

## Lesson from CEC's Departure

**O**STENSIBLY, Chief Election Commissioner Abu Hena has resigned on 'health grounds'. But his decision to relinquish could not have been devoid of 'political reasons' to get the burden off his shoulders in the face of opposition criticism and non-cooperation that dogged his footsteps for the most part of his tenure. Although he put up a brave face and functioned within the statutory assurance of keeping his position until such time as he himself chose to resign or otherwise found guilty of misconduct, there are reasons to believe that he was affected by political tempest blown around him.

The pattern of CEC resignations is unmistakable with Abdur Rauf and Sadeq relinquishing their charges before time like, in a way, Hena is departing now from the scene.

Sadeq had too brief a stint to be any reference-point here; but what certainly will be worthwhile to recall is the fate that Abdur Rauf met with. Both Abu Hena and Abdur Rauf were not so much the victims of having held any bad elections as they fell prey to the opposition's prejudice originating in their electoral defeats.

The apathy towards them snowballed centring on the 'conduct of by-elections' by the CECs where the outcome went against the opposition candidates. The accusations levelled against Hena were largely unfounded and evidently not in a sync with his general reputation for having held the elections freely and fairly. Thus both Abu Hena and Rauf, in that order, appear to have been crucified due to their 'failure' to conduct an election in a way that produced victory for the opposition parties.

The supreme irony in the whole experience has been that both Abu Hena and Rauf were consensual choices when they look over as CEC. Abdur Rauf was blamed by the AL for its defeat in the 1991 elections while the BNP could not get over the feeling that Abu Hena's 'conduct of elections' somehow ensured their fall from power in 1996.

Either we discard such a precedent of consigning a CEC to perdition as a reaction to electoral reverses or we never allow democracy to take roots in the country. We must get our basics right there or democracy is doomed.

## Another Jolt to CU

**T**HE ruling party-backed Bangladesh Chhatra League has plans to file a writ against the Chittagong University syndicate's decision to expel four of their activists in the wake of murder on the campus. Since that is what they have decided to do we find no reason why they should be enforcing the indefinite siege programme which has got under way. The BCL move is reflective of sheer indifference to the ordeal of some 14,000 general students of the university. Also, it proves beyond doubt their opposition to the All-Party Student Alliance's just-ended siege which again was staged purely on political considerations, not out of concern for the general students. Actually, it is the same role being recast with the BCL now playing the tormentor.

The latest turn of events, besides casting a dark shadow over resumption of academic activities at the university, has also posed a threat to inner discipline of the party itself. The CU unit of the BCL seems to have decided to forge ahead with its siege programme despite being advised to the contrary by the central leadership. The BCL high command, a report in *Prothom Alo* says, is in favour of reopening of the university and wants to play no role in prolonging the 'unscheduled recess'.

We are fully in agreement with the BCL's central leadership on this count. The ordeal of the general students should be put to an end rightaway. If not out of sympathy to their sufferance, the latest siege programme should be folded up in the very interest of the BCL itself. If they persist in it, it would bring a greater slur on the BCL's name. In the long run, the move might also prove detrimental even to the interest of the ruling party itself.

We urge the central leaders, not only of BCL but also of Awami League, to put a tight rein on the CU unit of BCL. It must be made to call off the siege programme before it inflicts irreparable damage not only on the academic careers of general students but also on the party's image.

## Biotechnology Institute

**I**T is a matter of great relief and satisfaction that the government has finally woken from its slumber and decided to establish the much-awaited National Institute of Biotechnology (NIB). We wholeheartedly welcome the initiative of the National Science and Technology Committee in this behalf and congratulate the Prime Minister who will lay the foundation stone for this important research organisation at Savar. The NIB in the context of the present day world will be of cutting edge importance for Bangladesh which is totally dependent on agriculture. In the 21st century farmers will be looking to use genetically modified seeds for improving plants and animal breeds. Use of biotechnology is rapidly increasing throughout the world because of the potential it holds to raise agricultural yield in particular. The NIB, among other areas of research, will develop genetically modified (GM) seeds that will be resistant to pests and diseases and tolerant of flood and drought. However, as we rejoice in the news of having a biotechnology institute in the near future we cannot help point out that this enormously important research organisation was shelved for such a long time. Our neighbours established them about two decades ago. The much delayed plan of the government to build the NIB sounds more belated when one considers the fact that it won't be before four years that we will see it in a tangible form. We hope the basic infrastructure needed for the NIB will be set up as quickly as possible and in the meantime the process of research at some level should continue in earnest. The scouting for a talent pool should start and contacts with other countries having experience in the areas of research should be stepped up. The views expressed by the professionals and biotechnology experts regarding project prioritisation should be taken into account because they are the persons who will be responsible for the success or otherwise of this tremendously important institute.

**S**RI Lanka is making SOS calls with about 40,000 of its weary, battle-fatigued troops trapped in the intricate web of jungles of the Jaffna peninsula. The seething ethnic insurgency that has claimed thousands of lives including those of high ranking political figures seems to be now moving inevitably towards a discernible course in favour of the guerrillas, however unpalatable it may be to the Sinhalese dominated Sri Lankan government. The insurgency and counter-insurgency in Sri Lanka are both unique in terms of their historical backgrounds, growth, regional involvement and the present complexities. What was initially a Tamil political stance and eventual disenchantment and despair over the new constitutional arrangements of the early eighties, later on turned into a full-blown insurgency largely due to the Indira Doctrine that envisioned India's regional role as a dominating policeman, a 'design' which Sri Lanka had so far defiantly challenged. Sri Lanka went not only to Pakistan, India's arch-rival, but as far as China and Israel, to seek support and add substance to its counter-insurgency operations in the peninsula. An euphoric and proud social democratic system, carefully engineered by Sri Lanka's political pioneers, began to fledge and collapse as the country was caught unawares in the degree and intensity of mass discontent of the Tamils. The country's rag tag minuscule armed forces were beefed up overnight in size and armaments, if not in its operational efficacy.

Since the inception of the insurgency, the political landscape of Sri Lanka has been marked by the violence perpetrated by the Tamil dissents at one hand, and the country's endemic domestic political squabbling by the power-hungry politicians on the other. In the absence of common political vision and direction, the initial response to the armed

dissidence was left exclusively to the fresh military leaders, many of whom were given overnight promotions to the ranks of colonels and brigades, but with little about the socio-political dynamics that has to accompany the military operations in insurgency situations. Lacking adequate field experience, the essence of counter-insurgency waged by the armed forces has gravitated on major contacts and rapid gains in some populated and built-up areas, but ultimate inability to exploit the gains through winning the hearts and minds of the people and expanding grassroots support for the government programmes proved major obstacles for political success of the counter-insurgency campaigns. Facile military gains, therefore, crumbled due to inadequate intelligence network, lack of motivation and operational endurance of the commanders and their men, political volte-face of the central leaders, and, lastly, the dogged military challenge of the more daring guerrillas in the jungle.

After the death of Indira Gandhi in 1984, the reformed and reinvigorated Congress leadership wanted to heal the Sri Lankan wounds, only if the government of Sri Lanka would overtly accept India's legitimate role as the mediator and arbitrator of regional disputes. India's subsequent military venture in Sri Lanka complicated its relations with its neighbours and raised international eyebrows, and the campaign itself met many formidable shoals and quagmires in the Jaffna peninsula. Faced with an unyielding LTTE, it encouraged Eelam National Democratic Front as a counter-force, and thus compounding the frac-

tures in the strife-ridden Tamil community. Despite frequent use of helicopter gunships and air raids on the guerrilla strongholds, the Tigers remained undaunted; it revealed the extent of their commitment to the cause and the dragging bush war proved staggeringly costly to India in terms of cash and casualties. Military stalemate in the campaign and the public uproar within India forced the government to withdraw hurriedly from Jaffna. This posed a renewed challenge to the Sri Lankan armed forces who would fight the Tigers without organized external support. But, more significantly, the embarrassing Indian withdrawal bolstered the morale of guerrillas greatly who, by then, knew very well that they could tie down the might of even the vast Indian army in the jungle warfare.

Since then much blood has dripped in Sri Lanka and it spilled up not only into the cap-

ital city, Colombo, but also to the Indian soil, where Rajiv Gandhi gave his life to a Tamil suicide bomber. Only last year, as Pravarakan, the legendary leader of the insurgents, intemperately refused to accept the latest offer of the Sri Lankan President, Kumaratunga for political dialogue, military boasted of successes in Jaffna where it controlled a large chunk of strategic territory including Jaffna city, Batticaloa and the Elephant Pass, the main entry to the peninsula. What has gone wrong since the last military gains, and why has not the military been able to predict the major guerrilla invasion that has caused humiliating setbacks for the country? Why is the forty thousand strong force giving SOS calls when the army can be supported by air? Has it reached a point of desperation, fatigue and apparent resignation? One would only be tempted to ask if the political

leadership had vested too much faith in the young leadership of the army and, in the process, faces humiliating embarrassments today.

Sri Lanka's desperate call for aid and assistance to tide over its military debacles has evoked most interesting response from the region. India, embittered over the Sri Lankan experience of the past, and conscious of the Tamil votes, has virtually refused to support the Sri Lankan government in any significant way. While its pro-forma commitment to the integrity of Sri Lanka remains hollow and perfunctory, it has cautioned against any outside support for Sri Lanka, signalling restraint against overtures both from China and Pakistan. While China, with its record of sabre-rattling over Taiwan that has earned her international condemnation for muscle-flexing, would have few reasons to become embroiled in Sri Lanka, Pakistan would have a more plausible geopolitical reason for involvement in aiding this neighbour. Pakistan is already on the list of being a patron state for international terrorism for its involvement in Kashmir and Afghanistan. Therefore, any major military support from Pakistan would not only vitiate the regional environment further, but also accentuate international condemnation of the military regime in Pakistan that urgently needs legitimacy of rule rather than regional adventures.

India, by default, can be the only savior of Sri Lanka. If it intervenes militarily and extricates the Sri Lankan soldiers from the peninsula, it may as well earn the respect it evoked in the Maldives, as a friend in times of crises for the neigh-

bours. But here the stakes for India are different. The players have degrees of substantiality and vitality in India's domestic politics which were absent in the case of the Maldives. India may not like an altogether independent Jaffna, but the idea of a Jaffna state that would be an intimate ally of India is not too disturbing for many Indians. This would not only strengthen the coalition partners of the present government in India in the South, but also earn warm applause from the millions of voters from the region. Many Indians, particularly the think-tanks from the Hindi dominated north, however, would not like to see a disproportionately powerful south that has been developing its own distinctive identity. It would deepen the wedge between the north and the south, with south clamouring for more autonomy.

Sri Lanka dilemma begs some interesting questions. Why has the counter-insurgency operation begun to fail, with dangers of trapping the government into a weak and limited bargaining manoeuvres? The resulting political arrangements, however temporary, may be unacceptable not only to the people of Sri Lanka, but also to many other countries of the world. Why has the security force, despite its rapid expansion and technological sophistication, failed in its military objectives? This is a vivid reminder to many Third World armies, high on national budget, but low in leadership qualities and operational efficiency. A timely review of the state of leadership and training of the armed forces would perhaps have prevented this political catastrophe for the growing democracy in the Third World.

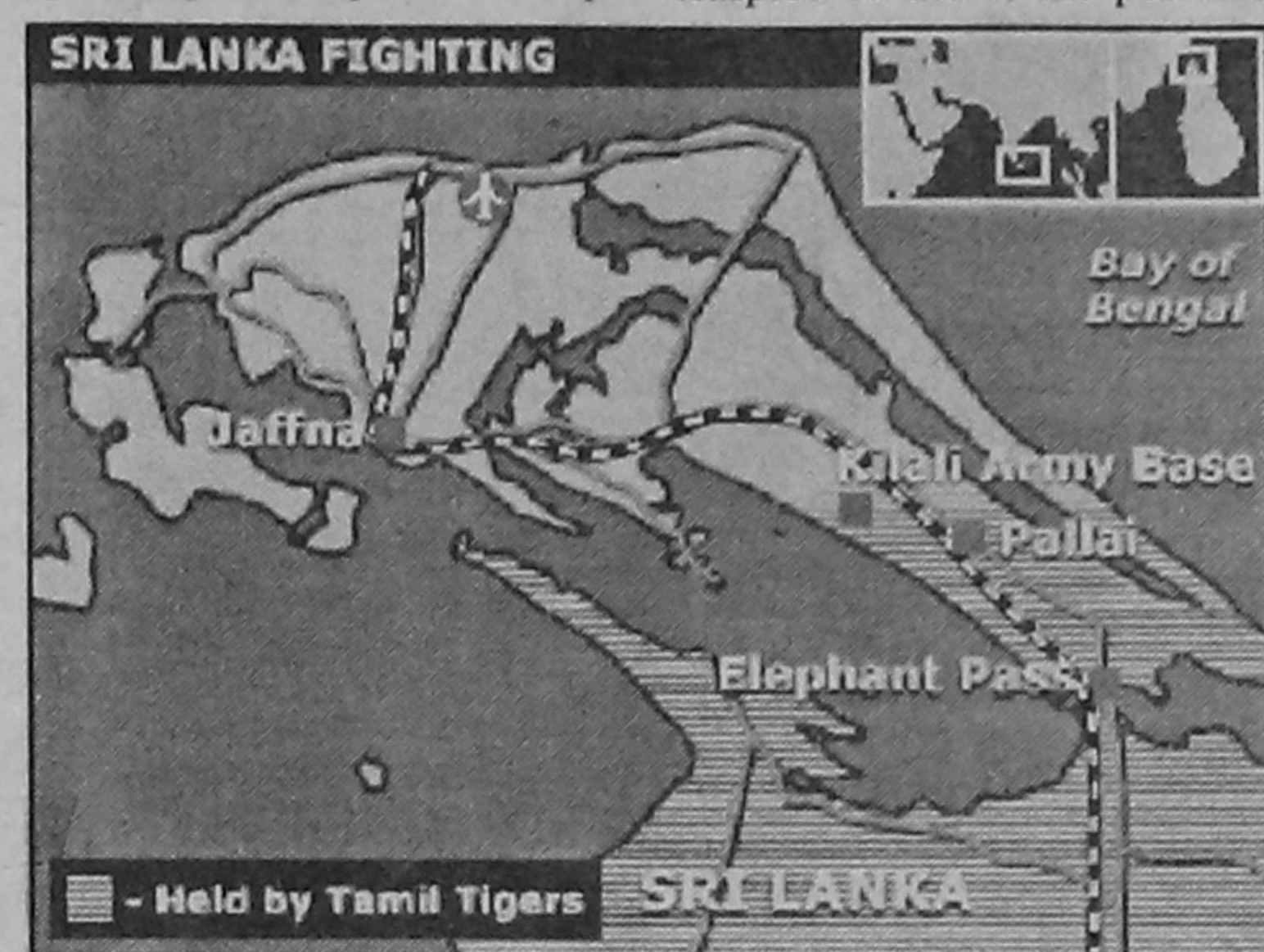
Lastly, the nature, ability and eventual effectiveness of Indian claims of leadership role in the regional politics will come under renewed focus and scrutiny, which is bound to have profound effect on regional cooperation and conflict.

## Sri Lanka

# A Test Case of South Asian Conflict Resolution

by Pundit Putro

**Sri Lanka dilemma begs some interesting questions. Why has the counter-insurgency operation begun to fail, with dangers of trapping the government into a weak and limited bargaining manoeuvre? Why has the security force, despite its rapid expansion and technological sophistication, failed in its military objectives?**



## Defining Moment for the Island State?

by Ekram Kabir

**What is needed is a serious effort on the part of the government of Sri Lanka to involve a neutral third party of professional mediators to develop a useful conflict-resolution strategy. Well, this is easier said than done, but given the circumstances it seems to be the only option -- even when Norwegian initiative didn't make much headway.**

condemned to a continuing cycle of violence until one side or the other is finally defeated? Or should Sri Lanka's politicians make more efforts to find a peaceful solution? And why doesn't the international community intervene to stop the bloodshed?

For India, it paid a heavy price when its intervention on two earlier instances went badly wrong. In 1971, several hundred Indian soldiers were killed when they were sent into Sri Lanka to help put down a Marxist rebellion. The next intervention by India took place in July 1987, when Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi sent in the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to disarm the Tigers. But the rebels refused to lay down their arms. More than 1,000 soldiers died and IPKF was forced into an embarrassing withdrawal, after being heavily criticised at home.

Indian policymakers, having burnt their finger in the past, fear a similar outcome if the country is drawn in again. "The spillover was quite serious and even led to the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi," an Indian political analyst Mahesh Rangarajan was quoted by the BBC. "If India does decide to help...and if

some Tamil civilians are killed after that, those groups will be baying for the government's blood," Rangarajan added.

India is also home to over 55 million Tamils, who live in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, separated from Sri Lanka by a narrow strait. They share strong historical and cultural links with Sri Lanka's Tamil minority and even provided a base for the LTTE for a while.

Then again, can India afford to stand by idly? It is conscious of its image as a regional power and is lobbying to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Diplomats and analysts say Delhi realises that if it stays away from the conflict, it could open the door to other countries to step in. It represents a dilemma for the country's rulers and one that they are pondering over with considerable caution.

Asking for external help shows how weak is Sri Lanka's armed forces have become. Asking outsiders for help also means losing faith in one's own soldiers. The inability to neutralise the rebels makes it difficult for President Kumaratunga to proceed with her alternative strategy of finding a peaceful solution to the country's trou-

bles. Her strategy revolves around a constitutional package that would ultimately result in some autonomy for Tamil-majority areas in the north and east of the country. It is hoped this could form the basis for attempts -- brokered by Norway -- to lure the Tigers to the negotiating table. However, Kumaratunga's proposals for constitutional reform have run into problems with the opposition United National Party, and without their support she will find it difficult to get the proposals through parliament.

Meanwhile, the government says its strategy is to defeat the Tamil Tigers militarily while simultaneously pursuing a constitutional settlement to Sri Lanka's troubles. But the critics argue this policy is contradictory, because any settlement could not be successful without the consent of the rebels. And with each government reverse on the battlefield, the criticism grows louder. The Tigers, on the other hand, say they will not stop their struggle until they have secured an independent homeland for Tamils. This aim too has proven unrealistic. It is a battle in which for the moment, neither side seems capable of conclusive victory.

Under the administration of Kumaratunga, Sri Lanka has committed itself to a substantive process of constitutional reform and devolution of power that will place the Tamil minority on an equal footing with the Sinhala majority, with clear control over the north and the most part of the east. The Kumaratunga administration, unlike its predecessor regimes, has sought to offer a non-chauvinist dispensation. Even if Chandrika's strategy has failed to make headway, it continues to be the most promising instrument of a potential peace process. She offers a way out of the morass that is far more healing than the LTTE's own campaign.

Negotiation seems to be the only solution. India, as a major regional player, should not remain uninvolved, because it is in the best position to help the troubled island. If India takes the lead in the negotiation for a peaceful settlement of the crisis it can even fulfill its role of the regional power. Reports from New Delhi suggesting it would be facilitating a peaceful outcome through constructively engaging both sides to the conflict, is a good news.

The United Nations or the international community can also help to end the cycle of violence in Sri Lanka. Solutions have to be found and peace prevail or both sides will perish. What is needed is a serious effort on part of the government of Sri Lanka to involve a neutral third party of professional mediators to develop a useful conflict-resolution strategy. Well, this is easier said than done, but given the circumstances it seems to be the only option -- even when Norwegian initiative didn't make much headway. This is a value-based conflict, and the war will not end until each party is convinced that it can benefit from a peaceful outcome. In order to achieve this, serious mediation efforts are a must. Military intervention, if any, will only aggravate the current situation.

There is an apprehension that negotiations between the government and the Tigers may not produce tangible results because of the pervasive lack of trust between the two sides. Besides there are many other factors in the country that may not permit a solution that is fair and acceptable to all. But Sri Lanka needs help to end the war. This war has killed thousands of Sinhalese and Tamils and made the country poor. Give peace to Sri Lanka and no aid is more effective than that. Get involved in facilitating a just peaceful solution to this troubled island. The SAARC countries should also come forward and help Sri Lanka resolve the crisis through mediation.

## 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.**

### Police beats Photojournalist again

Sir, Beating of on duty photojournalists is not unusual in our country. Recently, a photojournalist of the daily *Manabzamin* was beaten by the police while he was trying to take photographs of the agitating female students of the Bangladesh-Kuwait Friendship hall of University of Dhaka. The students were agitating in front of the Vice-Chancellor's residence for their various demands including safe drinking water, electricity and so on. A photojournalist's duty is to portray the real picture of an incident. Therefore, what right the police had to obstruct the said photojournalist from performing his duty and torture him?

A young citizen  
Dhaka

### Autocratic democracy

Sir, The President has rightly criticised the current political style of enforcing one way of thinking, condemning other options. Now the business community has started specifically criticising the political

and bureaucratic setup (DS, April 18).

On the other hand, the ruling party is openly criticising the judiciary for delaying in disposing off cases of interest to the party--even pointing out that they were mentally prepared for contempt of court cases. The President has also pointed out about the adverse implications of the presence of bank loan defaulters within the political parties.

Thus, there is confrontation all around, and the political situation is going from bad to worse. This tension is mounting before the next general elections, now just round the corner. The helpless public is not at all happy confronting the big shots, but the masses are at the receiving end in all public issues. The continued misuse of power is oppressive. The people have the moral right to explode one day.

If, as a citizen, I criticise bad politics, then I am a conspirator, according to the powers that be! This is preposterous. The ruling regime is pointing out that a campaign had been launched by interested quarters against the politicians. In public affairs there is nothing hidden, including criticism.

The way the President's observations are ignored by the

political leaders is not a good omen for good politics in the country. Supposing the President decides to resign voluntarily one fine morning, whose would suffer most? The answer is crystal clear to all citizens.

A Husnain  
Dhaka

### Computer related ailments

Sir, In the May 2, 2000 issue of weekly *Jai Jai Din* a very informative article came out on computer related illness. It informs the readers of health consequences of continuous and long hours of work in front of the computer with least or no break at all. The article is about those persons working in front of the computer all the time through out the week. After months of work this person is most likely to develop pain in the neck, shoulder, back and fingers. This physical trouble shows up due to the repetitive movement of the muscle in a single pattern for a long time. It is called repetitive stress disorder or computer induced repetitive stress injury. Over the time these condition effects the normal functioning of the spinal cord and other related bones. And if this unhealthy working condition continues the person can suffer debilitating illness.

The article also indicates some precautionary measures one can take to avoid computer-related ailments. Before starting the day's work and during the rest period one should do some light exercises and warm

up the body. One should not take complete rest immediately after long hours in front of the computer. There are also other bits of advice presented by Mr. Shamim Akhter Tushar, the author of the article which includes sitting position, level of height of the computer, easy accessibility of the mouse and other necessary materials etc.

While reading this article, I remembered of a young man, I heard about, working as a very well paid consultant in one of the largest consulting firms somewhere in Europe. His job like many of his colleagues was to develop and write project proposals for his clients as assigned to him. His responsibility entailed work from nine in the morning till eight or nine at night. All these hours he had to be in front of the computer. It did not matter how many hours he put in his work a day as far as the employers were concerned. The assignment had to be completed and that too on time. The job had severely taxed the young man's brain for he has to think, analyse, and review his project continuously while preparing the project document. Under conditions of time limit for completing the job, he could seldom go out of his office for lunch, not to speak of taking a break. Considering the nature of the job his company made available prepared fast food, soft drinks, hot coffee and tea etc within the office premises so that the employees did not have to go out of the office during the working hours. But soon the young man started suffering from extreme headache and some other ailments as discussed above. His

regular physician's prescription helped for a while but the trouble did not go away completely. Shortly after his headache came back in greater intensity and his ability to carry out intensive brainwork was greatly impaired. Later, he had to go to a specialist and had to undergo treatment for a long time.

In Bangladesh, the increasing number of people spending all their daily working hours in front of the computer need to be careful about the possible adverse effect on their health. Our neurologists may like to throw some light on this nascent issue.

Syed Wallullah  
Dhaka

### Bangladeshi hackers

Sir, Good news (ironically) for Bangladeshis starving for hi-tech IT news. We are progressing in the PC and IT sectors, as could be indirectly judged from news reports about hacking of an Internet provider's network based in Dhaka (the name and address were traced, it is claimed). Sometimes back, another such an agency was hacked, but the victims are chary about confirming such intrusions, for business security.

Now the urgent question, which arises in the minds of the Internet users, is whether the GoB is ready with the regulations and the mechanism for the eventual prosecution of the offenders. We need hi-tech cyber

laws on line piracy. The authorities can never catch up with the technological traps without expert guidance from the professional bodies. An official version of what really happened would reassure the public against future mishaps.

AZ  
Dhaka

### Receipt and payment of electricity bills

Sir, For the last six months many of us have not been receiving electricity bills in due time. We have been receiving bills only 3-4 days ahead of the last date of payment of the bill. This put us in great difficulties and inconveniences. We are required to go to DESA office personally for taking necessary permission and extension of last date of payment of the bills costing our valuable time, energy and money.

We would therefore like to request DESA to kindly send us the monthly electricity bill at least 15-20 days ahead of the payment day.

We would also like to request PDB and DESA to inform us, after every three months, the amount and period of outstanding bills, if there are any, with a view to maintaining a clean and up to date account of payment of the electricity bills and to save us from unnecessary hassles.

O H Kabir  
6, Hare Street,  
Wari, Dhaka-1203