

Mayhem at Barisal Medical College

It is time for firm action against BCL elements

DESPITE severe warnings from the prime minister, despite all the expressions of outrage about their destructive activities, the unruly elements of the Chhatra League go on creating disorder and so causing public worries. This time it is Barisal Sher-e-Bangla Medical College which has had to be shut down for an indefinite period because of the violence let loose on its campus by two factions of the BCL. One need hardly describe here the nature and dimensions of the violence for the simple reason that the pattern has been similar to what the cadres of the organisation have been doing elsewhere in the country. These activities by the BCL, centering around tenders and all other things that students are not expected to be involved with, have already led to the closure of a number of educational institutions. The irony is that at a time when its patron organisation, the Awami League, is in power, the BCL appears not to be unduly worried about the damage it is doing to a government led by individuals it considers its philosophical and political mentors.

The immediate cause of the trouble at Barisal Medical College is reportedly the abduction of a follower of one of the factions. If that is so, there was hardly any reason for the followers of the two factions to have taken the entire college hostage and precipitate a situation where it had to be shut down. An intriguing part of the sordid story is that the Barisal city BCL convener has said that SBMC BCL activities were suspended in the city a month ago and therefore the BCL does not bear any responsibility for the mayhem which has just occurred. Are we to suppose that merely because BCL activities are in suspension its workers have suddenly gone peaceful? In recent weeks we have noticed a tendency on the part of some to point to an 'infiltration' of BCL ranks by outsiders, the implication being that it is these outsiders and not BCL men who have been causing all the problems. That is tantamount to looking away from the issues. It is also a worrying example of people being in a state of denial. Such attitudes not only reveal the new dimensions of violence that are becoming clear to us; they also are a feeble attempt on the part of responsible quarters to wash their hands of everything bad that has been happening. It bodes ill for the future of education and with it that of the country as a whole.

The time has now arrived for firm, concrete and purposeful action to be taken against the lawless elements of the BCL. Since exhortations and reprimands, even from the prime minister, do not appear to have been heeded, let the law enforcers be instructed, in the interest of public peace, to take action. We simply have no choice.

Sorry tale of footbridges, underpasses

Old ones need overhauling, the new to be strategically located

THE photograph of a dilapidated footbridge at Shahbagh intersection of the metropolis on the back page of The Daily Star on Saturday says aplenty about the extent of mismanagement of the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) when it comes to providing essential public service. We spend huge sums of money to erect these structures but once built, they are left to caprice of the elements and human vagary. They are mostly in derelict conditions with no repair work having been done since their construction. Lighting arrangements in the bridges and underpasses are conspicuous by their absence. They become dark tunnels at night, booby-traps laid by snatchers. On top, the steep stairs make climbing and descending veritable ordeals for the users.

Footbridges, or for that matter, underpasses are an essential component of amenities a modern city has to provide. But the citizens feel that many of them have been constructed at wrong places. With the number of motorised vehicles rising every month, appropriate placement of such structures is of paramount importance. It would be in the fitness of things, therefore, that the DCC conduct a survey of the conditions of the existing footbridges and underpasses and see how far these can be done up and pressed into service, albeit not for the criminals who tend to use them as their dens.

Since we can ill-afford to demolish the structures that have been raised at a huge cost, all we can do is to locate the newly planned ones at suitable points. And then all these must be made safe for use at day time as well as at night by installing electric lights and ensuring regular police patrol. No excuse should be entertained by the authorities in this regard.

Finally, we hope that the government would not hesitate to place the required budget for the purpose, with money specifically allocated for maintenance.

Overcoming student agitation

The AL-led government is aiming for a 'digital Bangladesh' by 2021. Attaining such a height is possible only if all the institutions work properly and a peaceful condition prevails.

A.B.M.S ZAHUR

THE problem of student unrest is not an uncommon phenomenon particularly in developing countries. In Bangladesh the role of student politics has some special significance. Historically, the students have been at the vanguard of various national struggles. They have proven that good leadership during turbulent times can bring results.

In achieving our democracy the contribution of the students can never be underestimated. Quite a few of our leading politicians came to the fore after taking an active role in politics during their student days. Among them are Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Tofael Ahmed, Abdur Rob, Kamruzzaman, Motia Chowdhury, Badruddin Omar, Mohammad Toha, Rashed Khan Menon etc. It may be relevant to point out in this regard that Sheikh Mujib showed his leadership qualities in Kolkata in early

1940 and in Dhaka University 1948 (state language issue).

Student politics in Bangladesh originated in united India. During Pakistani rule Chhatra League became the most organised and powerful student organisation due to its good leadership and firm commitment to achieving various rights of the people. It was most active as the auxiliary force of the AL. We are all aware of their support during the liberation war. They always remained above greed and malice and faced the highly trained Pakistani army with hardly any training because the only thing they had in mind was the independence of their country. This was the spirit of our students in 1971.

From 1969 when Sheikh Mujib was behind bars in connection with the Agartala case the students continued the agitation, which forced the Pakistan government to start negotiations with Mujib and was followed by the abdication of President Ayub.

After the assassination of Bangabandhu the students of Chhatra League became targets of repression. They, however, played a pivotal role in the movement against Ershad to restore democracy. In 1990 Ershad had to step down. The student movement during that time played a pivotal role to bring about the downfall of this autocrat.

The relationship between the student wings of AL and BNP continued to remain calm until 2001. With the setting up of the four-party alliance government the student wing of BNP started becoming hostile towards Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) and there have been reports of a large number of atrocities perpetrated on the members of BCL.

With the setting up of the AL-led government a part of the BCL started getting antagonistic towards the Jatiyotabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) in a similar fashion as was done by JCD during the 2001-06 period. However, due to timely interference of Sheikh Hasina the intensity of such acts was reduced.

The malicious activities of BCL could not be stopped despite repeated warnings of its chief Sheikh Hasina. She resigned from the

post of the chief out of sheer frustration. However, many AL well wishers could not appreciate this step taken by Hasina, firstly because she is symbol of unity of AL and all of its institutions and the future of AL depends much on the quality of the emerging leaders from BCL. BCL needs the right guidance and direction of senior leaders of AL and the financial support from the party on regular basis so that they remain free from nefarious activities because of financial constraint. Banning student politics right away might not be such a good idea as it still has some role to play in Bangladeshi politics.

The AL-led government is aiming for a 'digital Bangladesh' by 2021. Attaining such a height is possible only if all the institutions work properly and a peaceful condition prevails. As one of the most powerful institutions for running a democratic order effectively the student wing of AL needs more attention from its high command.

A successful dialogue (or a series of them) may bring a peaceful solution to the current problem. What is needed at this hour is patience and persuasion.

A.B.M.S Zahur is a former joint secretary.

US-Pak differences widen

Pakistanis did some tough talking that the Americans did not expect. But the Americans did not promise to respect what Pakistan wants, even on the question of extending the drone attacks to Balochistan. It is now to wait and see how things develop and who blinks first.

M.B. NAQVI

BARACK Obama's review of the Afghan-Pakistan policies has created a rift in its relations with Pakistan. The new US representative Richard Holbrooke and the head of US military, Admiral Mike Mullen, came to Islamabad on April 6 for seeking a new modus operandi. The indications were that the new democratic Islamabad would welcome closer cooperation with the US the way the Americans want. The Americans were surprised at the strong differences that emerged in the relationship.

Heading the list of differences was that Pakistanis did not want Predator drone attacks on Pakistan territory anymore, flown from Pakistan's own territory. Islamabad also wanted US government to put an end to the propaganda in the US media and by the think tank community against the integrity of Pakistan army.

The US media has been suggesting that Pakistan is now not a part of the solution of the Afghanistan problems but a part of it. Indeed some US experts think that Pakistan is the epicentre of Islamic insurgency in Afghanistan, as well as in the tribal regions of NWFP and other places in Pakistan.

Pakistanis see the problem to be far more complex. Pakistanis are angry that they are being treated so shabbily after doing their very best in the War against Terror, suffering more casualties than any western country.

The American idea of joint operation was especially disliked because Pakistan saw in it the beginning of the presence of more American troops on Pakistani soil. But Americans are quite right in thinking

that Pakistan itself is seriously threatened by Talibanisation.

Already Pakistanis are worried that large chunks of Pakistan territory have become semi-independent, where the writ of Islamabad and Peshawar governments does not really run.

Taliban influence are steadily increasing. They are now knocking at the doors of Peshawar and in Punjab too. The reality is that Punjab is not only self-sufficient in Islamic bigotry but is perhaps far better organised than the NWFP and its tribal areas. Pakistan is a very important country, strategically. It is a piece of real estate that lies at the junction of several regions in Asia, from Middle Eastern countries on the northern shores of Persian Gulf to the rest of South Asia on the other side with a gateway with Afghanistan to Central Asia, where much of the action is.

This area cannot be allowed to fall into Taliban hands. It is a country of 170 million people and is also a nuclear power. The idea of nuclear bombs falling someday into the hands of Islamic bigots is a danger for the entire west and, what was, 'east.'

But no one really likes it to remain an appendage to American power. Just as the West cannot tolerate Pakistan becoming a part of the grouping led by China and or Russia, major Asian powers cannot be quite happy to see Pakistan remaining a bag carrier of the Americans. It is a very hard problem for all strategists. And much can happen here.

Pakistan has created problems for itself. It has run all kinds of arms races with India. The two countries were programed from their own birth for adversarial roles. Once Pakistan became a nuclear power, it started

hurting India badly in Kashmir. There was also another diplomatic rivalry between them over Afghanistan throughout the last 62 years. Even in the 1950s, there was a restrained rivalry in Afghanistan between them.

Pakistan produced Mujahideen, fought a war in Afghanistan and earned ill will of the Afghans of various schools of thought, including the modern middle classes that had been produced by Zahir Shah and the later editions of middle class by communist governments in 1980s.

Afghan nationalism had an anti-Pakistan undertone from the beginning. But the pinnacle of Pakistan's success in Afghanistan was after the Russians had left Afghanistan and Pakistan began by installing up an Islamic government in 1992 it had set up. That lasted no more than a year and a half and Afghanistan dissolved itself into many civil wars.

Pakistan produced another crop of Mujahideen called Taliban and led them to victory in Afghanistan by trickery and military guidance by ISI. They established an Islamic Caliphate under Mullah Muhammad Umar and the whole world knows how reactionary these Taliban were. Everybody knew that the Taliban was a creation of Pakistan and Pakistan had thereby acquired dominant influence in Afghanistan.

After 9/11, the Americans decided to invade and occupy Afghanistan. The Taliban simply disappeared into Pakistan and decided to fight another day. They did exactly this and the process is growing more difficult for America by the day. These Taliban who ran away to Pakistan have created a grave security threat for Pakistan and the ISAF and Nato troops in Afghanistan as well.

America's new policy wanted India, Pakistan and Afghanistan to become operationally one against Islamic Terrorism. India refused to be a part of it for fear that Kashmir issue may thus be reopened. Afghans and Pakistanis are allies but they now cooperate with considerable ill will in their hearts. The Americans are unhappy,

especially with Pakistan.

Pakistan has been a financial beneficiary of its long alliance with American power structure and has grown used to inflows of dollars for doing certain American chores. The whole US-Pakistan alliance is based on this basis.

The new government, that the Americans helped return, is now in place. It is as pro-American as the Washington power brokers wanted it to be. But the Pakistan army, an autonomous power centre within Pakistan state, has a somewhat more sensitive skin and is also a shade more patriotic.

While the Pakistani army remains Pentagon's darling, it is uneasily juggling between being under the control of the government and what the autonomy military dictators had given it. The army's power rested on Pakistan's economy not being able to sustain the size of Pakistan's military, perhaps seventh largest army in the world. It requires a lot of foreign exchange that Pakistan cannot spare. This is one of the reasons why it tends to take-over whenever expedient and insists on its big share of resources. The Americans have largely met that cost most of the time.

But this time Washington has insulted and shown a tough face to the Pakistan army for working both sides of the street: working with GIs and also keeping contacts with Taliban. And they claim all the bounties from the US taxpayers!

The Americans trenchantly said that no blank cheques would be given to Pakistan, though a lot more money would be given if it stayed honest. But they would monitor how it is spent. To this Islamabad replied, "we will take or give no blank cheques."

All these differences came to a head on April 6 in Islamabad. Pakistanis did some tough talking that the Americans did not expect. But the Americans did not promise to respect what Pakistan wants, even on the question of extending the drone attacks to Balochistan. It is now to wait and see how things develop and who blinks first.

M.B. Naqvi is a leading Pakistani columnist.

A Prime Minister and his house

A leader, and specifically the prime minister, should lead the examples of plain living and high thinking, of shared austerity espoused for the people, and of accommodative attitude to the critics.

ABDUL BAYES

PROFESSOR Nurul Islam, Deputy Chairman of the first Planning Commission and an economist of international repute, was a close associate of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the realm of economic matters in both pre and post-independence periods.

In his book *Making of a Nation Bangladesh: An Economist's Tale*, Professor Islam provides, inter alia, a penetrating presentation of his personal conversations with the greatest Bangalee of all times.

Down the author's memory lane, as revealed in the aforementioned book, we come across a story about a house called "Prime Minister's house." The Works Ministry at the time developed a project for the construction of Gonobhaban i.e. a new office cum residence for the prime minister and sent it for the approval of the Planning Commission. Possibly to deter any deviations from the original plan, the Ministry also conveyed to the

Commission that the project document has already been seen and agreed to by Sheikh Mujib.

But a closer look at the project revealed that, in preparing the design and quality of construction, the Ministry was overzealous possibly to please the prime minister. On receipt, the Planning Commission suggested a reexamination of the project and its construction costs. But the Ministry was very surprised at this suggestion and informed Sheikh Mujib, no doubt with some embellishments, about the audacious behaviour of the 'professors' in the Commission.

However, at that time, the decision evoked no reaction from the then Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman himself or from his office. The reticence is quite understandable. While the government was publicly committed to a policy of austerity and the Commission was expected to enforce it in respect of development projects, Sheikh Mujib decided that he could not have asked the Commission to do otherwise in his own

case. He did not want to deviate from the discipline that the Planning Commission was trying to impose on public expenditure.

The prime minister forgave the "professors" for that moment but, possibly, did not forget their interventions. This subject came up later in a different context when Sheikh Mujib and his delegates were taken to Birosini Island where Marshall Tito of former Yugoslavia had his villa. The villa belonged to the old monarchy and was inherited and renovated by the socialist government of Tito. "It was very luxurious in the tradition of palaces and villas of the European royalty of the 19th and early 20th centuries. We were all impressed to see how the living styles of leaders in the Socialist countries contrasted so starkly with their espousal of the cause or the rights of the proletariat!" writes Professor Islam.

Later on, in one of his relaxed moments Sheikh Mujib, just in jest, reminded Professor Islam of the great pomp and luxury in which the famous Socialist revolutionary Marshall Tito lived. Whereas, the leader lamented, "the Prime Minister of Bangladesh was being denied by the Planning Commission a proposed accommodation for his residence and office which was very modest, not even distantly comparable to this villa or resort."

In reply, and also in jest, Professor Islam argued that Tito secured these luxurious

villas free from the disposed royals and feudals. "We were very unlucky in this respect. The only palace of any sort that we had inherited was the palace of Maharaja of Santosh." The conversation concluded there.

Till his brutal assassination in 1975, Bangabandhu lived in the house where he had been living for years -- an accommodation akin to an average resident of Dhanmondi residential area. He sacrificed his personal pomp and luxury for the sake of the people he loved so much. He maintained that discipline of public expenditure, on the heels of declared austerity, should be the key consideration for a prime minister, not the suggestions of sycophants around, constant barrage of flattery and exaggerated eulogy.

"As a veteran in human relationships, he was often quick to discern the difference between sycophancy and genuine appreciation. He seldom expressed displeasure at my critical comments and protests," reports Professor Islam.

The moral of this short story is very simple. A leader, and specifically the prime minister, should lead the examples of plain living and high thinking, of shared austerity espoused for the people, and of accommodative attitude to the critics.

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