

Floods : Three Points at Issue

MINISTER for Water Resources Abdur Razzak has hinted at taking up this year's flood havoc at the next JRC meet with India. Although the specific points to be mooted will be revealed later on, there is something that we would like to bring up rightaway. It seems to us that the 48-hour flood forecast mechanism that was agreed upon by India and Bangladesh replacing the previous 72-hour one has not quite worked. It has been a rather untimely flooding in West Bengal that has had a cascading effect of a run-off deluge through the south-western districts of our country. The suddenness of the flooding required that both sides communicated on a stepped up basis which obviously went abegging. Nevertheless, it is also worth investigating as to how much the flood warning department of the Water Development Board is to blame for the failure to forecast the magnitude of the flood to come.

We have never tired of stressing the dire need for setting up a reliable forecast mechanism as a top priority concern in terms of disaster preparedness. That the climatic pattern is changing makes it all the more imperative that we lose no time in getting a thoroughly scientific and operatively a cross-border early warning system so that it proves fail-safe.

The violent clashes that we have observed this time in connection with attempts to relieve the water pressure by cutting passages through some embankment points could be avoided if we had the benefit of timely warnings. This would have enabled us to avoid the surprise or shock element, and what is even more to the point, we could stay ready with alternative routes for flushing out excess water, including perhaps having some pumping devices installed right on the embankment sites.

The government's relief operations have been wobbly. Its roars about having huge food stocks in hand are petering out into bleats as two ministers, the water resources minister and the state minister for relief, who on a tour of some of the flooded areas, encountered public commotion for the extremely meagre succour that had reached the affected people after so many days of waiting. They could only escape the embarrassment by assuring speedy delivery of adequate relief material to the distressed souls. It is a pity that in some places the folks received as little as 100 gram of foodgrains. We are not interested in the lamentation any more that those were not flood-prone areas so 'we were caught unawares by the calamity.'

ADAB has floated a request to the international community seeking its assistance to the flood victims. We want proper utilisation of whatever help is received in response to that call. Basically though, the government must not only rush with adequate relief materials to the affected areas but also make sure that these are delivered to the genuine flood victims.

ME Peace in Tatters

PRIME Minister Ehud Barak's 48-hour ultimatum to PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, in our view, has done more damage to the peace process in the Middle East than the recent outbreak of bloody violence in the Gaza Strip. We cannot help the feeling that Israel's internal politics, and not its commitment to lasting peace in the region, has actuated Mr Barak to issue the deadline. With his government rater precariously placed in a largely hostile Knesset, he cannot simply afford any move to reprimand opposition leader Ariel Sharon for instigating the violence in the first place, can he? In the wake of failed peace talks and amidst growing frustration and anger among the Palestinians over the fluidity of the situation, Mr Sharon's visit to the Old City on September 28 was primed to incite trouble and it did. In all fairness, Mr Sharon committed the first sin and Mr Barak the second, in his bid to pass the buck on to Chairman Arafat.

The Palestinians are hard done by in every possible way. They are the ones who have so far counted some 80 corpses of the kith and kin. They are the ones who have taken shelter in rubbles as the Israeli troops demolish one building after another. Ironically still, they are the ones blamed for the skirmishes. Their only solace came in the form of a UN resolution that condemned "excessive use of force against the Palestinians, resulting in injury and loss of human life" and implicitly blamed Mr Sharon for provoking the weeklong riot in the Gaza Strip. Here, too, abstention of US on the ground that the resolution was "one-sided" and "did not reflect the fact Israel had been killed and wounded", however, provided the thorn in the flesh.

Anyway, lasting peace in the region should be the focus and such flare-ups should not derail the talks initiated and sustained by the US. An AFP news item quoting an Israeli commander has it that the Israelis and the Palestinians have agreed to immediately stop fighting. If this is what has really happened then the leaders on both sides must now start repairing the damage done, instead of finger pointing. They must realise that peace in the ME would serve the interests of both sides.

Chaos at Chittagong Jail

THE over-crowded Chittagong Central Jail was the scene of a riotous flare-up between the prisoners and wardens on Sunday afternoon. The chaos continued for more than two hours in which around fifty people were injured, including some prison guards. The trouble erupted when the city's notorious terrorist Kader was attacked by the followers of two Shibir terrorists -- Nasir and Iqbal. Kader was alleged to have been stabbed by the followers of his opponents when he was returning from the jail visiting room with the result that there was an immediate backlash within the prison compound. Recently Nasir was brought from Comilla jail to appear in some cases at the Chittagong court. These groups had previous enmities and Sunday's proximity between them fuelled the fire. Knowing the past of these people the jail officials should have taken precautions to keep them at bay.

When out of jail these people try to expand their sphere of influence to perpetrate their reign of terror on peace-loving citizens and when in jail they try to wield influence over their followers in cohorts with prison employees. Conditions in jails around the country are far from being normal. The country has seen serious troubles in prisons quite a few times over. We have had firm assurances from the government for jail reform but that still remains a far cry. This is too pressing a task to be left unattended anymore.

"DEMOCRACY is a kingless regime infested by many kings who are sometimes more exclusive, tyrannical and destructive than one, if he be a tyrant." Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, who acquired notoriety for his policy of Fascism, said this by way of expressing his derision towards democratic dispensation. All autocrats, whether in Bangladesh or elsewhere in the world, past or present, were equally contemptuous of democratic polity. But democracy is not what these dictators meant or tried to hammer on in their bid to cling to power. Democracy, in essence, is accommodation and tolerance of and respect for each other's viewpoints. Democracy, called unity in diversity, is the rule of the majority. But in a democracy the minority voice is also equally heard and avenues exist for their proper ventilation. Regular interaction and interchanges between the majority and the minority opinions ensure accountability and transparency from which the electorate form their own mindset as to which side is wrong and which side is right. In a democracy the party or parties in power and those in opposition share broad consensus on major national issues. Only their approaches and policy options to those issues are different. Both the sides strongly vouchsafe welfare of the people and vow to work for promotion of greater interest of the country.

People in a democracy closely observe the performances of two sides which are equally responsible and accountable to them and give their verdict accordingly when the time for the hustings come. In a democracy when the occasion demands, the ruling party and the opposition share the same platform and unitedly work for salvaging the nation to reassure the people of their concern for their (people) betterment and to extricate them from all possible pitfalls. Democracy is thus reconciliation rather than confrontation. If the minority

voice is stifled or muzzled by the majority, and if the opposition, in its turn, behaves in an obdurate manner and instead of extending co-operation stands as stumbling block at every step of governance, it automatically gives rise to a situation identical to Mussolini's definition of democracy. It then turns into sham democracy. Democracy then largely becomes only a facade.

The recent incident at Kalaroa where the movement of the motorcade of the Leader of the Opposition was blocked on the pretext of security for the Prime Minister, who was also scheduled to visit the area, and the consequent hullabaloo in political arena ever since are not, in any way, reflective of true democratic spirit. The law enforcers with the help of paramilitary forces put up a three-hour road blockade and the leader of the opposition along with her followers and members of the public, who had nothing to do with politics, remained stranded for hours together at a point on Jessore-Satkhira road. She was not allowed to visit the flood-affected areas and sympathise with the afflicted people.

From the southern tip to the northern region a vast area was, and still is, under floodwater in western Bangladesh. It has been a surprise flood and is the worst in three decades. The unprecedented cataclysmic deluge was caused by the onrush of waters from across the border. Nearly three million people have so far been affected and rendered homeless. Their condition is simply abysmal. During such a calamitous situation there should not have been any divide on party

lines. Forgetting party differences both the ruling party and the opposition should have stood by the side of the stricken people to give them encouragement as well as succour. But our leaders on both sides of the fence failed to rise to the occasion and delved in polemics and confrontational politics, as they are wont to, much to the dismay and chagrin of the saner democracy-loving elements.

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In Bangladesh the older generation of leaders despite their political differences used to maintain excellent interpersonal relations. The then Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was extremely respectful towards Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani despite the fact that the latter was bitterly critical of the way the former was ruling the country. Only months before his assassination Sheikh Mujib went to Moulana Bhasani's house at Santosh, Tangail responding to latter's invitation to inaugurate the nationalised Moulana Mohammed Ali College set up by him (the Moulana).

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to each other even over telephone. They meet seldom and even if they meet they do not talk to each other. In short, they are not on talking terms. These cannot in any way be good signs for democracy to flourish in Bangladesh.

A few years back a number of school children were brutally massacred in Britain. The entire nation was shocked and a pall of gloom cast its shadow everywhere. The then Prime Minister John Major and the then leader of the opposition Tony Blair together travelled to the school where the killings took place and jointly stood on the rostrum to reassure the mourning nation that they are one and united in the condemnation of the dastardly incident. In neighbouring India a few months ago a large number of pilgrims were gunned

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opponents as personal enemies. This is why there are so many political killings in Bangladesh. Instead of putting up road blockade to stop the leader of the opposition, the Prime Minister should have invited her to together visit the flood-stricken areas. This should have been the true spirit of democracy and this was the expectation of the people. But unfortunately the two leaders are so much scared of each other that they had publicly accused each other for hatching conspiracies for their extermination. This demonstrates how intolerant they have become of each other.

Security agencies have recently become over jealous for what they term as protecting the Prime Minister. Their overkill in this respect is vexing the general people. They block the roads much before the Prime Minister is to pass through them causing long traffic jams. They forget that this way they are, in fact, isolating the Prime Minister who is a public leader and making her a prisoner of her own security system. The Prime Minister's security must, of course, get priority. But at the same time the point of public convenience/inconvenience should also be kept in mind.

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Iraq and the UN Sanctions: A Dilemma for the UN?

by Harun ur Rashid

THE perception in the international community appears to be that President Saddam Hossain of Iraq is winning and the sanctions against Iraq have failed to bring him down. This perception is being reinforced by the fact that aircraft from France, Russia, Jordan and Yemen have recently landed in Baghdad contrary to the sanctions. These countries have argued that they did not break the sanctions because these flights are humanitarian in nature and they do not require the permission or approval of the UN.

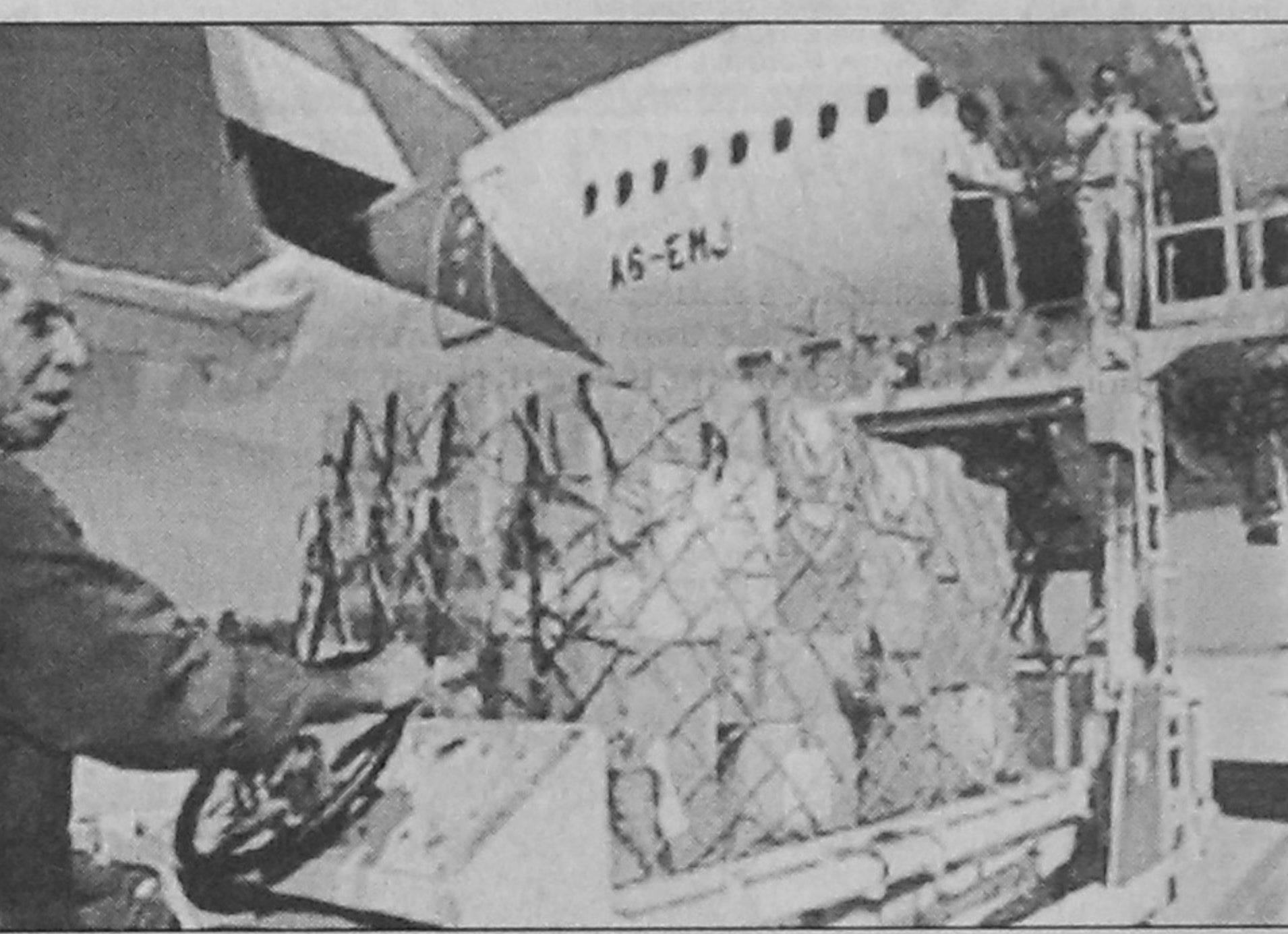
The question is: why do the UN sanctions fail against Iraq? Ordinarily sanctions are imposed to put a country in severe economic difficulties so that the people realise that their sufferings and deprivations are due to the flawed policy of their leader. The gradually built-up resentment of the people leads in the long run to the overthrow of the leader in question. The ousting of the Yugoslav President Milosevic early this month through 'people's revolt' in Belgrade is one of the shining examples of the emergence of 'people's power' against an unpopular regime.

The Western countries imagined in 1991 that what had occurred in Yugoslavia would take place in Iraq. But this has not been the case. Rather President Saddam Hossain's grip in the country is reported to have strengthened by the sanctions. There is a view that the sanctions have destroyed the middle-class society in Iraq that ordinarily rise

against the unpopular regime. In the absence of an enlightened middle-class there appears to be no sign of revolt against the regime in Iraq.

The Arab people have seen the double standards in the policy of the West towards the Middle East. They hold the view that one policy is being pursued for Arabs and another towards Israel. Israel has been allowed to flout the UN Security Council resolutions with impunity. The disenchantment of the Arab people with the West has provided, according to many observers, their support to Iraq regime. Israel is believed to be in possession of nuclear weapons in the region and has the status of a regional superpower. There is a view that until there is a balance of power in the region and peace is established between Israel and Arabs, the sanctions appear to be unjust punishment for Iraq.

There is common view that although the sanctions did not affect the elite of the Iraqi society, they had affected disastrously the



Iraqi workers unload the first direct humanitarian aid from a Gulf country

living standards of the ordinary Iraqis and led to the malnutrition and death of the children in Iraq and it has become a moral issue in international community. People are aghast to see that children are dying because of the lack of medicine due to the sanctions. According to UNICEF, the death rate among children in Iraq has jumped from 56 to 131 per 1000 births after the sanctions.

The effect of the UN sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council against Iraq in 1991 has even unnerved the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. He was reported to have said that the UN

should think of another alternative way other than sanctions to meet such situation. Two UN Humanitarian Co-ordinators had resigned in protest over the devastating effects of sanctions on ordinary Iraqis.

Another factor which seems to be working in favour of Iraq is the shortage of oil and its high price in the market. The high price has developed as a serious political issue in the US and the European Union. Sanctions have kept a great deal of Iraqi oil off the market and a flood of oil from Iraq could markedly ease the situation

globally. After all Iraq has been endowed with vast resources of oil after Saudi Arabia in the Middle East. There is a view that Iraq should be allowed to pump oil to flood the market and there is a pressure that sanctions should be withdrawn.

There is a view that the oil-rich Iraq would rebuild the country after sanctions are withdrawn and the West and Russia would have the opportunity to make money from its infrastructure and oil machinery. An important consideration lurking in the rush of aircraft flying to Baghdad seems to be the desire of getting preference in the contracts to rebuild Iraq when the sanctions cease.

The other view: The US and Britain argue that the unavailability of medicine and other essential supplies is being manipulated by the Iraqi Government to show to the world that the sanctions do not work, are hurting the children and as such they should be lifted. Furthermore they contend that the regime has built many lavish palaces in the country and funds are being

diverted towards the manufacturing of weapons of mass destruction. It is also alleged that the warehouses in the country are full of medicine but they are not being deliberately released to the public to exert a political pressure on the international community. Their argument focusses that whatever the international community has been witnessing in Iraq, it is due to the policy of the regime, rather than the effect of sanctions.

It appears that this line of argument is not being totally shared by France, Russia and China, the three Security Council permanent members. They appear to believe that the sanctions have not been working in Iraq because there is a fatigue syndrome in continuing sanctions against Iraq and this is no exit strategy conceived in 1991. Furthermore the sanctions are hurting the ordinary Iraqis.

Conclusion: The Security Council is at a bind because Iraq would not accept the latest UN proposal of UN inspectors inside the country. Iraq considers the proposal irrelevant since it argues that it has complied with the UN resolutions. The UN Security Council seems to be without any definite course of action dealing with President Saddam Hossain who has outlived politically all the people who opposed him in 90-91. There is a view that the West is paying the price for its lack of vision in its policy towards Iraq.

The author a barrister is former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

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.

Stop terrorism

Sir, The law and order situation of the country is deteriorating day by day. But who cares? Instead of helping and redressing the misfortune of the people, all our political leaders, of both the ruling and opposition parties, are engaged in criticising each other and making hollow promises.

Would our leaders instead of rhetorical promises kindly help solve the manifold problems of this hapless country and do something practical to redress the grievances of millions?

OH Kabir
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Wari, Dhaka 1203

Wanted: More ministers

Sir, One busy minister has been burdened with the charge of two problematic ministries: home and telecoms. Both are not performing well. One has alarming statistics on the law and order situation, while the other is critically under-developed, hovering

on the poverty line of telecoms services, stretching the waiting period for new telephones to several years; and that too, with the highest installation charge in the world.

The Prime Minister has also burdened herself with more Power and Energy than she can handle, or deliver; resulting in frequent tripping of circuits and power black-outs. It appears we have still to learn about the optimum use of power, with concentration of energy focused on the right target. And in a delicate region, this could be a problem.

AZ
Dhaka

Female hostel needed

Sir, It is known from the DU sources that of about 22,000 students of the University, over 10,000 are girls. The University was established in 1921 as a residential one. But its residential status could not be maintained for long. The University started with only three residential halls. Now there are 14 hostels of which only three are for females.

Recently the foundation stone of another female hostel was laid by the PM. The hostel will be set up near the New Market. The establishment of a female hostel is indeed welcome, but its location cannot be appreciated because the Kuwait Maitri Hall (established as an extension of Shamsunnahar Hall) is very near to the new one.

There are only two hostels in the Science Faculty and both of them are for male students. A third one is being constructed on the eastside of the Asiatic Society. This has also been declared to be a male hostel. This is sheer injustice to the female students of the Science Faculty. Science students are to remain busy with their practical classes up to 5 p.m. and after the class, the female students cannot enter nearby hostels although their male classmates can.

Therefore, I suggest that the under construction hostel near the Asiatic Society be given to the female students of the Science Faculty. To increase its size the present Extension-I of Shahidullah Hall may also be included in the female hostel. There is enough space on the eastern side of the Extension-II of Shahidullah Hall to build a five storied north-south building (may be larger than the present one) facing the west. And this new building could easily be occupied

by the students of Extension-I.

MAS Molla
Member, BAAS, Dhaka

Corrupt police stations

Sir, Being a resident of Uttara, it is dreadful to think that our police station has been distinct as the second most corrupt police station in the country. Transparency International's report published in your esteemed daily (September 26) has to be taken seriously. The report has put the Uttara residents in a dilemma. The report indeed interprets that we should be prepared to face all means of harassment at the police station should we have the bad luck to visit the place to lodge any complaint. Our congratulations to the OC of Uttara police station for this unique achievement!

Mahmad
Uttara, Dhaka

Frustrating indeed

Sir, Two news items published in different newspapers have attracted our attention. One is about a Bangladeshi athlete, who secured 64th position out of 65 participants in one of the events at the just-concluded 27th Olympic Games in Sydney, ahead of the competitor from Uganda. The

other news item is on the World Population Report 2000 released by the UNFPA, which puts Bangladesh second to Papua New Guinea in terms of incidences of cruelty and physical assaults on women by their male partners. It is alleged that 47 per cent women in Bangladesh are at the mercy of their male partners. What an appalling and sad picture!

In cruelty of other sorts, we must be in a good position, maybe atop the list. Horrendous accounts of crimes occupy the news dailies. Is it not ironical that Bangladesh is climbing the ladder in those survey which are despicable and going down in commendable ones? Will this horrifying trend ever change?

NurJahan
Chittagong

Concern for the environment

Sir, Being a citizen, I find it my duty to make others around me aware of environmental degradations in Bangladesh. I am a member of a club called the Global Issues Club and our main objective is to make the country a better to place to live in. We believe in Recycle, Reuse and Reduce.

We want others to believe in this and help us achieve our goal. Bangladesh is our country. If we don't look after it, no one will. Some of the major environmental

problems that we are facing are: ●Use of polythene bags. Polythene bags do not dissolve in the soil and thus pollute the environment. These are also harmful for our health as it has been found that black polythene cause cancer. So, we should discourage the use of polythene bags and encourage the use of paper bags or jute bags. ●The second problem is the wastage of resources. E.g. paper. Paper is made from trees. So, if we use more paper, more trees will be destroyed. Trees are vital for our survival and we simply cannot afford to destroy more and more trees. Thus, we should encourage reusing, e.g. paper envelopes can be reused or made from old magazines that are found lying around the house. ●The third problem is littering. Everywhere we go we see litter all around. People throw litter out on the streets which is very much harmful for the environment. Litter decomposes in the open and release poisonous gas which are inhaled by us. This is very harmful. If people are careful enough to through litter only in the garbage bins then this environmental degradation will be checked and the country will indeed be a better place to live in.

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