues they would have to deal with would be economic, not religious. He was shocked to learn that Ahmedabad was the scene of communal frenzy.

Had he been alive today, he would not have believed that Gujarat, the BJP administered state, is the laboratory of the Sangh Parivar. Whether it is the question of conversion or that of membership of civil servants of the RSS, the experiment is made in the state to see the reaction in the rest of the country. The strategy is modified accordingly. It is a pity that Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, the only BJP liberal, has not done so. He at times makes you feel that what BJP ideologue Govindacharya has said is correct: Vajpayee is only a mukul (mask).

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BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

Correcting Wrongs?

In the face of business as usual, people will begin to ask, was Oct 12 necessary?

As an incurable optimist who believes that the present military regime has sincere intent, one takes the Chief Executive at his word about our pointing out possible mistakes which he would rectify. The functionaries of our military regime must refrain from bending the rules to suit personal preferences, only then will they go a long way in fostering the corruption they set out to eradicate on October 12.

CORRUPTION is the main side-effect of nepotism. The moment we negate merit as the only touchstone for selection, the seeds of corruption are well and truly sown. In developed countries, democracy ensures selection, appointment and/or advancement on the basis of merit. Unfortunately, the worst form of nepotism was practiced by our "democrats" when in power. Democracy is meant to ensure that merit alone is the arbiter of success but our "democracy" was not accountable and when a system is not accountable it is to be expected that patronage will be rampant on a wide-scale. Because of this lack of accountability in third world countries the situation is perverse, democracies tend to indulge in corruption, that in turn makes the system tailor-made for corruption. When any authoritarian rule substitutes democracy, the major reason usually given is to stamp out the nepotism and corruption. In the initial euphoria of correcting wrongs, an authoritarian system does fall back on merit. Only when things settle in place the client-patron relationship takes over and things go back to being far worse than in any democracy.

How have the institutions of Pakistan been corrupted? Mainly by installing favourites, with or without merit, in decision-making positions. Those unworthy of selection then proceed to run riot in the institutions at all levels, bending the rules to accommodate their favourites in turn, in time the whole institution becomes rotten to the core. Lacking ability or management capacity, those without merit have as their primary aim and function the lining of their own pockets and/or living high at the expense of the institutions. Obviously this cannot be done without ensuring the appointment of hand-picked cronies in key decision-making slots. A cycle of nepotism is created

which deepens the corruption psyche. Even if the person appointed without merit is not corrupt, which happens from time to time. The lack of efficiency, knowledge, experience, managerial capacity, etc., encourages others down the line to indulge in corruption, secure in the knowledge that ignorance and incompetence of their superiors will prevent any discovery, a built-in inferiority complex preventing those in power from exercising their authority as it should be used.

Late Zulfikar Ali Bhutto tried to briefly bring merit of sorts into the selection process, creating a "talent pool" base on extensive checking of qualifications and the testing of abilities. This resolve soon faded out in the need for rewarding political favourites, a form of patronage perfected in vicious form by every political government thereafter. Since the PPP had nationalised industry and business, the "talent pool" was sorely needed so that professional excellence would ensure continuity and profitability. In the face of political expediency, this experiment faded out and we returned to a gross form of nepotism. By putting men (and sometimes women) without merit in top slots in government and semi-government corporations, their ultimate destruction as a viable economic entity was ensured.

There is a vast difference in the skill and dedication of entrepreneurs running their own business and the expertise and commitment of managers appointed mainly without merit. Almost all the nationalised units collapsed under the burden of corruption and management. To this unmitigated disaster another yoke was added, the over-staffing of units by

pointees in the banking system, professional bankers soon joined in wilfully, making the defaults much more sophisticated and difficult to investigate.

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AS I SEE IT

Ikram Sehgal writes from Karachi

creating jobs when they did not exist, putting additional pressure on revenue streams.

Disaster became manifold with the nationalisation of the financial institutions. Whereas corruption had previously remained a product of crooked managerial initiative in procurement or sales in nationalised industry, the unscrupulous presented a unique opportunity of pocketing hard cash by the fastest means, the giving over of un-secured loans for dubious purposes to dubious people — eventually even writing off these loans. Whereas "soar default" in any business is to be expected, wilful loan default i.e. those who took loans from financial institutions without any intention of ever paying it back, became a common occurrence. Initially this was the prerogative of political ap-

pointees in the banking system, professional bankers soon joined in wilfully, making the defaults much more sophisticated and difficult to investigate.

Suffice to say that our nationalised commercial banks (NCBs) and development fi-

nance institutions (DFIs) were the subject of virtual highway robbery, the likes of Younis Habib, Younis Dalia etc becoming bywords in the lexicon of corruption in the sector. Most of the NCBs and DFIs were looted but Allied Bank (ABL) went one better as the banking professionals who took over managerial control in the name of "employee ownership" looted this financial institution at will. Each succeeding managerial group in ABL outdid the previous lot, the present President ABL and his friends, way past their retirement age, fiddling openly and with relative impunity with employees' shares and the loan portfolio. Since ABL had been "privatised" in a controversial employee stock option plan (ESOP), ABL senior management remains untouchable, outside the purview of the Ministry of Finance. That shows up the

dilemma of Shaukat Aziz as Finance Minister in stark relief,

is he master of his own

house or does he find it more

expedient to pander to moti-

val interest, bending with the

wind?

Earlier the man who has

been adjudged as Pakistan's

biggest tax evader was taken on

the Economic Advisory Board

(EAB). He was labelled as a bud-

ding entrepreneur! Another

case in point, the rumour of

the imminent appointment of

Chairman NDPC. The man

so passionately earmarked for the slot

is a classmate friend of a couple

of eminent personalities in the

senior hierarchy of the present

military regime. Finding his

banking career going nowhere

in 1991, he opted into business

in the United Arab Emirates

(UAE), managing a textile unit

as a shareholder partner. This

textile factory went into default

because of bad management

practices and questionable fi-

nancial decisions. UAE is not

friendly to crooked practices

(and bankers) as Pakistan. In an amicable settlement the NDPC hopeful was cautioned not to darken Dubai's doorstep

ever again. For reasons beneath

one's dignity to disclose, this

man was rehabilitated as a

banker in 1998. It is mind-bog-

glaring that an independent deci-

sion-maker like Shaukat Aziz,

who does not owe his present

position to anything but merit,

would allow such episodes to

take place under his nose, but

then he has not shown any re-

sistance in refusing to employ

as advisors "honest" people of

integrity". One does not believe

that the "friends" in uniform of

the NDPC hopeful would allow

them to be control corruption.

such an aberration to take place if they were aware of the real facts, however whenever recommending a friend it is incumbent on them to lean over backwards to ascertain the facts before trying to foist such an abnormality on a major DFI.

Other than the direct conse-

quences of appointing someone

without merit to such a post,

which is tantamount to fostering

corruption, the indirect conse-

quences are also many. It demoralises those with merit but without influence, causing frustration, apathy and loss of efficiency in their service to the institution. In the general public it spreads dissatisfaction because of the variance between word and deed, after all the military regime's entire success is based on the public believing its sincere intent. If members of the senior hierarchy are per-

ceived by the masses at not practicing what they collectively have been preaching as a regime, the intelligentsia will be sceptical about their intent

and fair play, without that solid

credibility no system can ever

succeed. As such the military