

Commentary

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ous action was at all called for considering the way things were going. But the police seemed to have been given a different brief. They were to launch an assault on the opposition regardless of what the latter did. Otherwise, there can be no explanation of the way the police brutalised the opposition leaders. It was a totally unnecessary action earning the present government a bad image and creating doubts in the public mind as to the seriousness of the BNP's election pledge to govern the country in a democratic manner.

Some very simple questions need to be asked. Does or does not the Constitution guarantee the right to hold peaceful demonstrations? The gather, to hold meetings and to demonstrate is an inalienable right of every citizen or groups. On Wednesday, Section 144 was not invoked, nor were meetings, processions or demonstrations banned for the day. Then under what law, under what authority and what rule did the police assault the AL demonstrators. If prior announcement was made curbing the normal rights to demonstrate, then some arguments could be made, however untenable, about the subsequent police action. Without any prior intimation the police action was illegal. The picture of a prostrate Matia Chowdhury literally lying on the street with a police mercilessly beating her with his baton is a scene not likely to be forgotten or forgiven by the people of Bangladesh. It was a shocking and deeply saddening picture. This particular leader has been at the heart of all democratic movements since the early 1960s. First as a student leader and later as a national leader, she commands respect and prestige the likes of which very few others enjoy. She was a valiant freedom fighter and has devoted her life to anti-military and anti-autocracy movements. During the tenure of the last government, she enjoyed a rare reputation for honesty, hard work and commitment to the people. Having her beaten up by the police cannot and will not enhance the credibility of Khaleda Zia's government. Let us recall what happened on Wednesday. By all accounts, the demonstrations were peaceful. The AL leaders tried to take out a procession, which was blocked by the police. Then, they tried to hold a sit-down demonstration without showing any sign of being violent. The usual stone throwing, cracker blasting or car burning did not take place, either. In fact, it was the police that indulged in all sorts of provocation by resorting to unnecessary tear gas, shelling, baton charge, severe beating, dragging people over the streets by the collar of their shirts or hair and trying to run a double-decker through the crowd. There is no denying the fact that the AL was extremely high-handed with the opposition during its own days in power. We remember how the BNP offices would be nearly or totally blocked during any demonstration they called. Very few BNP leaders, if any, would be allowed to enter the office premises on hartal days called by them. Frequent baton charges would be carried out against BNP processions. We recall here the picture of BNP lawmaker Sadeque Hossain Khoka with a bleeding head injury from a rock thrown at him and the accompanying police attack. Who can forget the famous pictures of gun totting cadres of AL MP HBM Iqbal shooting at opposition procession? Shadman Osman, the AL MP from Narayanganj, would block the Demra road with abandoned trucks every time the BNP would try to use that road. These and other images of the fascist tactics used by the previous government to thwart opposition activities have remained in the public mind. We repeatedly urged the government then to allow the opposition democratic space. After all, they were well within their rights guaranteed in our Constitution. The AL government did not listen and has paid the price for it.

What we saw Wednesday cannot in any way be termed as a treatment of the opposition by a democratic government. It was a clear case of trying to hit back at the former ruling party for the way it treated the opposition. All the pictures of the AL's maltreatment of the opposition seemed to have been replayed on Wednesday, this time by the BNP. We sadly have to ask, "Did the people elect BNP to take revenge on the AL or to govern better?" Is it to see a repeat of the same crimes, the same atrocities, the same fascist behaviour, the same disregard for democratic norms, the same arrogance of power and the same drunkenness for wealth that the people voted for a change? From the way the BNP coalition government has been behaving from the beginning, it appears to be no better than we saw in the past. We want to state in the clearest possible terms that people did not elect the new government to carry out its private or personal agenda against the political opponents. Sheikh Hasina confused her chance to govern with her chance to teach the BNP a lesson. It was she who learnt the lesson instead. But what of Khaleda Zia, has she learnt nothing? Will she behave with the same arrogance of power as her predecessor? She will be living in a fool's paradise if she thinks that people will treat her differently for the same violations of democratic norms. We condemn in the most unambiguous terms the attack on the opposition demonstration of Wednesday. We can in no way accept what the government did to the opposition. It was against the rights of freedom of political activities guaranteed in our Constitution. It was against democratic norms practised in any civilised country and it was totally against our own democratic values that we aspire to attain. After eleven years of democracy we will not accept such police atrocities.

No other paper can match our consistency in opposing hartals. We opposed Wednesday's as well. To the extent that the AL has gone back on its word, repeatedly given to our people and to the international community, not to call hartals, it has lost credibility. The AL cannot expect the public to take its future commitments seriously because of the way it is breaking its no-hartal pledge. However, the AL's going back on its word does not justify the present government's going back on its own words about adhering to the rule of law and democracy. We express our deep disappointment at the way the present government has dealt with the opposition on Wednesday. We think that instead of setting higher and better examples the present government is repeating the worst aspects of the previous government, if not going a few steps lower. This is not the way forward. Please learn from history.

PM: Pry edn
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in the morning.
She said her government has taken steps to ensure attendance of all school-going children and check dropouts to make the free primary education programme a success. She mentioned the newly introduced monthly stipend of Tk 100 for poor students each.

The programme for non-formal education for the dropouts and the aged has been intensified, she said. She also referred to the ongoing programme for creating mass awareness about education.

Listing various steps of the government, including timely distribution of textbooks and other materials, appointment of qualified teachers, introduction of modern training and strengthening academic supervision, she said these measures would help improve the educational standard.

"We have taken the initiative to ensure that everyone discharges his or her responsibility from the central management to the grassroots level of the primary education system," the prime minister said.

At the closing ceremony, the prime minister distributed awards among the children for their excellent academic performance and extracurricular activities including recitation, impromptu speech, patriotic songs, solo performance, drawing, dancing and cubing.

She also gave away prizes to the best teachers, best primary school, best primary school managing committee and the school with top attendance.

The function was also addressed by PM's Adviser for Primary and Mass Education Prof Jahanara Begum and Secretary of Primary and Mass Education Prof Tahmina Hossain.

Cabinet members, members of parliament, eminent educationists, scholars, diplomats and senior officials attended the function.

Chinese premier arrives
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increasing role in regional affairs. Rongji will fly off to Delhi on Sunday at 9:30am.

Diplomatic circle considers Rongji's high-profile trip as a sign of the country's growing regional stature as a moderate 'Muslim democracy', and the catalytic role it can play in South Asia through SAARC and an international role through peacekeeping missions, including a likely participation in the Afghan peace process.

Bangladesh has been a long time friend of China and both countries share similar perceptions on many regional and global issues.

The visit is likely to be marked by the signing of several agreements on economic cooperation.

His visit comes less than two years after former Chinese premier Li Peng's as the chairman of the National People's Congress of China in April 1999. Former premier Zhao Ziang also visited the country in 1982.

A catalogue of high-level visits marks the relationship between the two countries, which dates back to late premier Zhou En Lai's trip to Dhaka in 1956 and 1964.

Former president Ziaur Rahman

Hoodlums set poultry farm on fire
OUR CORRESPONDENT, Ngunj

A gang poured petrol and set fire to a poultry farm at Doharmouradi village in Arahar Upazila in the early hours of yesterday, killing around 300 chickens.

Police said owner of the farm Manwara Begum filed a case with Arahar thana, accusing eight people. None of them could be arrested till last night.

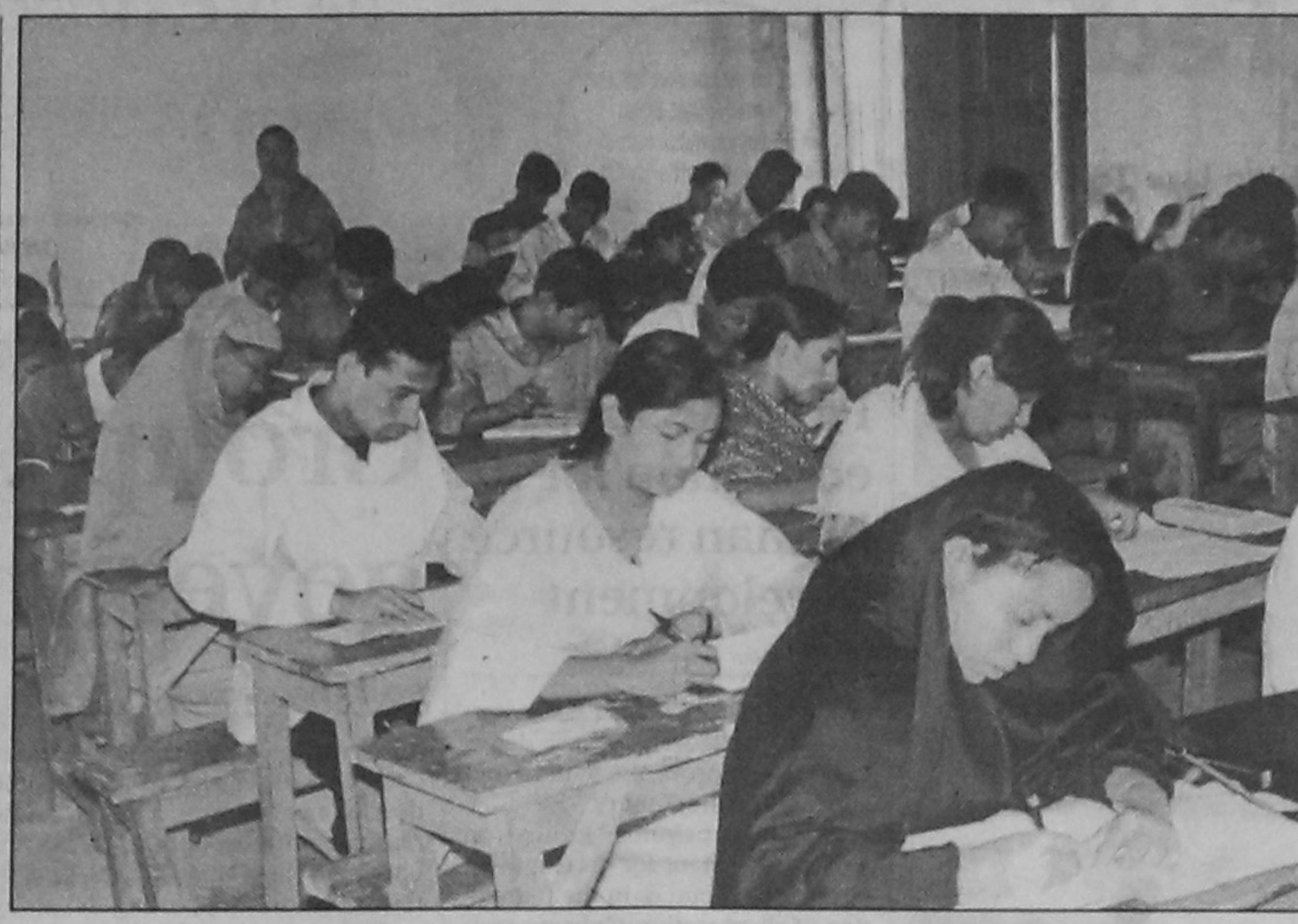
Dispute over land might be the reason behind the incident, police suspected.

BNP activist hacked to death in Tangail
UNB, Tangail

A BNP activist of Dhanbari upazila hacked to death by a gang of terrorists yesterday.

Bazlur Rahman Hablu, 35, of village Banichandbari came under attack in the morning on way to his business house in Dhanbari Bazar. The motive behind the murder could not be known.

Police arrested Kalpa, a young man, for his alleged involvement in the murder.



The degree (pass and subsidiary) exams under the National University began in the country yesterday.

Group to promote local govt

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rhetoric yielded in little results, he noted.

In this connection, Prof Yunus stressed reforming laws and rules and developing better ones. If necessary reform measures capture the imagination of the nation, it will no longer be difficult to implement those, he felt.

The group will be careful to select issues, keeping an eye on the reality. Side by side with streamlining of legal framework, it will also address another issue. This will be to focus on the economic basis of local governments. There can be no strong local governments with a weak and insecure economic base. So, the aspects of economic basis and legal strength will get focus of the group, he said.

The local governments, he said, are near the people. They know the pulse of the people much better than the central government. The real strength of local governments is to unite local people and encourage them to solve their problems themselves. It will work for restoring such a sense among all concerned.

He pointed out that local governments are playing vital role in every-day life of people in many parts of

the developing world. Citing examples, he said in Latin America, China, and other countries, local governments have emerged as a force for local economic transformation.

The rural economy in Bangladesh has witnessed the beginning of many potential activities in sectors like industry and agriculture. With the support of local governments, these can emerge as a major economic current.

Prof Yunus said local governments can also help spread information technology (IT) to villages for further development of health, education and trade sectors.

The forum will publicise the best practices of local government sector and try to increase public enthusiasm and awareness.

It announced a four-point agenda. These include establishing contact with interested individuals, women, youth, NGO workers, business groups, researchers, media persons, politicians, institutions and such others with a strong interest in issues of local government and building networks among them, identifying realistic steps for institutional strengthening of local governments and taking up programmes

and formulating proposals for strengthening the financial base of local governments.

The forum will hold a national workshop on upazila reforms to formulate a realistic agenda and hold dialogue with policy-makers to initiate the process of building a network.

The Group comprises Abdul Mueyed Chowdhury, Qamrul Islam Siddique, Salehuddin Ahmed, Rokshana Khondoker, Ahmed Kamal, Hossain Zillur Rahman, Member-Secretary; ANM Khaiyyam, Ataus Samad, Tofal Ahmed, Binayak Sen, Muhammad Solaiman, Shaden Malik, Muhammad Jahangir, S Aminul Islam and Syed Mosaddik Hossain Labu.



Artists of Nrityanchal perform a dance in the Nrityanchal Utsab 2002 at the Shishu Academy yesterday.

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Biman fare

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Dhaka-Chittagong-Dhaka route, will have to bear more losses from now on.

According to aviation experts, it costs an F-28 carrier about Tk 400,000 for a 40-minute flight from Chittagong to Dhaka. With a one-way fare of Tk 2000, Biman could earn a maximum of Tk 170,000 even if the 85-seater took a full load of passengers, and still incur a Tk 230,000 loss per flight on.

Now with the price slashed down to Tk 1000 to travel on the wide-bodied aircraft serving the Chittagong-Dhaka route, the F-28 flights on this route costing Tk 2000 per passenger are bound to come back empty.

On the other hand, Biman's Chittagong-Dhaka flight on wide-bodied aircraft, the 274-seater DC 10-30s and the 221-seater Airbus, will also incur losses even with a full load, as it also costs Tk 400,000 for each of those flights to Dhaka.

State Minister for Civil Aviation Mir Muhammad Nasiruddin, who hails from Chittagong, however said that the move was aimed at eventually lessening the losses. "The Biman flights, which come from the Middle East to Chittagong, has failed to attract passengers while flying to Dhaka. So we thought it would be better to slash the ticket rate and attract passengers."

"We have made the new tariff structure effective for three months. Once we are able to attract passengers, there is an option to raise the

fare," Mir Nasir said.

However, the CAAB in its circular issued on September last year said, "No operators, either from the public or private sector, may be allowed for price dumping through predatory pricing."

But the state minister for civil aviation thought that the ministry had the prerogative to revise the tariff structure of Biman whenever it feels necessary.

"We are here to serve the people and expand Biman's services, not squeeze it," Mir Nasir told The Daily Star.

Contrary to the minister's statement, the CAAB in a letter on December 12 last year said that as the air operators have not taken step to enforce its directive for price adjustment it is violation of the Civil Aviation regulation, 1984.

Biman Managing Director Air Commodore M. Khusrun Alam offered a different point of view. "Our wide-bodied aircraft virtually had to operate with empty seats on the Chittagong-Dhaka route. The discount offer however should draw a large number of passengers that will help us minimise our losses."

In support of his theory, Khusrun Alam said that the inaugural wide-bodied Biman flight flew from Chittagong to Dhaka with 170 plus passengers.

He also said that Biman was currently having a discussion with the CAAB on its prescribed tariff structure for the domestic route.

Police attack on AL leaders condemned

Staff Correspondent

Different organisations yesterday condemned police attacks on leaders and activists of the Awami League (AL) during Wednesday's half-day hartal.

In a statement, the Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal (BSD) said the attacks on the AL's peaceful demonstration have unmasked the fascist nature of the government.

The Bangladesh Communist Party in its statement said hartal, demonstration and rally are the people's democratic rights. Steamrolling and repression compound problems instead of solving them, the statement added.

The Left Democratic Front said the police action against the opposition's rally and procession on the hartal day without any provocation was completely pre-planned.

The other organisations -- Bangladesh Awami Ainjibi Parishad, Samajtantrik Chhatra Front and Kendrio Ganotantrik Chhatra Oikya -- also condemned the police attacks.

2 shot as terrorists clash in Tejgaon

UNB, Dhaka

Two people were injured seriously in an armed clash between two groups of terrorists in the city's Tejgunipara under Tejgaon thana yesterday.

The injured were admitted to Dhaka Medical College Hospital in critical condition.

Hospital sources said Ashraf, 27, received bullet in his abdomen and throat while Layen Mia, 35, in his head by the splinters of bomb.

Wife of one of the victims said the clash erupted between the two groups over establishing supremacy in the area.

Mob-beating

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people have lost their confidence in law-enforcers and in the lengthy process of trial.

"If police could arrest the attackers for taking the law into their own hands, the rampant mob-execution would be stopped," Alena said. Police have to be accountable for the incidents, if any, in their respective areas, she added.

People have every right to catch culprits, but they have no right to kill them. In many cases, police have seen the angry mob beating the culprits, but they shied away from taking action, she continued.

To make things worse, investigation into the incidents of mob beating lost its track midway through the process due to lack of clues. In the city, most of the incidents took place in the same areas, but police could not identify the victims, nor could they arrest the persons who beat them to death.

There are also instances of terrorists killing their opponents in front of a crowd to give it a colour of mob beating, witnesses said.

People's frustration is mounting to a high pitch and anybody can be a scapegoat.

Cherry chase

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to 72 before being run out.

The sad dismissal of Youhana set the stage for Abdur Razzak and Rashid Latif to run rampage. Together, the two clubbed 175 runs for the fifth wicket.

Razzak completed his second successive ton against Bangladesh off 199 balls and with the help of twelve boundaries and three sixes.

The 22-year-old cricketer from Lahore scored an unbeaten 110 against Bangladesh during the Asian Test Championship in Multan last year.

It was the right-hander's third century in 16 Test appearances.

But wicketkeeper Latif missed his maiden century in 26 Tests for only six runs. The 33-year-old stumper from Karachi mistimed an attempted drive off paceman Sharif and was caught by Al-Shahriar. Rashid's previous highest score was 71 against England at Old Trafford last year.

Enamul was the pick of Bangladesh bowlers with three for 134. Right-arm seamer Mohammed Sharif captured two wickets for 86 runs.

(Scoreboard and other stories on Sports pages)

Tremor project

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required.

After much delay, a project was taken in 1999 to set up three stations at Dhaka, Sylhet and Rangpur and upgrade the one at Chittagong.

All the four places fall under active tremor zones, while Sylhet and Rangpur are considered as 'severe' quake zones.

But the project could not be completed last year due to indecision by the authorities.

Slow constructions of the three stations, particularly the one at Sylhet, have further delayed the project, sources added.

Workshop demands direct election to reserved women's seats

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Speakers at a workshop yesterday demanded direct election to the reserved seats for women in the parliament.

They also demanded increase in the number of reserved seats.

The workshop styled 'Political Empowerment of Women: Direct Participation in the Politics' was jointly organised by the Law, Justice and Parliament Affairs Ministry and the NGO Committee of Beijing Plus Five, Bangladesh (NCBP), a coalition of 624 NGOs and civil society members, at the BIAM auditorium.

Minister for Law, Justice and Parliament Affairs Moudud Ahmed was the chief guest while David Preston, ambassador of Canada, was the special guest. The meeting was presided over by Salma Khan, chairperson of NCBP.

Salma Khan said all major political parties are committed to direct election to reserved seats for women in the parliament and increasing the number of such seats.

Salma Ali, Executive Director of Bangladesh Mohila Ainjibi Samity, urged the government to pass a bill to increase the number of seats for women and introduce direct elec-

tion to them.

Shoheli Parveen Jharna, an elected member of Atulia Union Parishad under Sarkhira district, narrated how women candidates faced difficulties in poll campaigns.

She said religious strictures, candidates' lack of money, influence of black money, terrorism and sense of insecurity are the main barriers for women to contest elections.

She noted that men refuse to accept women's leadership because of their stereotyped mindset.

Addressing the meeting, Moudud Ahmed said the government would fulfill its election pledge on reserved seats for women in the parliament.

He said a tough law will be enacted against acid throwers and steps would be taken against sell, purchase and distribution of acid.

David Preston said participation of women in decision making process is important for advancement of the society.

He expressed his satisfaction over the large turnout of women voters in the October 1 elections.

Dr Najma Chowdhury, chairperson of Women Studies Department of Dhaka University, conducted the workshop.

AL urges people

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Senior party leaders blasted the government for police attacks on former ministers Mohammed Nasim and Matia Chowdhury and also for filing cases against them yesterday under the Public Safety Act.

Speaking at the meeting, AL presidium member Tofal Ahmed expressed deep frustration at the infringement of basic rights of people. "By infringing the rights to assemblage and procession, the government of Khaleda Zia is trying to push the nation towards a civil war."

Tofal appeared to be surprised at the news of filing of cases against Nasim and Matia. "Get ready, our movement to dislodge this autocrat government would begin," he told the meeting of several hundred people.

The AL General Secretary Zillur Rahman advised the coalition government to learn from the past. "If (government) thinks it can cling to power by resorting to oppression, it is doing a big mistake. People of the country have already their back against the wall."

Presidium member Abdul Jalil said the AL with its vast experience in mass movement would again put a people's government in power.

Naming the police officer who ordered the crackdown on the AL leaders during Wednesday's hartal, AL presidium member Suranjit Sengupta said, "People expected the IGP (Inspector General of Police) and the DMP Commissioner would take action against Kohinur (an ADC of DB). But that did not happen. Instead, cases were filed against our leaders."

"Kohinur is not a servant of the republic; rather, he is a member of Khaleda's 'Gestapo Force,'" said Suranjit.

AL urges people

The AL central leader Matia Chowdhury said the government was asking for trouble by ordering police excesses on and filing of cases against the AL leaders. She said it would be unwise for the government if it tried to suppress the opposition by using bullet and baton.

Senior AL leaders including Syeda Zohra Tajuddin, Sajeda Chowdhury, Abdur Razzak, city AL President Mohammad Hanif, and leaders of different front organisations also took part in the meeting.

The AL leaders recalled Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's invaluable contribution in the country's achieving freedom and expressed grave concerns at the "distortion of history under the new regime."

They alleged that leaders of the alliance government were making derogatory remarks about the founding father of the country.

The AL leaders condemned the unnecessary controversy over declaration of the country's independence, removal of Bangabandhu's picture from Tk 10 denominations, and threats to demolish sculptures depicting spirit of the War of Independence.

Motia, Nasim

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PSA. In the FIR, police accused the leaders of obstructing public transports, causing trouble to the people's movement, attempting to damage the state property and hampering police's official duty.

The four opposition leaders were accused under the controversial Public Safety Act only three days after a government decision to scrap the law. The bill on repeal of the PSA will be tabled in the coming parliamentary session beginning on January 31.

The decision to repeal the PSA, introduced by the previous Awami League government in February 2000 amid widespread protest and criticism, was made at the cabinet's regular weekly meeting on January 7.

Meanwhile, AL leaders at a meeting in the city yesterday blasted the government both for police attacks on AL leaders during the hartal hours and for filing a case against them.

Motia, Nasim

CID's handwriting experts for authentication. Along with the note, police also sent an old copybook belonging to Simi.

"We have not received any complaint from Simi's family about the threats they are receiving," he said. "We are trying hard to nab the criminals."

Razzak could not be contacted yesterday as he reported sick.

Meanwhile, Simi's friends said they would continue to demand that all the culprits are arrested and justice is done.

Janatar Mancha

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They said the government since its assumption of power has engaged officials and employees close to the BNP as well as intelligence agencies to draw lists of those who joined the 'Janatar Mancha' in violation of government service rules.

Sources said the government prepared lists of several hundred officials and employees as per reports of intelligence agencies.

Simi suicide

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ing arrest.

One source said some of the wanted persons often visit their homes 'but spend the night elsewhere'. A shop belonging to Mofazzel and a pharmacy owned by Ripon have reopened.

The hoodlums and their accomplices have removed all the posters in Bhuiyapara area locality, demanding 'justice' regarding Simi's death.

Simi, a first year student of Bachelor of Fine Arts at Narayanganj Fine Arts Institute, took her life after being teased, taunted and humiliated by local hoodlums, a sub-inspector of police named Bashar and a middle aged neighbour, Enayet Chowdhury. Simi has left behind a hastily written note in which she blamed Bashar, Khalil, Mofazzel, Ripon and some others for her suicide.

Simi's only fault was that she returned home late from her work as an artist. Following her death, some ministers including the home minister visited her house and ordered police to arrest the accused including Bashar. He was immediately arrested and put behind the bars.

Sub-inspector Razzak of Khilgaon thana is now investigating the case but he has failed to arrest any of the hoodlums so far.

Officer-in-Charge of Khilgaon thana AKM Rafiqul Islam, when contacted yesterday, said police had sent Simi's handwritten note to

Simi suicide

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6 killed

FROM PAGE 12

Police arrested the driver of the bus.

Soon after the accident, local people put up barricades on Dhaka-Khulna highway, disrupting traffic for three hours.

The bodies were sent to hospital morgue for autopsy.

A young man was killed and two others were injured in a road accident on Dhaka-Sylhet highway here yesterday.

Witness said the mishap took place near the town on when a Dhaka-bound bus knocked down a rickshaw leaving three people injured.

The injured -- Selim, 35, of Bhuiyan village in Sadar, Hamid and an unidentified man -- were rushed to Sadar Hospital where Selim succumbed to his injuries.