

## Destructive hartal, again

Let restraint be the hall-mark

LIKE an automaton with a metallic indifference to surroundings, the Opposition alliance, led by BNP, is forcing the nation once again into a hartal-afflicted dungeon-like existence. We will be setting back our clock by 72 hours from today in this fast-track digital age where speed is now the common endowment of all mankind. We seem to be the most reluctant to use it.

This shutdown is being forced down the gullet after the 132-hour-long hartal suffered in two spells during the first fortnight of the current month by spurning the SOS calls from the business community, civil society entreaties and even murmurs within the BNP against further hartal. A certain section of the BNP likes to argue though, that their hands are forced into hartal because of the government's 'repressive policies'. As if there is no alternative remedy for it, something that would not have subjected the people to an oppressive disruption of life they have come to have a revulsion for. A hint has been dropped from within the BNP that the hartal hours might be curtailed by 12 to 18 hours towards the end to reduce people's hardship to some extent. Let it come true.

Show some economic sense, too, by paying attention to the Asian Development Bank's pointer to the export growth having declined by 5.5 per cent during the last two months alone because of the spurt in hartals.

The level of violence during the last 72-hour hartal was high and it could escalate during this spell if conscious application of restraint from both sides of the political divide would be lacking. Shun the policy of engaging each other in the street in a show of power while the police plays its professional role.

Since the opposition has called for this long hartal it is their responsibility to see that the exemptions to medical emergencies, fire service and journalistic activity are fully enforced on the ground by them. This would require the right kind of message to be put across to their activists and field operatives topped off by a supervisory tab kept on the proceedings.

## Stop destruction of lakes

A question of survival

IT is a matter of survival. Lakes are not just objects of scenic beauty, but of crucial importance to life itself. From providing a habitat for plants and fishes, to aiding the replenishment of clean air and offering natural drainage systems, lakes carry out a host of silent but critical activities that must not be compromised. To do so would be to invite permanent ecological and environmental degradation and threaten the health of millions.

It is a matter of grave concern that far from preserving and improving the condition of our lakes, we are allowing them to be destroyed, one by one. At a workshop organised by BUET, Bangladesh Scouts and The Daily Star, experts warned that while many lakes in and around Dhaka had already disappeared, others are seriously threatened with extinction.

We have spoken out against encroachments on our lakes, and we do so again. The authorities have been turning a blind eye to illegal grabbing of lakes for commercial or private purposes, by influential quarters, for far too long. We demand that all unauthorised structures in lake areas be demolished. The natural boundaries of all our lakes must be restored. Government must ensure that no encroachments are made in the future.

Waste matter is being dumped at will into our lakes, causing pollution, killing plant and fish life and blocking their free flow into natural streams. Sewerage disposal is a vital need of this city and must be given the highest priority. Stop our lakes from being used as free disposal grounds. Penalise commercial dumping and install a proper sewerage disposal system.

Private and media campaigns to promote awareness among citizens cannot bear fruit unless the government takes this issue seriously. The various public bodies, DCC, WASA, DESA, the Land Commission and RAJUK work at cross purposes. The authorities have to unify and coordinate their activities with a committed agenda to save our lakes.

We have wasted valuable time, allowing nearly irretrievable damage on our lakes. Let the government be aware that it has a responsibility to preserve life and protect the health of citizens. Act now, before it is too late.

# Kashmir today: More than that meets the eye



BRIG (RTD) M ABDUL HAFIZ

EFFECTIVE from November 28, 2000 the Ramadhan ceasefire offered by Indian Prime Minister Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee is still in force in Kashmir after several extensions. Pakistan's 'maximum restraints' with partial troops withdrawal from the line of control (LOC) in response also hold good. Vajpayee's steadfast commitment to prolonging the ceasefire together with General Musharraf's renewed call for a dialogue with New Delhi points to the existence of a peace initiative in Kashmir, although no one knows if it will fall in place to form the web of a peace process in due course. In the meantime the whole world knows that the contenders in the disputed state are in search of peace and have been seeking peaceful ways and means to wriggle out of the imbroglio. To give peace a chance even the wild speculations on either side seem to have been suspended for the time being and Kashmir is conspicuously absent from international headlines for some time. The peace activists have been briskly rushing back and forth to each other's countries to wage war for peace. Yet, beneath the thin veneer of a deceptive calm an ominously different Kashmir is

emerging which is neither peaceful nor conducive for peace. The news of real import in Kashmir these days are few and far between, but they do punctuate a far larger story the story of a continuing carnage and gloom.

The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) in New Delhi the prime mover of Vajpayee's cease fire politics was not unaware of the risks involved in an unilateral ceasefire declaration and its repeated extensions. It could not be oblivious of the fact that the space vacated by the

India by decimating pro Indian elements and degrading the centre's legitimacy in the state. For example, eight people who had filed nomination papers or had taken office in the state's now-aborted local body elections have been shot dead since January 11 right within the ceasefire period. Although the elections were held on a nonparty basis, almost all of them had some past affiliation with the ruling National Conference (NC). The party has lost over 30 cadres since the Prime Minister's

through a newspaper notification to spare them because the stoppage of their work would cause indescribable sufferings for their wards and dependants. The episode only shows the limit of the government writ in the state which is increasingly in the grip of the terrorist groups.

Also those who were candidate for local body elections hurried to advertise that they had no interest for any public office. So much panicked are those people for the retail-

A series of communal events in India like the RSS (Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh) chief K S Sadashan's call for the 'Indianisation of Islam', VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad)-led anti-Muslim mobilisations in the wake of Bamiyan Buddhas' demolition and the burning of a copy of the Holy Quran in New Delhi on March 3 provoked deep sentiment throughout Kashmir and quickly gave a religious hue to the enter struggle for Kashmiri liberation. The right wing leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani, neu-

would soon have talks with all parties, and make efforts to find a solution to the Kashmir problem is the only hope that is now dangling before the APHC. Whether such a step will soon be taken remains to be seen because the real reason for the failure of a dialogue with the APHC appears to be a bitter campaign of resistance mounted by Home Minister Advani and Defence Minister Jaswant Singh. Even if a dialogue starts according to Vajpayee's assurance no one in the APHC seems to have any real ideas what to do should a dialogue fail to produce any result. In the meantime, aggressive security measures like cordon and search operations have gradually started to resume in the valley in the wake of continued terrorist violence an indication that the cease fire may no more be extended.

With the terrorist groups like Lashkar-e-Tyeba well entrenched in Kashmir during the ceasefire period, the levels of violence and infiltration across the LOC continue to rise. The security officials are predicting an especially violent summer ceasefire or no ceasefire. Importantly, General Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan signalled at the start of his March 22 visit to the United States that he was in no position to end the activities of fundamentalist groups without some major concessions by India on Kashmir. And worst of all, there is an ominous growth of the communal chauvinist constituency in much of Jammu and Kashmir. Not only has there been a growing intervention in Kashmir of Jihadi groups based both in Pakistan and Kashmir, the nationalist goal of a free Kashmir is increasingly becoming elusive. So far nothing substantive has been gained by any of the contenders and the divide between them has only deepened.

## PERSPECTIVES

Not only has there been a growing intervention in Kashmir of Jihadi groups based both in Pakistan and Kashmir, the nationalist goal of a free Kashmir is increasingly becoming elusive. So far nothing substantive has been gained by any of the contenders and the divide between them has only deepened.

respondents to Vajpayee's call would be instantly occupied by other terrorist groups vying for dominance in the troubled state. Yet one of India's intentions in its ceasefire gambit has been to tell the world that India is pro-peace while Pakistan continues to sponsor terrorism through fresh groups like Lashkar-e-Tyeba and Harkatul Mujahideen, now in the forefront of 'Jihad' in Kashmir. But such notion of India has been far from cost effective. Because, according to current political barometer, the gambit has altered the valley's ground reality in a manner which would ultimately compromise India's bargaining position.

Today even official records are aptly to show the ascendancy of the groups like Lashkar-e-Tyeba in post ceasefire period and how much has it undermined the interests of

ceasefire came into effect and 42 who had or were believed to have association with security organisations have been executed. The responsibility for all these killings has been attributed to Lashkar-e-Tyeba who never denied them. Back in early nineties thousands of NC workers threatened then by Hizbul Mujahideen put out declaration of disassociation with the party.

Now the same phenomenon is back again. The newspapers in Kashmir these days abound with announcements advertising disassociation from political or elected office. On March 13 when Lashkar-e-Tyeba announced that it would execute any one who took up contract for army supply and military works there was clear trepidation among the prospective contractors. Next morning they collectively begged to the Lashkar-e-Tyeba

ation of the Lashkar! Not only that. From January 12 to march 10 the state's intelligence records show that the valley saw at least 31 major rural and urban protests against the Indian rule. Thousands of people came out to join those protests and their numbers were unprecedented since 1990. Some of those protests were in support of far right terrorist groups whom the Indian authority wanted to eliminate through its ceasefire strategy. One key objective of Ramadhan ceasefire was to isolate the far right so that All Parties Hurryat Conference (APHC) centrists could gain ground.

Frustrating those hopes, the string of protests through the month of March has, for the first time in Kashmir, been directly influenced by pan-Indian communal conflict a syndrome that would adversely affect India's game plan in the state.

tralised earlier both from the APHC and his own Jamat-e-Islami scored significant political mileage by organizing protests against 'Hindu chauvinism'. Geelani who always described the movement in Kashmir as being essentially religious in character and was consequently eased out of APHC executive was now catapulted to a leadership position although outside the Jamaat and the APHC.

With no dialogue as yet taking place between the APHC and Indian authority the former could find itself further marginalised if the present trend of rightwing tilt continues in Kashmir politics. The leaders like Geelani and his close associates will now attack APHC mainstream's supposed secularism rendering the prospect of an early dialogue even more difficult. Vajpayee's March 12 announcement that his government

## Tension mounts in Indonesia

Can President Wahid survive the crisis?



ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

INDONESIAN president Abdurrahman Wahid, currently embroiled in a crisis to remain in the office, has warned that a "nationwide rebellion" would erupt if the parliament attempts to impeach him on corruption charges. He said more than 400,000 people from across the main island of Java and southern end of Sumatra were ready to come into the capital to protest against moves to oust him from presidency.

His remarks came as on April 30 the parliament is certain to issue a second censure against the president as a prelude to impeachment most likely by August. Earlier, on February 1, the parliament overwhelmingly censured Abdurrahman Wahid for his alleged involvement in two graft cases. As April 30 is coming nearer, tensions between the president and the parliament seem heightening with fears of large scale violence in the country. This has also increased anxieties about the shape of things to come for the big south-east Asian nation which is also the largest Muslim country. President Wahid was elected for a six year term which expires in 2004.

Indonesia, since its inception as an independent country from the colonial Dutch rule under the dynamic leadership of Ahmed Sukarno, has a history which is less democratic and has only come closer to a democratic rule with President Wahid and vice-president Meghwati Sukornopurti, the daughter of late leader Sukarno coming to the helm. A pro-communist abortive coup rocked the nation in 1966

Meghwati lost but accepted an offer of Wahid to be vice-president as a gesture of political reconciliation and also for national interest. Indeed, it was remarkable because she did not consider it contrary to her dignity even though she was expected to be in the top position. This accommodation also provided the kind of stability that was needed at that stage of ushering in an era of democratic rule.

would not resign since many voted against him without knowing what he said the real picture. He travelled different parts of the country in recent weeks and explained to his supporters that he was being victimised without being guilty of committing any wrong. His critics say he has definitely erred in financial matters.

Right or wrong, the question that comes to the fore is: why politicians taking office with popular mandate

the people. However, probably it did not happen as charges of corruptions came against the president who otherwise had commanded respect and support. While the new government set up commissions which have been investigating into the allegations of massive amassing of wealth running into billions of dollars by Suharto, his family members and close associates, it is an irony that the president himself has

the price. While it remains to be seen if Wahid is able in shrugging off the charges and eventually survives. In the Philippines, Estrada had to give in and vice-president took over the presidency in the midst of a crisis that forced the president a few months ago to step down. In Indonesia too the possibility looms large that the vice-president, who is also a woman like her counterpart in the Philippines, may emerge as the president. However, while in Manila, vice-president Arroyo had taken a totally anti-Estrada stance in Jakarta, Meghwati has not taken such a position till now and remains largely neutral in the crisis. However, she has also an eye on the presidency should Wahid finds no alternative but to leave. Meghwati also wants to ensure that she faces no serious trouble in office if she has to take over in the event of Wahid's departure.

In recent weeks thousands of Wahid's supporters particularly in his home province of East Java have formed paramilitary squads. They have announced plans to come to the capital before the parliament votes on Wahid's fate at the end of this month. There are also plans for a mass prayer by Wahid's supporters. Wahid said more than four lakh people would come to the capital while he has enough supporters in Jakarta itself. He argues that he is not guilty and is being victimised by certain interested quarters. But a second censure by parliament makes his position really vulnerable. A difficult time awaits him. But what worries international observers is the prospects of instability and violence in the country which has found some democratic touches not long ago.

## MATTERS AROUND US

In recent weeks thousands of Wahid's supporters particularly in his home province of East Java have formed paramilitary squads. They have announced plans to come to the capital before the parliament votes on Wahid's fate at the end of this month. A difficult time awaits him. But what worries international observers is the prospects of instability and violence in the country

that brought General Suharto in power who remained as the strongman till May, 1998. His 32 years in power was more or less autocratic although it was under different guise and finally pro-democracy mass movements led by the students forced him to resign. The country went through an interim phase under acting president BJ. Habibie, a hand-picked person of Suharto, and Abdurrahman Wahid was elected as president by the people's consultative assembly. The physically weak but scholarly Wahid was the dark horse in the race for the highest office while Meghwati was the forerunner as the leader of the largest political party. But because of various form of equations and alliances among different political groups, Wahid won the elections despite having a smaller party.

Wahid, also partially blind, made up a good team with Meghwati but often faced criticisms of being inept because of physical disadvantages. But more serious allegations engulfed him over financial irregularities. He has been accused of corruption worth million of dollars from the state fund and also for not being transparent about two million dollar given by the Sultan of Brunei. The president denied the allegations but parliamentary committees found truth in the allegations and the parliament with a overwhelming majority vote censured him. This also opened up the possibility of his impeachment. Meghwati's party with 185 members in the 500-member parliament supported the censure motion. The oppositions are calling for his resignation. But the president is defiant and said he

resort to wrong-doings that raise serious doubts about their morale and intentions of delivering goods to the people? Wahid came to the scene following the 32-year rule by Suharto marked by massive corruption and undemocratic pattern of governance having scant links with people's participation. Hopes were high when Wahid and Meghwati took over. The country has massive problems including secessionist trends in some regions and the new leadership is grappling with the situation. But people were hopeful that a new government elected by people's representatives would be different from the previous long-ruling of Suharto's. They are aware of the manifold problems that the nation is facing but are keen to see that the leaders are honest and making sincere efforts for welfare of

been embroiled in such allegations and that too when he is less than midway through his term. The vice-president and her party are also not totally free from accusations of corruption.

In the neighbouring and fellow ASEAN nation The Philippines Joseph Estrada and Indonesia's Abdurrahman Wahid were popular and respected figures who were catapulted to their highest positions through democratic procedures. But one had to go and the other is facing daunting challenge of survival even before completing the tenure. The problems stemmed essentially from corruption charges which have eroded their credibility. Anger of the people has been directed against them mainly for immorality and playing with confidence of masses. Estrada has paid

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

### Border tension

Bangladesh has lost in last four days what it had earned in last 30 years--the goodwill of the people of India. Every country, every neighbour has disputes. We may also have disputes. I saw some newspapers saying that India has occupied some 200 odd acres of Bangladeshi land. Well, India can also accuse Bangladesh of such things. These things go on. But what the BDR did at the border is beyond comprehension. The Bangladeshis have proved that changing a name to Bangladesh does not change a basic Pakistani character.

I suggest Bangladesh should change its name to East Afghanistan or East Taliban. The brutality and hatred shown by the BDR and Bangladeshi villagers and the treatment meted out to BSF personnel is unforgivable. In our country, even animals are treated better.

We should have known the Bangladeshi character when they mercilessly killed their great leader Sheikh Mujib.

Today, despite the millions of Bangladeshis infiltrating our country who essentially are involved in begging, stealing etc, we have never considered the Bangladeshi people as our enemies. We always had a soft

corner for them. This has now changed forever.

Hope you would have courage to print this letter to let Bangladeshi people know our feelings.

A true Indian  
India

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Over the last four years, I have become so frustrated with the present government that whenever anything tragic and unfortunate happens, the sceptic in me looks for a conspiracy working behind the scenes.

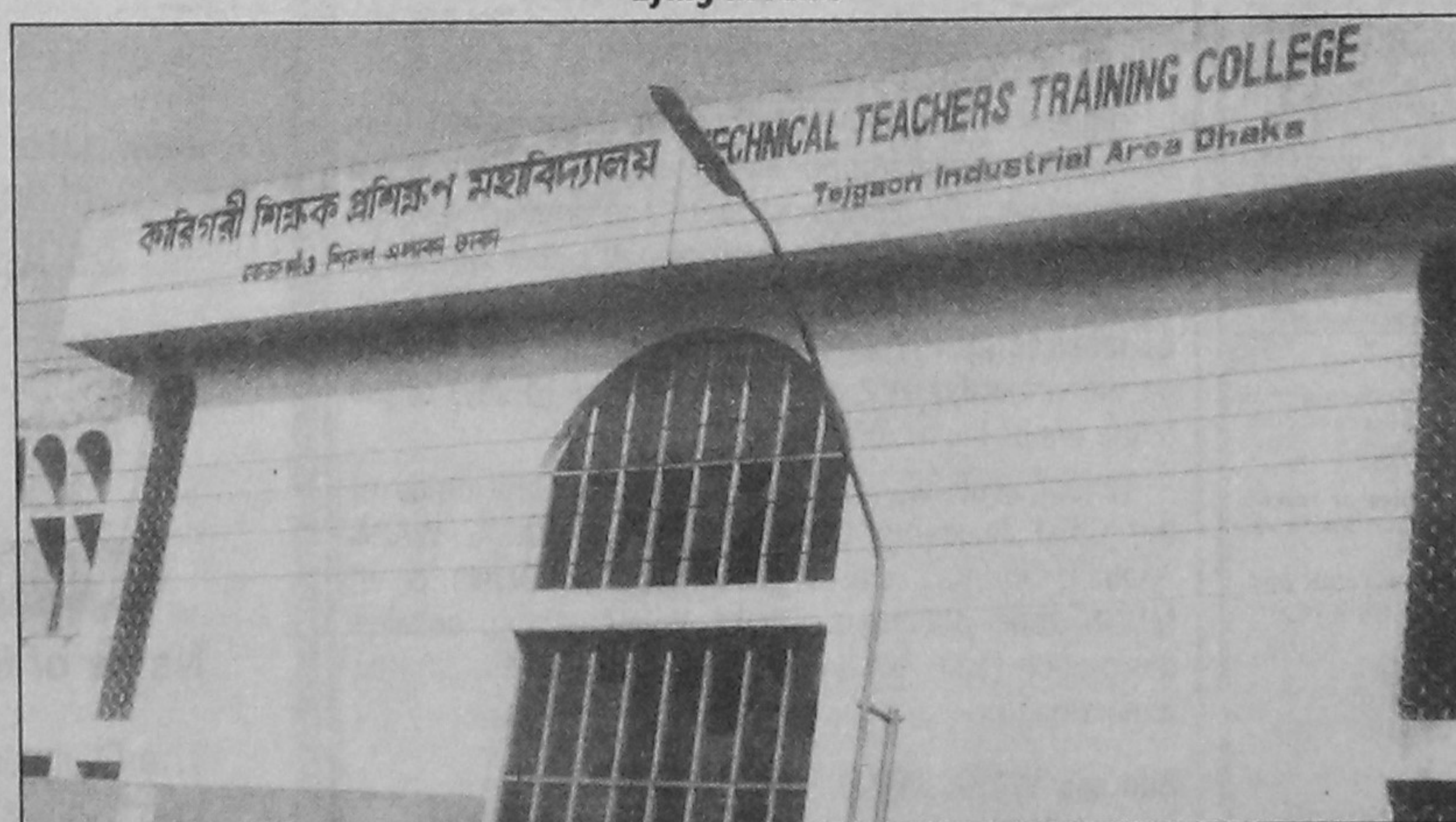
The recent bomb blast at Ramna and the mini border war with mighty India--all remind me of a movie "Wag the dog" that I watched last year. In the movie, a fake war was staged to shift peoples' attention away from a matter involving the American President's personal life. Who knows, what Bangladesh is going through now may well be the climax of a grand plan to divert peoples' attention away from the shortcomings of a failed administration. I pray that this is not the case, but if it is, I have to say only one thing--how many innocent lives does it take to win an election?

Anwar Babar  
Texas, U.S.A

### PHOTORIAL

Readers are invited to send in exclusive pictures, colour or black and white, of editorial value, with all relevant information including date, place and significance of subject matter. Pictures received will not be returned.

#### Lying in ruins



STAR PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

The window panes of the Technical Teachers Training College at Tejgaon have gone to rick and ruin. Political activists and students often resort to violent activities damaging buildings and vehicles. The authorities do not repair the wreckage apprehending repercussions. But the damaged windows are an eye sore. The authorities should carry out repairs. At the same time, we should try to control this breaking habit of ours.

### Border tension

The recent intrusion of 300 BSF troops 600 metres inside Bangladesh territory and their subsequent indiscriminate mortar firing is characteristic of India's antagonistic behaviour towards its neighbours. India has committed such serious violations of international law since the inception of Bangladesh in 1971. That India occupied 230 acres of Bangladesh land near Tamabil border should be a matter of shame for its government. But the Indian government has remained absolutely apathetic.

I wonder how the foreign policy of India can be so hostile to a small country like Bangladesh. If other powerful countries start behaving like India, the whole world will turn into a veritable hell. It is true that Bangladesh is not in a military or economic position to face such an adverse situation, although its morale seems to be high. Only the intervention from the international community can ensure a sense of security for the people of Bangladesh. I urge the international community to come forward to solve this hostility that prevails between the two neighbours.

Mahmudul Hasan  
Leicester, UK

I'm relieved that the embarrassing situation that broke out between Bangladesh and India is almost over. However, there must be some flaws in the bilateral relations between India and Bangladesh and this gave rise to such tension. Now that the tension at the border is over, the two countries should come forward and take necessary steps to ensure peace between the two neighbouring countries.

Jahed  
USA

### Save our lakes

I would like to thank the participants of the workshop "Lakes of Dhaka City: Problems and Prospects."

We have become insensitive to so many issues that people coming together for a common cause--not to save oneself but to save the city as a whole and its inhabitants is a striking shift of credo and one that should be acknowledged.

Thanks to the department of Architecture, BUET, for taking the initiative to make the voices of the citizen heard and thanks to The Daily Star to help co-organise this workshop.

Architect Dilshad Rahat Ara  
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