

## 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 teachers' 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 far-sightedness, 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 Bangladesh 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 Zulfiqar 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 formed 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, therefore, 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 communalists 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 outfits 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 rumour 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-living. But they are not interested in reforms. Their purpose is to

convert a secular state into a communal society, with their own interpretation of religion and their own narrative of history. What defeats them is the diversity of Hindu society, its real strength. It is a sad comment on the working of the National Democratic Alliance, which has 22 parties which do not believe in the BJP ideology. But when the chips are down, the writ of the Sangh parivar runs, not theirs. They have

the two volumes when he had authorised their publication. History cannot be distorted to suit the wishes of ruling parties or personalities. But Human Resource Development Minister Murlidhar Manohar Joshi does not appreciate the point. Nor do certain social forces which are trying to change the ethos of India. Joshi and the Sangh parivar should realise that India's ethos is not *Hindutva*. (In his bio-data, one of the qualifica-

Muslims too showed their repugnance to the frenzied pitch they had been taken at the time of the Shah Banu case where the Supreme Court intervened to grant the payment of maintenance allowance to a divorcee. The government legislated to circumvent the court's decision. Still once the emotions settled down the Muslim community realised the futility of converting the maintenance issue into a religious war.

Communal poison, which has been dripping into Indian politics — both Hindus and Muslims are guilty — is destroying India's ethos. Leaders of different parties have taken communalism into the mainstream of Indian politics. The result is that the roots of tolerance are weakening day by day.

Those believing in secularism should have worked in the field to inculcate the attitude of keeping religion separate from politics. They were naive to think that the poison to communalism would disappear the moment the country was free. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, India's first education minister, says in his book *India Wins Freedom* that once the British left, the differences between the two communities would go. But he realised after independence that the problem was not so

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 Ahmed-abad 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 Bihari 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 *mukut* (mask).

Maybe, Vajpayee does not want to join issue with the RSS. When he said that it was a cultural organisation, he probably indicated his *Laxman Rekha*, beyond which he cannot go. What he does not realise is that the RSS or his equivocal attitude clouds India's ethos of togetherness and tolerance. Temporary advantage may be with communal parties. But the nation is sure to return to its ethos — and repudiate what some political parties are doing to gain power or to sustain it.

# Vajpayee's Laxman Rekha

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## BETWEEN THE LINES

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

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 is his belief in *Hindutva*! If some people at some place can be worked upon 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

# 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.

which deepens the corruption psyche. Even if the person appointed without merit is not corrupt, what 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 ignorant and incompetent 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 Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto tried to bring merit of sorts into the selection process, creating a 'talent pool' based 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 a cooked managerial initiative in procurement or sales in nationalised industry, the managerial control of financial institutions by the unscrupulous present a unique opportunity of pocketing hard cash by the fastest means, the giving over of unsecured loans for dubious purposes to dubious people — eventually even writing off these loans. Whereas 'loan 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-

dilemma of Shaikat Aziz as Finance Minister in stark relief, is he master of his own house or does he find it more expedient to pandar to motivated 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 budding entrepreneur! Another case in point, the rumour of the imminent appointment of Chairman NDFC. The man supposedly 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 financial decisions. UAE is not as friendly to crooked practices (and bankers) as Pakistan. In an amicable settlement the NDFC 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-boggling that an independent decision-maker like Shaikat 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 resistance in refusing to employ as advisors 'honest people of integrity'. One does not believe that the 'friends' in uniform of the NDFC hopeful would allow

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 consequences of appointing someone without merit to such a post, which is tantamount to fostering corruption, the indirect consequences 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 perceived 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 regime must be like Caesar's wife, what to talk of doing wrong, they must not be seen to be doing wrong.

Unless we make every appointment on merit and merit alone in the government and semi-government corporations, particularly in financial institutions, we shall have cause to wonder if things are really different after Oct 12? 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. Unless one can control one's urges towards nepotism, we shall never be able to control corruption.

## 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.

## DCC's tree plantation plan

Sir, Why everything in our country is going on disorderly and hastily? On 18 Feb, I woke up in the morning by a clamour of 4/5 labours outside, each digging a spade-deep hole at intervals all along the roadside in Uttara. One of them informed me that DCC had deputed them for planting trees. I was puzzled for a while and wondered was it third week of May or February when normally people make such preparation to allow topsoil, subsoil and fertiliser to interact before planting in June!

But it is now February and still wintry weather, why then so early action that intrigued me. It startled me again in the afternoon (just after Jumma Prayer), when the same group reappeared with a van full of mango and mahogany plants and started stuffing one saplings each in one of those dug holes. This unusual way of plantation in public roadside is bewildering too. First, in our country, each year, trees are normally planted in the first week of June, and the Forest Department runs much publicity for that. DCC also follows them. However, this year, it started in February and without any publicity. Secondly, to get best result, people plant after few days of digging soil.

Thirdly, in one side of the road, the saplings have been planted just directly below the overhead DESA power transmission line not considering what will happen in future. Fourthly, it is still winter and as dry summer is following, all evergreen plants find hard time to survive, even with daily overhead watering, and trees like mahogany etc would certainly require extra care. Who will ensure that? Besides, during dry season loitering cattle are more on the spree in search of tender leaves of younger tree. Who will drive them out day in day out until the plants gain enough height? I hope the DCC has consulted the Forest Department for all this purposes.

A R Choudhury  
Uttara - Dhaka

## The president deserves appreciation

Sir, I thank our president Shahabuddin Ahmed wholeheartedly for his insistings on the exclusion of Gholam Azam from the Jamat-e-Islami delegation that sought an appointment with him to discuss the PSA.

Undoubtedly the president has shown the way.  
Sayed Salahuddin Ahmed  
Jahangirnagar University

## Change is the order of the day

Sir, When it comes to indirect disservice to the country on a large scale (damaging the established clean institution), the politicians are second to none. They are capable, experienced and practical in the art of non-transparency. Absolute power corrupts absolutely, when

combined with lack of transparency.

BMA's embroiled activities as revealed in the Daily Star (We stand by our side), the PS rejoinder to the BMA rejoinder, Feb 19) is further vindicated by the DS editorial, calling for a top to the politicisation of the professional bodies and labour unions by the political parties. Discipline cannot be maintained through moral violation by the leaders.

Today, the country is internally divided, due to bipolar politics. In the time of need, real leaders cannot be found and party comes before the country. This is a typical attitude in the developing countries.

What is the punishment for bad politics? The peoples' verdict. The way the opposition is treated by the ruling party (generally speaking) is a clear indication that it will take a long period for the country to take off (speaking from the development angle).

We are short of the right type of leaders. This is not surprising, judging from the fact that the world is also short of global leaders who can rise above the occasion, and deliver the goods.

Here in Dhaka we seem to need an overall change of political leadership, at the earliest possible, to save the country and not to save the politicians who cannot deliver.

A Hussain  
Dhaka

## Why revive nuclear power generation?

Sir, It is disturbing to read a news report about the possibility of reviving the Rooppur nuclear power station project through a 20-year accord with US sources (DS Feb 21), to produce 600MW of electricity.

According to international reports, setting up of new nuclear power plants is on the de-

cline all over the world, although the technology on safety and other factors might have improved. The reasons being the scare of accidents and the disposal of the radioactive wastes anywhere in the universe. Japan is the latest victim of such an accident due to human error, and UK has been seamed through a scandal in the shipment of radioactive materials.

In Bangladesh, the maintenance over a long-term period may be subject to hazards, especially due to human factors. Bangladesh is said to be floating on underground gas; and the prospect of finding more gas is bright. Once the gas supply and demand position is known positively for the next 50 years, it will be time for looking at alternative sources of power supply.

It is true that availability of additional 600MW of electricity will make it easier to export gas, as the foreign investors desire. But all that can be said at this moment is for the government not to hurry and to examine all options and implications carefully and transparently before final commitment.

Alif Zabr  
Dhaka

## Voting right

Sir, There is this provision that the voter ID card holders can only vote at their selected areas where they reside presently. However, there is no indication that whether these voters could be able to vote at their permanent address with the same ID card or not.

This requires clarification so that we, the voters can vote from any of the two place, either from the permanent or the present address.

Dr. M. A. Khaleque  
Savar, Dhaka

## OPINION

# Enforcement of PSA: Attitude Counts

Arshad Mahmud

The controversial Public Safety Act is now in force. It's, of course, too early to say whether the act will reduce crime in the country. But what is certain though is that unless the law is applied uniformly, it is most unlikely to have the desired impact. And one doesn't need to be a Harvard law school graduate to know that.

Experiences show that despite public pronouncements of our leaders the law is never allowed to take its own course — especially, when it comes to white collar thugs and criminals masquerading as politicians and businessmen with clout. At a recent OCAB news conference, I pointed out to the PM Sheikh Hasina about some of her actions, albeit subtle, which are widely seen to be thwarting the natural course of law.

When she asked me to elaborate, I mentioned about the owners of the biggest house who were the biggest loan defaulters of the country and another Awami League stalwart who is the principal accused in a murder case and who recently stormed a bank in broad daylight in effort to take control of its board.

The High Court declared the owners of the big business house as wilful defaulters of huge bank loans ruling that they cannot become directors of any bank for the next eight years.

Despite the High court ruling and exhortations from our re-

spected President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed to shun loan defaulters and boycott them socially, the PM invariably allows one of the owners of the big defaulting house to join her on her foreign jaunts. The principal accused in the high-profile Humayun Zahir murder case who returned home from self-imposed exile only after the Awami League came to power has been on more than one occasion seen sharing the podium with the prime minister in public meetings.

These actions are bound to send an unmistakable message to the law enforcement agencies that these people cannot be disturbed, let alone prevented from their crimes. No wonder a posse of police force reverentially saluted one of the aforementioned characters, the picture of which was front-paged in the daily Manabjama, after he came out of the said bank with his musclemen.

How does the Prime Minister explain these phenomena and whether this would encourage terrorists and bank defaulters?

Tel me which party doesn't have defaulters and terrorists in their folds, 'she shot back. If that is the answer from a PM, I do not know how the PSA, or for that matter any law, can be effective in dealing with crimes.

The writer is the overseas correspondent for *The Guardian*.