

Turf wars within BCL exact a heavy price

High time the PM acted decisively and demonstrably

THE shutdown sine die of Dhaka Medical College following a lethal factional clash in the BCL being the latest in the series of infighting-induced closures of educational institutions -- eight of them including two public universities -- the question that exercises the public mind is this: has the ruling party abdicated its authority to its student wing? Or, for that matter, has the government done so?

The midnight mayhem apparently originated in a demand for toll to carry on with a rag programme in Fazle Rabbi Hostel planned by a section of students. This itself was symptomatic of the ailment of toll collection linked to control of turf by one student group over the other. Little wonder, therefore, Tuesday's eruption came in the wake of a tense situation that had been simmering in the hostel owing to running battles between two factions of BCL contending for supremacy on the campus as well as the hostel.

Judging by the escalatory factious fighting within the BCL, which apart from putting the government's credibility and image on the line, primarily goes to raise a governance issue beyond the pale of a purely academic concern. In the public eye, the wayward students are being defiant of the government authority; there is thus no scope for any wavering stance on the matter, either for the ruling party or the government. Actually, the issues need to be addressed headlong both by the ruling party and the government.

To be frank, the BCL excesses could not have come to this pass but for the impunity they were feeding on. In the beginning, it was given to understand that since the Chhatra Dal had done the thing when in power, what if the BCL paid them back in their own coin! Surely, the attempt to right a wrong by a wrong only aggravates the wrong. Besides, what of the mandate for change with which the Mohajote came to power? Then, the aberrations were associated with infiltration of 'outsiders' including opportunistic elements of beleaguered Chhatra Dal. But that does not absolve the BCL of its responsibility.

To our mind, there are two issues before the Prime Minister. First, she must pull her full weight to clean up the house, meaning that the ruling party-writ unmistakably holds over its student front; and secondly, the public is fully informed of her actions against the errant students and see the results for themselves.

Despite the series of troubles, none have been arrested or legally proceeded against, although there were arms discovered and physical assaults made on victims. The Prime Minister has directed the police to act independently, regardless of whether a law breaker belonged to her party or not. The police should not hesitate to do it.

Green Crescent tale

Where was the oversight before?

AS the Green Crescent story unfolds, a number of irregularities have come to light in the functioning of the UK-based NGO in an upazila of Bhola district. Obviously, the recent unearthing of a mini ammunition factory at a madrasa-cum-orphanage set up by Green Crescent has triggered a plethora of questions and queries regarding the real objectives of the controversial NGO. The elaborate structure was, it is suspected, used for some clandestine training purposes as pointed to by the seizure of cache of combat-grade weapons and jihadi literature.

A probe by the Bhola district administration has revealed that the organisation did not even obtain the permission for running the madrasa and illegally extended its activities to another upazila. The organisers were out to exploit the religious sentiments of people by engaging in philanthropic activities which nobody could object to. The ploy worked until the law enforcers raided the madrasa building and found materials proving that something very different was going on inside it.

Developments like the ones witnessed in Bhola tend to indicate how vulnerable we remain to proliferation of organisations with some hidden agenda. For example, it still seems pretty easy to get registered as a welfare organisation and use it for carrying out activities having nothing to do with social welfare as such. It appears, there is no centralised authority to approve or reject any proposals for setting up 'welfare' organisations; for, the Bhola one was registered with the local welfare department. It seems also, there is a duality of authority between the NGO bureau and the social welfare department, or perhaps, a conceptual overlapping of it.

Furthermore, as far as the welfare bodies go, there is hardly any mechanism for monitoring the functioning of such organisations once set up. In the Bhola case, the organisers did not even bother to submit its charter to the local welfare department nor did the latter care to see whether the set-up was acting beyond its stated purpose or keeping within it.

It is imperative that use of religious institutions for any malevolent purpose is prevented by the government energetically. The danger here is perhaps much greater than we can conceive right now. So, we have to contain the menace before it becomes too big to handle.

Unravelling the mystery

A battlefield mutiny can be dealt with summarily, but a peacetime mutiny warrants detailed investigation to unfold the underlying mystery, and to firmly and judiciously act so that history holds it and the nation hails it.

Z.A. KHAN

THE recent carnage at Pilkhana has raised many questions pertaining to the real motive of its perpetrators and about who could instigate an otherwise disciplined paramilitary force. Investigations are underway to unravel the mystery. A few statements that have been published in print media are, at least, insinuating. The author would rather restrict himself to discussing the fall-out of this ghastly incident in national life.

Even a month after the incident, people in the villages talk about it in tea stalls, and some of them even suggest solutions so that such a situation may never occur again. Many people whom I talked with opined that the incident could have been averted had the intelligence services monitored the activities of those who had access to arms and were exposed to public life, and disseminated the findings to the concerned people.

Some among them seemed worried about what the fugitives with arms might do when they disperse into rural areas where law and order cannot be kept under strict vigil, probably because of shortage of manpower. A few of them suggested that the government should move fast to form community police (gram police) with the capability of communicating with the police if mysterious movements are seen.

Few people wanted to know whether teachers and college students could be tasked to maintain vigilance over the people belonging to security services when they come on leave, or whether any message could be passed to local police that they are

enjoying leave in their homes from x date to y date. Those that lost their dear ones wanted the perpetrators of the heinous crime to be given exemplary punishment so that it deters the misguided youth from resorting to such a ghastly crime to make a "statement."

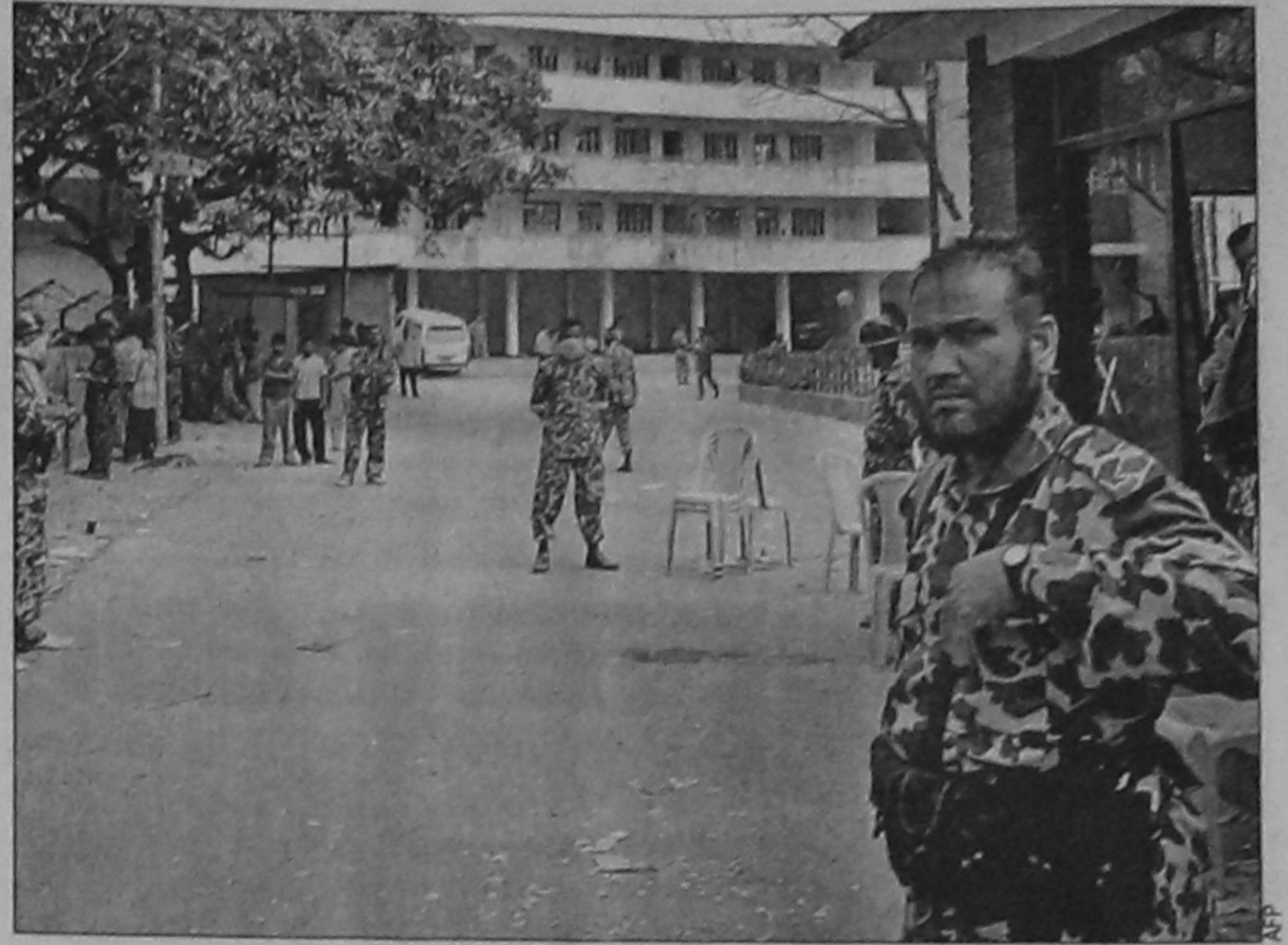
Loaded with differing views on how to tackle the post-carnage situation, one may wonder where to start. Should it be a multi-prong approach to converge at a conclusion, or one line of approach at a time? Some people maintain that different task forces should be formed so that suggestions to address the post-carnage situation are available and at the same time the mystery behind the carnage is uncovered. They think that this will stop the fall-out of restlessness from fanning out far and wide.

Those that support one line at a time opine that the post carnage situation should be immediately addressed so that the anger in the victims' families calms down while investigation to unravel the mystery should go gradually. They hope that this will help identify the root of the conspiracy, which is shrouded behind a thick cloud.

A quick dispensation might overlook details that could be the crux of the problem. A battlefield mutiny can be dealt with summarily, but a peacetime mutiny warrants detailed investigation to unfold the underlying mystery, and to firmly and judiciously act so that history holds it and the nation hails it.

The following questions are humbly placed before the investigators:

- Who could or would have benefited from



Who and why?

- What motivation could have acted as the prime mover for the perpetrators?
- Could there be any "cash in" possibility for the political parties?
- Could it have opened a floodgate of street violence leading to outbreak of turmoil, and who could have reaped a rich harvest from the general confusion?
- What type of the weapons and equipment were used by the perpetrators?
- What has been the career pattern of the accused sepoys?
- Did they go on leave often, or enjoyed a spendthrift life?
- Was there a regular pattern of posting and transfer, or there were departures for a few?
- What has been recruitment pattern of the rank and file, keeping in view:
 - Geographical area from where larger

- number of sepoys joined BDR.
 - Was there any recommendation from any quarter for recruiting a large number of sepoys over the last several years (say 5 years)?
 - Who were responsible for recruitment during last several years?
 - What was the educational background of the sepoys recruited during the last five year?
- When the answers to these questions become available, it will be a lot easier for the investigators to collate and interpret the actions, which will pave the way to solving the mystery. I recommend that a steady pace be followed, without fear or favour, to go to the end of the tunnel to see the light, or else the nation may find itself stranded between the devil and the deep sea.

Z.A. Khan is a former DG of BISS.

The state of our public universities

There are a multitude of factors that affect teaching and research in our universities. Research productivity and innovation are not considered important for personal advancement of teachers.

AHMED A. AZAD

AS a proud alumnus of Dhaka University I was elated to see a local newspaper headline saying: "Dhaka University among world's top varsities." Further reading revealed that in the recent Webometrics Ranking of World Universities DU ranked 4922 worldwide and 45 in the subcontinent, hardly an endorsement for "one of the world's top universities." There is no dearth of talent or intellectual capability as DU and other universities continue to produce some exceptional scholars and academics under very difficult circumstances. So why are our universities not internationally competitive?

The government, through its "Vision 2021," has promised a middle income and technologically advanced country by 2021. These desired objectives couldn't be achieved without a vibrant and innovative higher education system. Excellence in higher education is closely linked to research productivity; the highest ranked universities in the world are also the best in research. Our poor standing in higher education is in part due to the fact that research has not been a priority in Bangladeshi universities.

There are a multitude of factors that affect teaching and research in our universities. Research productivity and innovation are

not considered important for personal advancement of teachers. Senior academics find little time for research and supervision of research students. There is very little research funding from the government and almost none from industry.

Major equipment is mostly unavailable and libraries are severely under resourced. Competitive research grants and predoctoral and post-doctoral fellowships are not available. The culture of multidisciplinary research, innovation and development of intellectual property has not taken root. Our public universities cannot become internationally competitive unless the above deficiencies are rectified.

If the desire to develop excellence in higher education and research is genuine then the government must drastically improve the research environment and transform the research culture in the universities. This cannot be done under the present set-up of the Ministry of Education, which is overstretched in fixing the immense problems of the primary and secondary education sectors.

Higher education, especially in science and technology relevant to our national priorities, requires the input of the ministries of education, science and industry, and they need to seriously consider the establishment of a joint department of postgrad-

uate research, innovation and technology transfer. Establishment of multidisciplinary cooperative research centres between university laboratories, government research centres and industry units with complementary expertise and resources would provide the needed competitive edge and help in the development of key priority sectors such as agriculture, health, energy and environment.

A congenial academic atmosphere required for serious scholarship and research is severely disrupted by violence and lack of security on campus. A blanket ban on student politics will be counterproductive. Enlightened university students, motivated by a strong sense of idealism, have been at the forefront of all our national struggles for educational reform, language rights, democracy and independence. Campus elections have taught them democratic practices and equipped them for future leadership.

So banning genuine student politics is equivalent to "throwing the baby out with the bath water." The right of students to safeguard student interests and support educational reform, and on rare occasions to take a principled stand on national issues, should be guaranteed.

Much of what passes as student politics today, such as carrying of arms on campus, illegal allocation of residential seats, forcible occupation of residential halls and inter and intra-party armed confrontations, has everything to do with lucrative commercial contracts and nothing to do with student politics. These criminal acts can be severely dealt with under existing

criminal laws. This does not happen as these criminal elements, consisting of a small minority of students, are members of student fronts of the major political parties and act as their enforcers on campus. The only way to eliminate student violence is to ban criminal activities on campus, and to sever formal links between student organisations and political parties.

Criminal elements on campus have often been patronised by teachers and teacher organisations aligned to the government and other major political parties. Recruitment and promotion based on political alignment has led to the proliferation of mediocre and self-serving teachers, and a sense of frustration and insecurity for highly meritorious but politically non-aligned teachers. To correct this, all academics, including vice-chancellors and deans, should be appointed through transparent procedures based solely on merit and academic achievements, including peer-reviewed publications and administrative abilities.

Vision 2021 cannot be realised in the absence of "world-class" universities, for which a culture of scholarship, research and innovation, and a peaceful and congenial atmosphere are essential. If the present government is really serious about reform of the higher education sector then din bodol must first commence in the public universities.

Ahmed A. Azad is a former Professor of Medical Biotechnology and Director of Research, University of Cape Town, South Africa, and Chief Research Scientist, CSIRO, Australia. Email: a.azad05@yahoo.com.au

Invigoration of ACC

He is hopeful that AL-led government will certainly take adequate interest in eradicating corruption from the administration and the society because curbing of corruption is one of the priorities in AL's manifesto.

A.B.M.S. ZAHUR

THE election manifesto of AL includes curbing of corruption. We may hope reasonably for restructuring of the Anti-corruption Commission (ACC). If the successes and failures of the ACC during the tenure of the caretaker government (CTG) are analysed one may conclude that it has been able to show that nobody is actually above the law. Common people could at least get some idea about the extent of corruption of the 4-party rule (2001-06).

The initial performance of ACC was commended by both the common people and the donors because it was extremely difficult for such an organisation to make headway in an almost thoroughly corrupt environment. In conducting the investigations proper personnel were not available. It was mainly conducted with reportedly corrupt personnel of the defunct Anti-corruption Bureau (ACB). The new recruits were not up to required level.

The CTG, though, showed enthusiasm in

the early stages, but failed to maintain momentum due to overriding consideration for compromise with the business community, politicians and bureaucracy.

Thus, the fear of punitive action for committing crimes like graft, tax evasion and extortion gradually died down. With a large number of release orders through bails, the ACC had to backtrack.

However, the ACC chief has not yet lost all hope for invigorating the ACC. He is hopeful that AL-led government will certainly take adequate interest in eradicating corruption from the administration and the society because curbing of corruption is one of the priorities in AL's manifesto.

The ACC has been criticised for its failure to handle corruption in the bureaucracy and for keeping the armed forces out of its purview. It has been said that the ACC was utilised by the CTG for harassing the business community and politicians.

This allegation, if proved correct, takes away a large chunk of the credit it earned for filing cases against some businessmen, politicians and corrupt organisations. Thus,

Sheikh Hasina has rightly recognised the need for bringing modifications in its design and objectives.

The bureaucracy in Bangladesh is the most powerful group. This is mainly because of its participation in the policy making process, which enables the bureaucrats to influence decisions at all stages of policy-making and implementation. Such an opportunity will remain as long as the people's representatives give less than adequate attention to their contribution in parliamentary affairs.

It is unfortunate that, within three months of the ninth Parliament's opening, we hear about lack of quorum in parliamentary sessions and strong demand from MPs for allowing them duty free import of luxury cars -- as was done by the MPs of the 4-party alliance. It is also learnt that the MPs are not interested in strengthening local government.

This makes one wonder whether the MPs are interested in the development of the country or interested in holding power. It is time they realise that their greater participation in national policy-making will result in curbing of the power of the bureaucracy, and the level of corruption among the politicians and business community will decrease.

Like many other developing countries, bringing pressure on high officials who control the administration is very difficult because our people are extremely poor and

illiterate; they have neither the strength to control corruption nor knowledge about the impact of corruption.

To bring down corruption, concerted and effective arrangements are needed in support of the ACC. Top business leaders must impress upon their colleagues the urgent need for discouraging bribes. All ministries/attached departments and subordinate offices should have a cell for handling cases of corruptions. Similar cells may be opened in autonomous bodies.

These cells should be in touch with the ACC. The ministry of defence should be given special power to monitor military construction works and defence purchases.

In the case of corruption among politicians, the EC, the Parliament secretariat and the ministry of home affairs should be given some special power to watch the activities of the politicians.

It is reported that the new government is considering modification of the design and structure of the ACC to suit the needs of a democratic government. However, searching for some excellent ideas to curb corruption will not do.

It is time that the PM directs the ACC to start disposal of pending cases and come up, if possible, with suitable recommendations for modernising the ACC. Such a directive will be appreciated well by all, both within and outside the country.

A.B.M.S. Zahur is a former Joint Secretary.