

Rumpus across polytechnic campuses

Spillover on to the streets speaks of a deeper crisis

THE students of polytechnic institutes across the country are agitating fiercely over some new examination rules set by the Technical Education Board. While this should normally have been an academic issue to be resolved within the precincts of the educational arena, it has been dragged on to the streets and spread like something of a bushfire. It raises the question in the public mind as to why the students' outrage assumed such a stupendous proportion, rocking even civic peace.

It affected not only the polytechnic institutes and their students and teachers but also vehicular traffic, shopping complexes and pedestrians, let alone damaging public and institutional property. As the police swung into action to quell disturbances, clashes occurred with the students at different places.

When such things happen, nobody seems to be in control. We believe that the police should have the capacity to be preemptive rather than reactive. We do realise though, the authorities of the institutions themselves should have nipped it in the bud through persuasive methods. Actually, the institutes ought to have internal trouble-shooting mechanisms consisting of student representatives as well as those from the institutes. Basically it's a question of timely communication at all levels.

The issue is that the Board has framed the rule that the referred students will be allowed to appear in exams twice as regular candidates and if they appear for the third time, they will not be treated as regular students. But the students seem to be under the impression that the rules will cancel their studentship in referral cases. Without going into the merit of the decision that evidently concerns only the referred students and not the general body of students, what is particularly abhorrent is the demonstration of an attitude that if they don't show their destructive claws they can't make any point.

Clearly, the new rules have been misunderstood by the students. The polytechnic authorities have issued a clarification to allay the students' apprehensions. But what is regrettable is why they could not act before the situation went out of control. There has hardly been any communication between the students and the polytechnic authorities on the one hand, and between the polytechnic institutes and the board on the other -- a lapse that no post-facto response can compensate for.

The problem of student unrest over something that should have been internally thrashed is becoming a national concern. Thus, we suggest that the education ministry, the boards, the campus authorities and representatives from student communities initiate consultative processes aiming to build trouble-shooting mechanisms into the respective campuses.

Traffic, again

No country can thrive with its capital in chaos

ONCE again the capital's traffic woes have hit the headlines and the denizens of Dhaka have had to suffer for hours due to the choking congestion. The proximate cause of the appalling jams that clogged up the city's roads on Tuesday were street demonstrations that brought traffic to a halt in many places, but this is only one of the maladies that beset us.

For the 12 million plus residents of the capital city, trivial as it may sound, there is no more pressing concern than that of traffic congestion. Indeed, the lower down the economic ladder one is, the more affected by the traffic situation. Those who must use public transportation are the ones who suffer the most from the delay and frustration that is a daily occurrence.

The new government, we are glad to see, is undertaking projects to build new roads, and seems to be making this a priority issue. However, it is not enough. What is called for is a complete and comprehensive overhaul of the existing system and massive investment in the necessary infrastructure.

But this is not all. We also need to make fixing Dhaka a priority, and to this end traffic laws must be enforced, traffic police need to be trained and deployed, and innovative ideas such as congestion charges, mandatory busing for schools, car pool lanes, expanded parking, etc as well as the promotion of public transport need to be explored.

At the same time, as Tuesday's incident showed, we need to ensure that the roads are not clogged by demonstrators. People may have legitimate cause for protest, but when this inconveniences the average citizen and keeps one from being able to go about one's business freely, then it is unacceptable.

In short, solving the traffic problem is as crucial as it is complex. It needs to be addressed not only immediately but also comprehensively. But the one thing that the government can do that would improve life for Dhaka residents the most would be to improve their mobility and the city's livability.

Crossing the 'Ts' carefully and in time

All the "Ts" are of vital importance to us. It remains to be seen how well we can exploit these to our advantage. We must be guided by our national interest in addressing these issues. Cross the "Ts" carefully and in time.

SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

THE opposition has managed to create enough furore on the foreign policy issues articulated by the AL. The debates are a very healthy sign -- diverse opinions and views help inform the public on the take of different parties and groups and the pros and cons of a particular issue. However, some reports and commentaries have managed to confuse, if not downright mislead, the public. Objectivity has been sacrificed to project a particular line of thought; facts have been muddled up, either out of ignorance or as a deliberate attempt to fool. All those who hold the right to know the truth as inalienable and sacred would find this disconcerting.

Interestingly, all the major issues that have been hogging the headlines and the op-ed columns and the talk shows, start with "T" -- TIFA, transit, trade, and taskforce/terrorism. And it all had to do with two very important countries, one the lone superpower to whom even a "small" country like Bangladesh matters in the overall global strategic context, and the other our neighbour, whom we cannot do without and who cannot do without us.

And to add to the interest inspired by the debates we have had two very important visits in the course of less than three days, one of which was very high profile, by Mr. Pranab Mukherjee, the Indian foreign minister, who also happens to be standing in for Dr. Manmohan Singh.

A very passionate discourse against TIFA had gone on before the arrival this week of Richard Boucher, the US

Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, the perception being that Bangladesh might be pressured into signing on the dotted line. There are very few details available for us to make a value judgment, but those who have more knowledge about this than most of us say that the arrangement will be counterproductive for US. Contrary to all expectations, we were told by Boucher that TIFA was not among the list of priorities of the new US administration.

But, for many, more surprising was US support for the idea of a regional anti-terror task force (ATTF), and its offer to enhance our maritime patrol capability. However, we don't know exactly what the specific areas are, in terms of enhancing surveillance capability of the maritime zone are, where help was sought, but one cannot imagine that joint patrolling is one of the options.

Rightly, there is strong resentment against any joint tasks with the US, particularly at a time when there is general perception about US attempt to dominate the globe directly and indirectly, and where local associates are likely to be seen as vassals. However, there is logic in acquiring technical assets that would help reinforce our coastguard resources. Although the taskforce concept is still in a very nebulous state, one must consider carefully the type of help that US might provide. There is risk that goes with being a partner in the much-maligned US global war on terror. Any arrangement that marks us as its partner is likely to make us targets of the terrorists.

The two issues related to India that have predominated all others are transit



Take time to think.

and ATTF. They had featured in the bilateral talks, although not in the way some had expected.

It appeared from some of the newspaper reports appearing a few days before Pranab's visit that Bangladesh was all but ready to provide transit facility to India, and one Bangla daily even reported that the government had approved a water-road-rail transit agreement. One was not aware that such a concrete proposal was on the anvil. Providing transit was one of the provisos of the first trade agreement, which found mention in all the other subsequent agreements, but whose modalities are yet to be worked out.

The ATTF has perhaps engendered more debate than the others, and much blame must lie on the government for not coming up with a concrete idea as to what and how it sees the proposed task force work. As for the Indian response to the proposal, some see it as an out of hand rejection of the idea. That is not necessarily so.

Only a couple of weeks ago, writing in this very column on the issue of a regional ATTF, I had said the idea was good and one that should help in fulfilling the articles of Saarc agreements related to terrorism but, given the peculiar strategic orientation and geopolitical compulsion of the region, one may well ask how effective the proposed task force would be.

The Indian minister's statement, that sincerity was a sine qua non of fighting terrorism successfully, only underlined the reality of South Asia. However, reading between the lines, one notices a hint of a suggestion that India might be open to a bilateral arrangement.

All the "Ts" are of vital importance to us. It remains to be seen how well we can exploit these to our advantage. We must be guided by our national interest in addressing these issues. Cross the "Ts" carefully and in time.

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The first 30 days

AL has shown signs of political maturity. The prices of diesel and fertiliser have been reduced for giving impetus to the green revolution. Prices of essentials such as edible oil, flour, rice, etc. have also substantially fallen.



A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

THE mahajote government has completed a month of its tenure. The national election, no doubt, went smoothly for Sheikh Hasina; but she is facing the challenge now. In forming the cabinet she depended on the young blood in her ranks. It was a big surprise that a band of young ministers, elected for the first time, have been allowed to hold important portfolios. The number of ministers with dubious past has been reduced to a minimum.

For the first time, AL has shown signs of political maturity. The prices of diesel and fertiliser have been reduced for giving impetus to the green revolution. Even in the current global economic downturn the Bangladesh economy appears to have remained buoyant. Prices of essentials such as edible oil, flour, rice, etc. have substantially fallen. With the hope of bumper production of rice and price adjustment of edible oil prices of essentials will go down further.

With regard to the trial of war criminals, the United Nations has been already approached and preparations are afoot for an early start of the trials. As the issue is complex the government, it is understood, is proceeding carefully with it. Bangladesh has also sought US technical assistance in the matter. The response of US appears to be encouraging.

Initially, the new leadership faced a crisis in controlling some disturbing situations in a number of educational institutions. This was subsequently controlled through intervention of the prime minister. Furthermore, due to deterioration of law and order killings and muggings, along with mob violence (particularly by students), increased. This is serious concern for the new government.

Mahajote has started its programs. Much more is to be done. We are alarmed at seeing the return of old gangsters. This needs quick overhauling of police. Perhaps new officers will have to be recruited, and strict neutrality needs to be

maintained.

Elimination of corruption is time consuming. The new government should allow the Anti-Corruption Commission to work freely and diligently, with emphasis on institutionalised corruption. It may be pointed out in this regard that it is wrong to assume that the Anti-Corruption Commission performed its job only to destroy politicians and politics in Bangladesh.

There may be errors of judgment by ACC here and there, and there may be corruption among the staff of ACC. This is because the present ACC had to start its work with a large number of corrupt and inefficient employees from the former Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB).

The work by the ACC has already been commended at home and abroad. With more experience, more trained staff, logistics, and strong support from the highest authorities it will not only be able to build a better image of Bangladesh, its efficiency will also ultimately assist in accelerating the rate of growth of the country.

Though the opposition party has not participated in the parliament fully till now, it is expected that by the start of the next parliamentary session we shall see effective participation of the opposition because the existing small problems will be sorted out soon.

We expect more transparency in government decisions, and more freedom of the media. Furthermore, quick and adequate attention is needed to improve governance. What we actually need at this moment is a smaller but efficient and effective bureaucracy to push forward the governmental policies and make decisions quickly.

A bureaucracy that is sensitive to people's needs and basically democratic in spirit and thought is possible only through close attention and strong commitment by the highest authorities, who should be careful about the integrity, honesty and the neutrality of the bureaucrats.

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Business of war

Wars are not fought for territorial gain. Battles are not fought for valour or aggrandisement. Troops are sent into conflict, but not to test their endurance. They are sent as guinea pigs to test the effectiveness of the hardware they carry in their arms.



F.S. AJAZUDDIN

IT took the descendants of black slaves 400 years to produce Dr. Martin Luther King. It took John F. Kennedy's intervention and four generations of education to produce his successor, Barack Obama.

It is a tribute to the American system that it could make a public holiday out of Dr King's assassination, and that it could swear-in a black as the president of the United States.

No black slave ever entered life with more shackles than does President Barack Obama. He has every moment of every day to earn the respect of every white American who did not vote for him. He has to live up to the confidence that millions of his fellow African-Americans have placed in him to consummate their mandate.

He has to repair a bankrupt economy, salvage insolvent behemoths in the automotive industry, rescue banks from their own previous follies, and convince the American public that it cannot spend indefinitely beyond its own means and beyond the resources of other countries.

Perhaps the most difficult challenge President Obama faces is to persuade the military octopus, whose tentacles radiate from the Pentagon, that it is as much a victim of the recession as the rest of America's less lethal industries.

Today, wars are not fought for territorial gain. Battles are not fought for valour or aggrandisement. Troops are sent into conflict, but not to test their endurance. They are sent as guinea pigs to test the effectiveness of the software they carry on their backs and the hardware they carry in their arms.

How else can military contractors be kept in business, if the goods they manufacture with relentless regularity are not used? How else will the Dick Cheneys of this world live if their friends in dark corners do not make landmines and rockets?

Of all the countries in the world, in which the use of arms is still an integral part of its diplomacy, India is perhaps the one that is least hostage to its armament industry -- Bofors notwithstanding. India's presidents do not shed tears -- even after the Sino-

Indian war -- as Kennedy was found doing after the Bay of Pigs fiasco. India's military knows that it is not an alternative government, nor a government within a government. If it is a government it is a government contained within a cantonment.

That is, in a sense, what provides security in the last resort to its neighbours like Pakistan. However noisily sabres may rattle and however loudly tanks may rumble, there is a sense of security that war will be the last resort, the final abyss, after the terra firma of diplomacy. No one in Pakistan has any illusion that the nerves of India are raw and inflamed. No amount of rhetoric and no number of resignations in the Pakistan set-up are likely to assuage the deep sense of hurt and outrage felt by Indians.

Whether that pent-up rage erupts now or years from now, the 1971 war had its genesis in the dugouts of the inconclusive 1965 war, friends of India hope that wiser counsel will prevail where the military dares to tread. Within Pakistan, battles are already being fought on too many fronts for yet another to be opened. We have too many amorphous enemies, too many intangible evasive demons to grapple with for us to take on a larger, better-equipped adversary.

Day by day, the schisms within our own body politic are making it all the more apparent to rational Pakistanis that the clash of civilisations exists not simply in Samuel Huntington's mind. A conflict is raging between reason and religion, with dogma becoming a weapon instead of a tool towards better understanding. Religious extremism cannot be vanquished by half-hearted liberalism. It takes more than drawing-room platitudes to counteract determined fascism.

Whatever demons beset Pakistan, have a parallel in India. Extremism in any country is no virtue, and resistance to it is no vice. Fortunately, we do not have Hindu extremists on our side of the border. It has taken India over 60 years to produce a Bal Thackeray. One wonders how long it will take to produce his antidote.

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