

SSC examination results

Top achievers felicitated but fail rate too high

THE number of students getting GPA-5 in the SSC exams has increased this year. We congratulate the students who have performed brilliantly and are now ready to move forward into the realm of higher education with confidence and a sense of fulfillment. The schools having a large number of GPA-5 holders deserve a round of plaudits.

But the overall picture is not that rosy as the number of unsuccessful candidates has also gone up. This is a reflection on the education system at the SSC level, particularly in the rural areas where as many as 248 educational institutions have had a zero success rate. That's indeed cause for concern and a clear indication of the ever-widening gap in the standard of education between the good schools in the urban areas and the neglected ones located outside the cities and towns. This is a problem that has to be addressed in right earnest if we want to establish uniformity in school level education.

It is sad and worrisome news that more than eight lakh students have dropped out of the SSC level in the last two years. The figure itself makes it amply clear that the existing system is highly lopsided, with the less privileged students finding it increasingly difficult to stay afloat. Most of them can neither attend the so-called good schools, nor can they seek the services of coaching centres. Their problem is compounded by the fact that most of the schools, even the government-run ones, don't have qualified teachers. Dependable classroom teaching appears to have become a thing of the past -- much to the disadvantage of students belonging to poor, lower middle and middle class families.

The standard of teaching in the rural and semi-urban schools has to be raised to a satisfactory level not only to ensure uniformity of standards across the board but also to remove the disparity between privileged and under-privileged students in terms of accessing school education. Any failure in this respect will lead to repetition of the same spectacle -- more GPA-5 achievers alongside swelling ranks of unsuccessful candidates. The decision-makers can ill afford to remain oblivious of the distortions in the existing system.

Campuses of foreign universities

They need a set of rules to operate

IT is disconcerting to know that a number of local branches of foreign universities have been running courses and offering degrees without due authorisation, according to the University Grants Commission (UGC). The UGC published a notice in the media containing names of 56 foreign university campuses in the month of May declaring these as illegal, emphasising that according to the Private University Act 1992 and Amendment Act 1998 no such educational institute can operate in Bangladesh in any form without specific permission from the government.

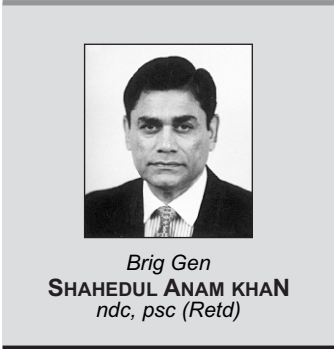
Despite having no valid approval, these 56 branches of foreign institutes ran courses charging students, 25 thousand strong, around Tk. 75 crore annually in tuition fees. It therefore leaves us wondering as to how this could happen when UGC watchdogs were supposed to be monitoring the activities of such institutes. It appears that the administration woke up quite late when already these institutes had opened branches in Dhaka and some other cities releasing catchy advertisements in the media.

These allegations pertaining to opening of campuses of foreign universities without obtaining permission from designated authorities need to be further gone into by way of separating the chaff from the grain. There are also allegations that some fake institutes have fleeced students in exorbitant sums and we strongly recommend that these should be made to pay back the money and brought under the law without further delay.

But it also remains to be said that there is a huge void in the higher education sector that needs to be filled through collaboration with reputable foreign universities apart from establishing fully-fledged private universities. We understand some of them are already doing well by offering MBA and other degrees at one fourth or one fifth of the tuition fees required in the country of origin. Such institutes having expatriate and local qualified faculties need specific rules and regulations to operate smoothly.

We hope the UGC and the Ministry of Education would look into the matter and take pragmatic decisions on the basis of ground reality and national interest within a specific framework of rules.

Playing politics with national interest



POLITICAL parties are known to indulge in one-upmanship to outdo a political opponent, to score a point if you like. And in Bangladesh politicians are celebrities in this regard, past masters in the act.

A better collection of human beings most adroit in taking advantage of a position of political authority to rub the nose of the political opponent in, one is unlikely to come across. That is why one comes across, not infrequently in Bangladesh, the phrase "playing politics."

A case of "playing politics" that turned out to be not only dirty, even by our own standards of political propriety, but also extremely harmful to our national security, is the way the issue of the Bangladesh navy frigate "BNS Bangabandhu" had been exploited by the then BNP-Jamaat alliance government.

Considering the fact that the frigate is to be "re-commissioned" soon, after having been in a state of "decommission" for five years,

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

Many feel that nothing justified the decommissioning of the ship in the first place. It is difficult to compute the loss that this has caused. Leaving the training of the crew, and the financial loss incurred by not utilising such a costly ship aside, we left a vast stretch of our EEZ vulnerable to outside encroachment.

there is very little doubt that the policy of the erstwhile alliance government was, at best, an abject attempt, motivated by very base considerations, to spite the face of its opponents. It may well turn out to be case of spiting one's own face too. As a fallout of this, the country has lost out on vital military assets, apart from suffering in lost time and money, which is difficult to calculate.

A brief background is perhaps in order. The caretaker government has decided to put back into operation the frigate "BNS Bangabandhu." It was the first South Korean frigate to enter service with the Bangladesh navy, at the very flag end of the AL government, in June 2001 (although not the first naval craft to be supplied by that country; "BNS Madhumati" a large patrol craft was the first naval vessel supplied by South Korea during the first BNP regime).

It was decommissioned in Feb 2002, very soon after the BNP-Jamaat alliance took over the reins of the country, and remained so on paper for the last five years. It cost \$100 million, of which the

hull cost \$55 million, and \$45 million was for equipment to be supplied by several western countries, for which separate deals were made.

And what were the reasons given for decommissioning the ship. None whatsoever has ever been made public.

But there were allegations that the deal lacked transparency, and that corruption was involved in the acquisition of the ship. While there was talk about the performance of some of its equipment, the pre-induction test and trials that were carried out appear to negate those arguments.

These automatically generate some very pertinent questions in our mind.

First, what compelled the decommissioning of a ship that was the only state-of-the-art warship that Bangladesh acquired, only eight months after it was put into operation? It needs pointing out that a piece of kit of the size of a man-of-war is decommissioned only when refit and complete overhaul, that require more than two years to complete, become necessary.

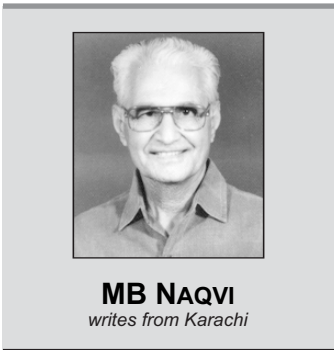
Secondly, if the ship was decommissioned, why did it put out to sea from time to time without any apparent change of its engine or any of its major systems, which a post de-commission action entails?

Thirdly, if the frigate was a bad piece of kit, why was money spent to fix it with new missiles and torpedoes; and the missiles that were fitted while it was in a state of decommission were not purchased from the country that was originally meant to supply them. And the very process of fitting it with missiles from altogether a new source has caused problems that are yet to be fully addressed.

There are two aspects of the issue, and each must be addressed separately. One, whether the frigate meets our requirements and whether we got the things we bargained for in the deal. Two, were palms greased in the process of acquisition of the ship, causing loss to the exchequer.

As for the first, there was, indeed, an urgent need of a state-of-the art frigate. The frigate is a modified version of the ones in

Will she, won't she?



THE question is: will the US make limited or unlimited, as it might become, war against Iran? There are two opinions: one says that the US has assembled an amount of military wherewithal in the Middle East and Persian Gulf that should ensure victory against Iran, so that it can enforce a regime change.

Fact is that American hearts are still bleeding over the events in Tehran 28 years ago; the loss of Iran is still not acceptable to the US. The whole post 9/11 US policy, under which it attacked Afghanistan and Iraq for mainly trumped up reasons, strongly points to the "compulsion" that America feels to reshape the area, including subduing Iran if it wants its own position to stay secure in the strategically vital Middle East.

Against this is the so-called realistic school, and the recent trends of American opinion now supposedly show that Iran will be off the hook, much like the way North Korea has got off the same hook.

The neo-con school of thought is said to have lost favour within the Bush administration after the Iraqi misadventure, and the proof of it is

PLAIN WORDS

The Americans seem to desire a virtual division of the EU into what they call Old Europe and the New Europe, the entry of which, into Nato and the EU, they have ensured. All these are requirements of their leadership concerns. They have to manage the whole world the same way, and remain in control of all areas where key raw material are produced.

that the US has dealt face to face not only with Iran in two recent conferences -- one in Sharm-al-Shaikh and later in Baghdad, where the contact was genuine and substantive -- but also with Syria.

The US is said to have yet again focused on solving the Palestine problem as a necessity for rendering Hamas and Hizbollah less credible. And this shows the way Iran might escape the otherwise likely war. Besides, Iran is not a pushover.

It would be astonishing if the arrogant American policy makers fail to realize the likely political and economic costs of unilateral action. Yes, the US can mount air action against however many Iranian targets. But then, what happens later depends on Iran's political, military and economic capabilities.

Iran's smart ordnance -- that can cost the American navy a ship or two -- may be in or near the mouth of the Hormuz Straits. Conceivably, Iran can stop all, or most, oil exports from the Gulf region, sending world markets into a tailspin. The damage the world economy will suffer cannot be assessed.

Notwithstanding the paranoia of

the Americans, Iran cannot support al Qaeda in Iraq or elsewhere. But it can cause a political earthquake throughout the region by its actions against Israel, in concert with Hamas, Hizbollah and any other Arab power (Syria?) that may also join in. Iran will remain capable of rebuilding itself in the present orientation. The Americans have to think again.

There is no disputing the plausibility of both schools. Still, it is not easy to visualise Americans resiling from their program of regime change in Iran. The fact is that North Korea was a different kettle of fish. For strategic reasons, it is sure to be supported to the hilt by both Russia and China.

The Americans haven't also forgotten the lessons of the 1950s Korean war. The idea of America getting into a war with North Korea without South Korea is inconceivable. Even Japan does not want such a war, though it has had a lot of heart-burning over the North Korean missile program.

The idea that North Korea could be easily invaded was a non-starter from the beginning. Even today, Americans would not dare to repeat their earlier mistakes of the late 1940s and early 1950s.

None of these considerations

apply to Iran. To be sure, there is no comparison between the military strengths of Iran and the only hyper-power. Iran, all said and done, can be invaded, though it is not going to be an easy morsel to swallow. A regime change in Iran remains as urgent for the Americans today or tomorrow as it is axiomatic to most

The American schools of thought believe that the US should continue to control the Middle East. There is no doubt that the Iranians are a consciously anti-US force in the region. Iran is playing the role of a natural leader of the Middle East, and has many qualifications for it.

Iran's recent behaviour is based on the assumption that it is already a pre-eminent power in the Middle East, and it is intent on winning the hearts and minds on the Arab streets. It has gone some way in that direction. The question boils down to how vital the Middle East is to the US. On that will hinge the question of taking military action vis-à-vis Iran.

Controlling the ME tightly is of prime importance for American strategic planning. Can it let the ME go its own way, especially with Iran leading it against American interests? And controlling the ME

service with the South Korean navy. It was the best that could be acquired with the money that we were able to pay.

It sailed from the country of origin after having completed various maneuvers and evolutions, some of which were carried out in the presence of the parliamentary committee on defence, which included members of the opposition also.

The possibility of malfunctioning of a new equipment, or any of its components, is not beyond the realm of possibility, and if that occurs within the guarantee period the supplier is bound to replace it. One is not sure that was the case, either.

As for the corruption issue, it is very difficult to put it past the capability of our politicians not to be influenced by the lure of the greenback, as has been so starkly revealed recently by many of the political heavyweights who have spilled the beans under interrogation by the investigating agencies.

In fact, there is a corruption case in this regard, in which a top brass of the then AL government is amongst the accused. There should be no compromise on this matter, which must be seen to the end. In the meanwhile, several senior officers of the navy have lost their jobs, while the case against the politicians awaits trial in the court of law. The government must also go into the rationale of not purchasing the missiles from the original vendor.

Many feel that nothing justified

the decommissioning of the ship in the first place. It is difficult to compute the loss that this has caused. Leaving the training of the crew, and the financial loss incurred by not utilising such a costly ship aside, we left a vast stretch of our EEZ vulnerable to outside encroachment.

The cost of decommissioning is perhaps as much as the money that might have accrued illegally to the unscrupulous, if not more. The difference is, the corrupt can be caught and brought to justice and the money recouped, while in the other case the losses may not be even be quantified, let alone recovered.

Now that the caretaker government has decided to re-commission the ship without any apparent major refit, it must not fail to determine why the ship was made non-operational. When there is a call for not only transparency in military expenditure, but also that hard earned foreign exchange be spent judiciously, it is all the more essential to determine that partisan politics has not prevailed over our decision making

From what has transpired about the matter so far, there is ground to believe that it was not technical nor strategic, but political, consideration that motivated the BNP policy on "BNS Bangabandhu." If that is the case, should the nation put up with the kind of politics that harms our national interest?

The author is Editor, Defence & Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

tightly seems to involve a regime change in Tehran. Therefore, it is hard to visualize even a Democrated US will let Iran adopt an adversarial orientation.

The role of American politics in policy-making cannot be denied: American opinion is decidedly against the Iraq war, and wants American soldiers back home. True enough. But there is total silence in the Democratic party regarding the American troops in Afghanistan, or in nearly 150 foreign military bases.

There is simply no talk of any withdrawal from Afghanistan or elsewhere. Mr. Robert Gates, the new US Defense Secretary, visualizes a permanent US presence in Iraq, irrespective of what happens there. This seems to how permanent US strategic interests are defined.

The present differences of opinion, and the ballyhoo of Democrats regarding withdrawal from Iraq, is mostly electoral politics; it may not be proof that America is likely to change its strategic thinking, or will let Iran and the rest of the Middle East possibly slip out of its control.

If this line of thinking has any merit, it would involve the assumption that American strategic thinking is not actually partisan; all major stakeholders in America share it. If this assumption is granted, the lie of the land is altogether different.

It is easy to note that Americans of most stripes think that they have to remain Numero Uno in the world, militarily, economically and politically. That involves management of the new power-centres that are definitely emerging, while preserving what the US already has.

The US policy in Asia can easily be seen as being mainly aimed at containing and countering the rising influence of China on the one hand, and of Russia on the other. The US is the head of a coalition with Australia, Japan, South East Asian states and South Korea and Taiwan.

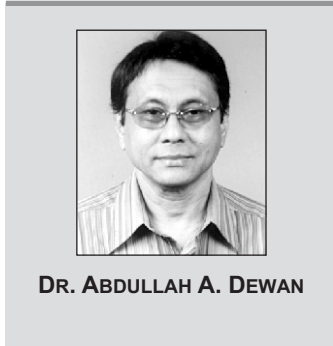
The US is trying to absorb India into its power system. In Europe, America is tightening its grip on the European Union so that it does not develop into a rival power centre but remains tied to the American chariot as an allied power. The struggle for the soul of the EU is intense today.

The Americans seem to desire a virtual division of the EU into what they call Old Europe and the New Europe, the entry of which, into Nato and the EU, they have ensured. All these are requirements of their leadership concerns. They have to manage the whole world the same way, and remain in control of all areas where key raw material are produced.

Europe cannot be left out of the loop of the American power system if the ME is to remain securely under American control. From that viewpoint, control over the Middle East is as vital as it is over Europe. Once this is granted, it means that a regime change in Iran would remain the American priority. Whether it means war now or later is secondary.

MB Naqvi is a leading Pakistani columnist.

Wall Street Journal and emergency



YAROSLAV Trofimov's June 4 Wall Street Journal article, "Bullets and Ballots: Army Takeover in Bangladesh Stalls Key Muslim Democracy," convinced many of us that the article was intended to serve the interests of Bangladeshi politicians and their surrogates living overseas. Even the title of the article offers an exaggerated depiction of what really happened on 1/11.

No one heard an echo of a single bullet being fired, except Yaroslav. On the one hand, he wrote "army intervened to abort a flawed election," and on the other, asserted that democracy was stalled by an army backed government with sinister motives.

Instead of lauding the ongoing

NO NONSENSE

The arrested politicians, government officials, and businessmen have no sympathizers except their beneficiaries -- some of whom were educated in the US. Many of these beneficiaries have now turned into internet bloggers and lobbyists, campaigning against the current reformist government to save these corrupt people from rotting in prisons. These lobbyists don't understand how the corrupt politicians exploited their own citizens, who elected them to serve their (the people's) interests.

institutional reforms, he dismissed them as back-pedaling pretences intended to prolong this version of military rule. Lack of objectivity, and the negative tones of the article are evident in the following paragraph:

"But now the army-installed caretaker government is back-pedaling on its pledge to organize a quick, clean election, and then relinquish authority. And the once-bloodless coup is turning into something more sinister. Since January, an estimated 200,000 people, including hundreds of leading politicians and businessmen, have been jailed under emergency rules that suspend civil rights and outlaw all political activity. According to human-rights groups, scores of others seized by the troops in the middle of the night have been tortured to death or summarily executed."

Many of these statements such as "tortured to death or summarily executed" are indefensible fabrications. Was it a military coup, or intervention by the army to avert "blood letting" and "internal security" explode out of control? Isn't it the calling of the country's defense forces to respond to such an occasion?

The jailing of 200,000 people is another indefensible exaggeration, since Bangladesh prisons do not have the capacity to hold one fourth of that number at one time. Knowing that the government is instituting long awaited reforms that'll facilitate a free and fair election by the end of 2008, but calling the process back-pedaling is deliberately deceptive.

He also quoted Brad Adams, Asia

director for Human Rights Watch, who said that the government "is very quickly squandering the goodwill that it had at the beginning. At this point, it's quite clear that he army is running the country, and they're making it pretty clear they don't intend to leave anytime soon."

If the government wants to perpetuate its power, why would it reform the judiciary, the Election Commission, and the Anti-Corruption Commission, ensuring that these institutions will remain constitutionally independent of the executive?

The democracy that existed prior to 1/11 was classified as one of the 55 "flawed democracies," (ranked 75th out of 165 countries) in a global survey released by the Economist Intelligence Unit on November 24,

2006.

The survey identified only 28 full democracies. Hopefully, once the reforms are instituted and a free and fair election is held by December 2008, Bangladesh will emerge as a new member of the fraternity of full democracies.

Foreign journalists must desist from propagating tendentious rhetoric against a country struggling to scramble out of a near collapse. Why is it hard to see that the army isn't running the country? It is only backing the government in law enforcement and the all enveloping anti-corruption drives.

The army does not have the expertise to orchestrate the all encompassing institutional reforms that are underway. Besides, what's wrong if the army is backing the government? The country doesn't belong to the corrupt politicians alone -- it belongs to the army and the people as well.

Is there any other country where a state of emergency coexists with freedom of the media and basic civil rights, as it does in Bangladesh today? Which civil rights are being violated, save the prohibition of political violence, lock-outs, street protests, and industrial blockades?

Why not ask the people on the streets if they know what civil rights they're being denied? Although a moratorium has been enforced on political activities, no one has been detained for open political discourses on television talk shows, living room chats, restaurant meetings, or in newspaper columns.

Yaroslav referred to the concern of 15 US senators over the ongoing "state of emergency" and "custodial deaths" in the country. How seriously should we take these senators' concerns about Bangladesh politics when they are persuaded by lobbyists to react to partisan views? When was the last time these Senators took issue with the human rights (HR) violations in Iraq or in Palestine?

Any law enforcing government would imprison alleged and suspected criminals (terrorists, extortionist, drug traffickers, smugglers, illegal gun owners etc) to restore and maintain law and order and, thus, protect the HR of 145 million law abiding citizens.

When the criminals violate peoples' rights the HR watchdogs call it a law enforcement problem. When the law is enforced they call it HR violations; a classic Catch-22 dilemma for the government.

There is no question that the

government should be transparent about any human rights violations that may have occurred, and must prevent such violations at all cost. Interestingly though, after the 1/11 emergency and the arrests of corrupt politicians and wrong-doers, some HR watchdogs have popped up suddenly in the US. These hitherto invisible watchdogs are now clamouring that many of the arrested are innocent victims of the army's indiscriminate campaign to destroy the democratic process.

This bickering can be dismissed as being deliberately fabricated -- a deceitful campaign staged by the political fixers in Bangladesh, and designed to distort the foreign media's perception of the reformist government.

The arrested politicians, government officials, and businessmen have no sympathizers except their beneficiaries -- some of whom were educated in the US. Many of these beneficiaries have now turned into internet bloggers and lobbyists, campaigning against the current reformist government to save these corrupt people from rotting in prisons. These lobbyists don't understand how the corrupt politicians exploited their own citizens, who elected them to serve their (the

people's) interests.

When the politicians looted funds from development and poverty reduction projects they violated the human rights of 60 million people living in poverty.

When they traveled to neighbouring countries for medical treatment, with money looted from hospitals and health care projects, they violated the HR rights of the sick and the helpless who crowd the hallways and corridors of under-funded public hospitals.

When they educated their children overseas with looted funds, they violated the human rights of the country's children who spoiled their childhood in "child labour" instead of schoolwork.

To human rights watchdogs, these problems originated from a lack of good governance and a disregard for the rule of law. If that is so, then shouldn't we give the reforms initiatives a chance to succeed? Like everywhere else, people here also deserve good governance, and all indications are that the country is moving -- albeit slowly -- in that direction.

Dr. Abdullah A. Dewan is Professor of Economics at Eastern Michigan University.