

Spurt in student violence

Corrective measures needed to address the issue

A sudden surge in student violence in the nation's capital leaves us all worried. The other day, factions of the Chhatra League went into battle against each other over the formation of new university hall committees of the student organisation. Alongside that came news of the violence which erupted at the Teacher-Student Centre centering around the selling of admission forms for prospective students of the university. And as if that were not enough, students of Dhaka College and City College went into pitched battles on Monday over the harassment of a female student of the latter institution by one of the former. Indeed, the clashes between the students of the two colleges resulted in a long and asphyxiating traffic snarl which affected not only the area around New Market and Science Laboratory but also other neighbourhoods.

Obviously, the incidents we speak of vary from one another. At the university it was basically a question of the turf wars that student groups or factions usually find themselves locked in. But what took place between the two colleges already mentioned is something of the clanish or parochial in form. Whatever the details of the incidents and however they may have been set off, the fact remains that it is all a portrayal of a bad situation that may get worse unless drastic and effective checks are in place. It is not that such incidents have not occurred before. But what is surely surprising is that despite the concerted steps being taken toward inaugurating a democratic order and a peaceful society, sections of rowdy students can have the audacity to indulge in civic disorder through blocking off all roads to traffic and pouncing on all sorts of vehicles that come in their way. It may be a sign of a bigger social malaise, but that is hardly any reason for us to think it cannot be curbed firmly. And that certainly is the job of the law enforcers.

Apart from immediate action being taken, it falls on the relevant college and university authorities to seriously undertake counselling programmes for their students as a way of inculcating in them the ideals of responsible behaviour. The political classes too could play a positive role, especially in guiding students at the university and college levels towards a respect for and adherence to values. The bottomline ought to be clear: when a section of students, being tomorrow's leaders and social players, themselves give rise to panic by their actions, it is their own standing in society which takes a battering.

Ingenuity of the corrupt

Lack of oversight glaring

THE reported cases of corruption in the Khulna offices of Bangladesh Telecommunications Company Limited (BTCL), formerly BTB, illustrate the utter disregard for accountability and a minimum standard of honesty of all those involved. This one instance has robbed the government exchequer, and consequently the tax-payers, of more than Taka 30 crore over a period of seven years. It is not only the amount involved, but also the manner in which public money was embezzled, that leaves us dumbfounded.

This is a classic example of the endemic institutional corruption, where one unit of a public establishment has tried to outdo the other in fraudulence and deceitful enterprise. And to top it all, only a small percentage of the work has been completed.

It amuses us a great deal to see the improvisation - showing, in one case, the use of 122 labourers in fixing a single toilet pan, and in another, a similar number of labourers in another office of the BTCL Khulna division, employed for cleaning shrubs and sewerage line.

Regrettably, such gross and brazen examples abound in our public sector. We have cases where bills have been paid for construction of roads without those being completed, of incomplete bridges whose payments had been made well before the work was started, some of which are still awaiting completion even many years after the scheduled dates. These acts of corruption are committed in connivance with, and full knowledge of, everyone up and down the chain. And everyone in the loop takes a share of the misappropriated money, even those that are supposed to maintain oversight and ensure financial discipline in these institutions.

The top managements cannot absolve themselves of their responsibility in this regard, for they have failed to exercise appropriate supervision, not only of the physical work for which the money was sanctioned but also the paper work that was used to process the money bills. And, we are constrained to ask, where were the internal and external auditing and the oversight by those that are supposed to scrutinise all aspects of a bill before putting those up for final approval?

It is therefore for the government and the ACC to rake out all those at key positions of responsibility, through proper investigation, and give them the most exemplary punishment that should act as deterrence for future to everyone. All the talks of ridding the country of corruption will sound hollow if the system cannot be cured of the disease that has taken a firm root. Little will come off any drive to root out corruption if the problem is not addressed in its entirety.

Of school timings, guillotined trees and overall drift

GROUND REALITIES



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

When government is in retreat, it is morality that begins to shatter, piece by piece. When society, having been made lazy by the slow but sure infiltration of capitalism, begins to resemble a couch potato, you do not expect revolutionary change in your life.

traffic problems in the nation's capital. It worked, miraculously. For only a couple of days. And since that moment in the sun, no one has talked about it. Which is one way of informing ourselves that we are back where we used to be, in the midst of all-encompassing chaos. You watch all the goings-on on all those roads and you realise with something of trepidation that things will not get any worse before they get better.

They will keep getting worse, unless of course the government -- this one or the next -- stumbles on the idea that building more, and lengthened, flyovers could really be the answer to the horrendous numbers of people and vehicles crowding the streets.

It is amazing that no one on the perches of authority thinks about these possibilities or, having thought about them, quickly bins them as just another wasteful idea. But consider the long way Kolkata and Karachi, to name just a couple of cities in our neighbourhood, have come through their flyovers. Why must we be left behind?

Ah, yes! We have, you will quietly remind us, been left behind in many

ways. Even Pakistan, a state not much noted for its devotion to democracy, has had elections. Its latest military ruler has been banished into silence; it has quite a working parliament; and, even if you do not have much affection for him, Asif Ali Zardari is the country's new president.

There will be an election in the United States. There has already been one in Canada. The Thais, despite their meddling military, have managed to hang on to democracy, however tenuous that democracy may be. And look at us. We have been preparing -- preparing!!! -- for general elections since October 2006. And even there we are not quite sure we will have elections on the scheduled day, if the worries of the politicians and various social groups are to be taken into account.

The state of emergency is still there; some unhappy political elements are pretty upset at the prospect of their losing the elections and could, therefore, do everything they can to foil the exercise. Sheikh Hasina is away and no one has any clear idea when she will be back home.

The drive against corruption has

lost steam, despite what the Anti-Corruption Commission will tell you. The chief election commissioner cheerfully tells us that Begum Khaleda Zia can become a voter any day she wants to. That is most wonderful, but why then must all those people who have missed making it to the voters' list be told that nothing can be done about them, that they must wait till the elections are over?

There are the priorities that need handling. But when you wake up one beautiful October morning to the depressing spectacle of scores of trees having gone through the guillotine in the night, you wonder at the predatory nature of some men in the hallways of government. There is doublepeak all around you.

On the one hand, there is no end to exhortations on saving the environment; on the other, there is this gross insensitivity to nature. It simply does not fit. And then there is the blatantly sinister about it. Those men with murderous intent go about the job of killing trees in the nocturnal hours, when men and women sleep in one another's arms and babies dream of ensorment with fairies in the Garden of Eden.

Go back to history, our history. Something has always been the matter with some of our rulers when it has come to the job of tackling trees. In the Zia years, all the graceful trees on Manik Mia avenue were struck down, because the president had seen wide, tree-less boulevards in China.

It was not years before another ruler, H.M. Ershad (give him credit for his sense of aesthetics), made a note of the resultant desolation and decreed the planting of fresh saplings on that road. Of course, the old beauty never came back. But it was a restoration, nevertheless.

This hacking away at trees is just one more of the wrong priorities you see around you. Small things come in where bigger issues should have been. It should have been for the police to deal with Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujahid under the terms of the law. They did not, for they could not find him. He was, said they to our disbelief, a fugitive. Was he? We thought we saw him at a meeting of the four-party alliance. And then, to our collective national horror, we found him shaking hands with none other than the head of the caretaker government.

Suddenly, the question was not why Mujahid was not being taken into custody. It was why the chief adviser, knowing full well what the commotion was all about, had allowed the alleged fugitive into his august presence. And then came the most piteous sight of all.

None of the four advisers present at the joint news briefing with the Jamaat leaders at the end of the dialogue gathered in themselves the courage to answer questions about

Mujahid's presence at the dialogue and at the press briefing. That was a moment of unmitigated shame. You ask yourself: if the police could be swift and demonstrate the kind of dexterity that came with placing Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia under arrest, what prevented them from showing similar energy in handling the Jamaat leader?

But these are mere questions. Do not expect them, or at least a good number of them, to be answered to your satisfaction. A band of extremists, having appropriated for themselves the right to speak for their faith, demand that sculpture put up before the authorities be removed.

The airport is in an embarrassed genuflection, oblige them. And the moral here? Today it is the airport sculpture. Tomorrow it could well be the Aparajeyo Bangla at Dhaka University and then the Central Shaheed Minar. One dark morning, questions might be raised about the National Memorial at Savar.

When government is in retreat, it is morality that begins to shatter, piece by piece. When society, having been made lazy by the slow but sure infiltration of capitalism, begins to resemble a couch potato, you do not expect revolutionary change in your life. Contaminated milk? Prices of food? Medicare? You do not see government clamping its authority in these areas. Everyone is comfortable, lulled into complacency.

Drift is all. And drift happens when your sense of idealism goes missing.

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How does the global financial crisis affect Bangladesh?

BOTTOM LINE

According to economists, 10/10 has dramatically changed global financial system forever. Governments have intervened with funds to avoid collapse of reputable banks. Some said that nationalisation of banks was unthinkable in the 21st century, but it has happened in a free market economic system.



HARUN UR RASHID

HERE is a saying that when America sneezes, the world gets flu. This is evident, as the American financial crisis has spread throughout the world. America can come out of this crisis, but countries with weaker economies will suffer heavily.

Bangladesh is affected by what transpires in international markets and economies of leading countries. Most of them are experiencing slowdown in growth. Bangladesh is most likely to be adversely affected sooner or later.

Stocks and shares dropped to the lowest level across the world on October 10. No country was spared from financial crisis because of globalisation and inter-locking of financial interests.

Some economists have compared October 10 to 9/11. Financially, 10/10 is a new 9/11 because the financial system and money markets will never be the same.

According to economists, 10/10 has dramatically changed global financial system forever. Governments have intervened with funds to avoid collapse of reputable banks. Some said that nationalisation of banks was unthinkable in the

21st century, but it has happened in a free market economic system.

Shashi Kapoor writes in the International Herald Tribune "Fidel Castro and Mahmud Ahmadinejad should pronounce themselves vindicated by the crisis in global capitalism, since free market economy and capitalism have over the years been strongly identified with America."

The crisis is compounded by the fact that the Bush administration has been saddled with deficit budgets for several years. It is reported that current budget deficit of the US hit a record high to \$ 455 billion. President Bush had inherited a surplus budget of \$79 billion from the Clinton administration.

Furthermore, US regulators did not monitor the way the banks were providing loans during the housing-boom period. The regulatory bodies in the US ignored warning signs of a financial storm since August 2007, and believed that the free-market system would take care of it.

When the catastrophe went out of control, the US treasury secretary came up with the \$700 billion rescue package. Some economists argue that it is too late, and is an inadequate or flawed response.

The rescue package met strong opposition in the Congress despite

the request of the president to pass the law quickly. Republican lawmakers do not believe that the administration should use taxpayers' money to bailout the financial institutions.

After more than week, the bill was passed with many conditions. Some say that the US should now be called "Socialist Republic of America."

Britain's prime minister adopted measures to restore confidence in the banks and money market by buying shares in the banks and providing billions of dollars to the money markets, including guaranteeing all deposits in the banks, and inter-banking debt as well.

The US has reportedly entered a recession according to an official of the Federal Reserve Bank and leading European countries are on the brink of recession, although unprecedented financial stimulus packages by Britain, France, Germany and Japan have avoided global financial meltdown.

Why meltdown?

It has been argued that the meltdown of the financial system was "Made In America," because it relaxed rules of providing loans to people with no income for buying houses, called "sub-prime housing loans" (now known as "toxic loans or assets"), amounting to about \$2.1

trillion dollars.

The paper securities on property were packaged and sold to banks and financial institutions worldwide, and when borrowers failed to make payment for loan the banks and financial institutions could not recoup the loan-money because the price of property was too low or because there was no buyer.

The towns where these properties are, are called "ghost-towns" because the owners have left and banks cannot sell the property.

Banks and financial institutions that bought security-papers have lost money. The IMF reckons that, worldwide, losses on "toxic assets" originating in America will reach \$1.4 trillion, and so far \$760 billion has been written-off by them.

Normally, banks and financial institutions lend and borrow money, and the money market works well. During this crisis, money markets ceased to function as investors, and banks which ordinarily arrange foreign exchange swaps among themselves for a set time period are nervous about the risk that their counter-party will go bust because of liability of "being put into place" while the swap is in toxic assets, and so have shied away from such deals.

Thus, the global money market was closed and a severe credit

crunch was felt across the world. If it were allowed to continue further it would have led to depression.

How does it affect Bangladesh?

In the industrialised countries, it is reported that manufacturers are not making money, the retailer is not making money and the consumer is complaining because they are paying more. An unprecedented plunge in the confidence of consumers is being experienced in these countries.

The global slowdown in the leading economies is likely to adversely affect exports, aid flow, foreign direct investment and remittance from workers. About 75% of the exported garments and knitwear go to the US and Europe, but this is likely to fall because there will be no demand in those countries.

Bangladesh needs foreign direct investment (FDI) up to 28% of GDP every year to reduce poverty in the country, but it may slow down considerably. Likewise, aid from the G-7 countries will be less.

Remittances during the last financial year stood at almost \$7 billion. 25% was from industrialised countries and 75% from the Middle East. The Middle East has not been immune from the crisis and stocks fell there too.

Furthermore, labour laws in some Middle East countries have changed to the detriment of foreign workers. It is likely that remittances will be less because there will be job cuts.

The good side of the financial crisis is that the price of oil has plummeted to a level unimaginable this summer. At the time of writing it was less than \$75, from the highest \$147 per barrel. This will help Bangladesh, which imports oil.

Suggested steps

Unemployment in the private sector is likely to increase, which the government must try to check.

Many economists say that one of the ways to keep unemployment at bay is to spend money on infrastructure, thus enhancing employment and ultimately increasing productivity. Purchasing power of vulnerable groups must be increased by directly giving money or food for work.

New business-friendly policies may be adopted to attract foreign investment. A cut in interest rates to boost investment in the private sector will be difficult because inflation hovers at around 10%.

Real estate developers and garment manufacturers may be given more incentives by cutting taxes and customs duties on raw materials so that rate of growth is maintained.

Bangladesh seems to be in uncharted territory because such global economic crisis has never occurred before. It is qualitatively different from earlier economic break-downs in South East Asia in 1987 and 1997.

Bangladesh's economic security is threatened. No one can be sure of what lies ahead for at least two years. Our think-tanks and private sector may advise the government on how to address slowing economic growth in the country.

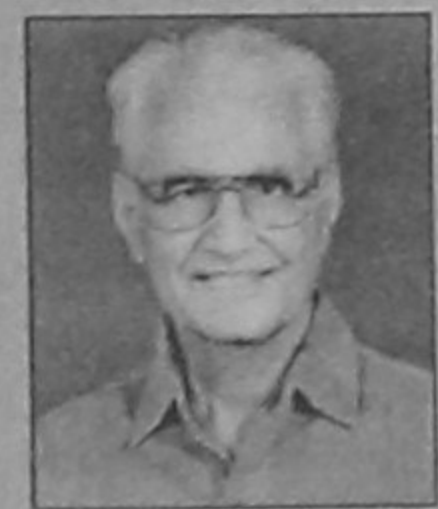
The volatile situation is both a challenge and an opportunity for Bangladesh to show innovation and creativity to come out from the likely adverse effects of the global economic slowdown.

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Compulsion or choice?

PLAIN WORDS

China has invested in Pakistan for its own sake, assessing that India and Pakistan are likely to remain at odds, and are unlikely to make up anytime soon. Building up Pakistan's military strength was perceived as working to China's advantage. How? It is simple, classical balance of power.



M.B. NAQVI writes from Karachi

IT is a moment of danger. The Pakistan economy is faced with a default on its external liabilities, both in the short run and until the first quarter of the next calendar year.

The deficits are too great to bear, particularly on the trading account, which has put heavy pressure on the balance of payments. The finance minister and other finance officials are putting on a brave front that they can pay their way through the year. But it would be a miracle if they do without substantial cash aid on harsh terms from international financial institutions. Pakistan is trying to fish in three

separate waters. It began with tapping western sources, and President Zardari assembled a Friends of Pakistan Conference in New York during the current session of the UN General Assembly.

But, against the background of the US's displeasure over Pakistan's inability to comply with American wishes vis-à-vis the fight against terror, it is sure to be hard going. The IMF and World Bank cannot possibly say "no" if Pakistan is ready to make the policy adjustments they prescribe.

Friends of Pakistan will meet in Abu Dhabi and something will be worked out from the Gulf Arabs -- and the IFIs. That is the basis of the

confidence of the Pakistani officials.

The Pakistan foreign office decided to send its national security advisor to Delhi -- virtually simultaneously with President Zardari's first "official" visit to Beijing. Pakistan is angling for a friendly India that can help solve its domestic problems, particularly relieving the pressure in the tribal areas of NWFP and Balochistan.

Pakistani intelligence services believe that it has aggravated the situation in tribal areas and Balochistan and, because of what Pakistani spokes are said to have been doing in Afghanistan, there are no great expectations from India at this stage; only a reduction in tension

and resumption of dialogue are desired.

This would please the West also. Pakistan is now prepared to pay more or less the requisite price if India were to settle a few disputes.

The major disputes -- regarding Kashmir and Indus river waters, particularly the Chenab river waters -- not likely to be resolved. But a better climate can be created by the resolution of minor disputes, in which trade and some economic cooperation can be subsumed.

Some kind of a deal with India should strengthen Pakistan's hands, both in Beijing and in Washington, not to say Arab capitals. All Arabs are on the same wavelength as

Washington; they all desire better Indo-Pakistan relations.

As for China, the third waters, the history of Pakistan-China relations has been one of Platonic love, mainly from the Chinese side; Pakistan's total contribution to China lie in two services it has rendered to China: there was the 1963 border agreement with China in which, according to the Indian stand, Pakistan gifted away some J and K territory that it should have retained as its own, even if it did not recognise India's right on it.

The second service that Pakistan rendered to China was no great service. It was to enable Kissinger to secretly visit Beijing from Pakistan. The groundwork for that had been laid by American diplomacy previously, and this was just a minor step; there are no reports that Pakistan had played any part in the developments that led to the visit.

The question is; why has China invested so much money and effort in Pakistan when it has not benefited China? When it has never taken by Pakistan during the 1965 and 1971 wars with India, and China has been vainly urging some kind of non-alignment and self-reliance in

economic development. Instead, Pakistan has blindly followed the economic line given by the IFIs, and politically it has remained closely aligned with America. Pakistan's conduct from Afghanistan's 31 Revolution onward is instructive: it has danced to the tune that the West wanted it to.

Why has China stayed steadfast and gone on investing in Pakistan? It has built the Gwadar port and the Karakoram Highway; it has given Pakistan all the defence industries it has. The question needs probing.

China has invested in Pakistan for its own sake, assessing that India and Pakistan are likely to remain at odds, and are unlikely to make up anytime soon. Building up Pakistan's military strength was perceived as working to China's advantage. How? It is simple, classical balance of power. A stronger Pakistan would detract something from India's greatness as it would mean the latter earmarking a certain proportion of its military strength to offset Pakistan's.

This bottling up of a considerable portion of the Indian military for tackling Pakistan is what would leave China more or less alone in spread-

ing its influence abroad. This does not hurt America, and the two have continued to give considerable military aid to Pakistan for exactly the same reasons -- until now, when the American attitude is changing rapidly to absorb India in its own web of power to dilute its old reliance on Pakistan.

Pakistan today faces one certainty: American is prepared to continue with economic aid but will certainly reduce its military aid. Even the continuation of economic aid would be predicated on America's success in stabilising the worldwide financial crisis and putting it again on a path of a steady growth. For the rest, there are far too many uncertainties in Pakistan-American relations.

It is also a historic moment. One element of semi-certainty has entered: India is likely to remain aligned with the US in the immediate future, except in the unlikely event of the Indian Left defeating both Congress and BJP next year. But this may involve political turmoil inside India.

There are also uncertainties over Naxalites: they can keep a lot of India's security forces tied down for a

long time. One cannot say that India will, or will not, have the requisite statesmanship in a rapidly changing world where American supremacy is decreasing at a much faster rate than anyone had supposed.

Can India and Pakistan possibly acquire the flexibility that is being forced on both by external circumstances? A theoretical possibility is that the two, if they can possibly reconcile with each other and proceed to make Saarc a vital and progressive organisation, can become agents of stability that can easily coordinate in economic matters with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

A peaceful coexistence of India and China in Asia is needed by all South Asian states. There is one thing sure however: China's politics do not permit military adventurism. It is the duty of most Asians to ensure that India and China coexist and cooperate peacefully, particularly in economic matters. Politically, they should focus closely on human rights and peaceful cooperation, without forgetting to include Japan.

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