

## Continuing violence in Ashulia

*Crisis runs deeper than we had thought*

**W**E had thought that after two days of mayhem and vandalism in Ashulia, matters would settle down and conditions would go back to being normal. But the outrage that was perpetrated on Monday through the destruction of six factories, two warehouses and some vehicles of Ha-Meem group has left us, indeed the rest of the country, in a state of profound shock. The vandalism that had been going on took an even more violent form on Monday, with workers participating in the destruction in a manner hardly imaginable. And it is not just Ha-Meem that has been the target of the attacks. Fifty other factories and more than twenty vehicles were also left damaged on the day.

The enormity of the violence, at once mindless and well-planned, shows that the crisis in Ashulia is much deeper than has so far been perceived. Obviously, in such situations, it is only normal to speculate on who or what can be influencing matters from behind the scenes. While it is an established fact that a large number of workers, coming from various industrial units, have been responsible for the outrage, the feeling is equally credible that unseen elements may have been fuelling the entire sordid episode from a safe distance. Mayhem on a serial scale cannot be a spontaneous happening. The way in which one factory after another has been put to the torch (and let us not forget that outsiders also appear to be involved here) is a broad hint of how well-laid a conspiracy may now be at work.

The question of the violence apart, one fails to understand the inability of the garments sector as well as the government to anticipate the resentment that might have been caused by such acts as retrenchment of workers. In the present instance, the sacking of a thousand workers of a sick industry in Ashulia a few days ago as reported should have prepared the government, the BGMEA and the management of the sick industry itself for a probable backlash and so made it possible for pre-emptive measures to be taken. That did not happen. In fact, in such situations, now as also in the past, no information gathering techniques regarding such matters as workers' growing resentment, the role of sinister forces in fuelling discontent, et cetera, have been observed. The result is there for all of us to see.

At this point, it is difficult to understand that workers' grievances will be so acute as to impel them into destroying the very organizations which are a source of their livelihood. And yet that is a fact, together with the truth that outsiders may have been manipulating such grievances in their own vested interest. In the past, one government after another has suspected sabotage in attacks on the RMG sector. But no government has so far actually taken steps to expose or ferret out these perceived saboteurs, which is a pity. Additionally, every time the sector has come under violent assault, governments have been found dismally wanting in providing them with quick and full security.

Can we, after the latest bouts of violence in Ashulia, expect some real change for the better? Hard, purposeful action is called for.

## DCC's lopsided priorities

*Its new budget reveals this fact*

**T**HE Tk 1411.58 crore budget of Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) for FY 2009-10 unveiled by its Mayor Sadeq Hossain Khoka evokes more criticism than praise because of its flawed allocation pattern. The sector-wise allocations made in it are by and large reflective of lopsided prioritisation.

Cash-trapped as the DCC is in terms of meeting increasing recurring, developmental and maintenance expenditures of an ever-expanding metropolis it is imperative for the city corporation to make best use of its limited resources. It is of utmost importance in a shoe-string budget to set the priorities in a way that it can cater to demands for services in certain areas that are more pronounced than in other sectors. True, there may be competing priorities; yet, a balance can be struck in the allocation pattern so as to ensure flow finances to areas most in need of these. The new budget doesn't seem to have passed that test.

For instance, it has reduced allocation to the special cleaning drive by 11.36 percent from the last year's level; Tk 2 crore has been kept for car parking which is way below Tk 15 crore spent in the last fiscal. Just mark the opaque pattern of emphases: Tk 20 crore is allocated for construction and development of community centres in stark contrast to mere Tk one crore presumably for maintenance of slaughter houses and Tk 4 crore for equipment of food testing laboratory and Tk 2.5 crore for public toilets and dustbins. Even the allocation for park development has been reduced from Tk 7 to Tk 6 crore which is a great pity because even the previous allocation was itself ludicrously low. Keeping the city clean and breathing, is far from the DCC's list of agenda, so it seems. Obviously, the more basic and essential the civic amenity, is less attention it gets.

We are looking forward to a wholesale change in the approach.

## The tribalism we have fallen into

What matters is the fact that there yet remain, in this country, elements all too ready and willing to take us back to the Dark Ages through their convoluted interpretation of religious edicts. You think here of places like Taliban-influenced Afghanistan and fanatic-occupied portions of Pakistan.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

**W**E are in real danger of mutating into a medieval society. That is the disturbing thought which comes our way from Debidwar in Comilla. A so-called fatwa has led to a woman and a man being humiliated through a crack of the whip no fewer than three hundred and three times. And those who perpetrated the deed, or the misdeed, have informed us that the two victims, Piara Begum and Mamun Mia, were whipped because they had indulged in anti-social activity. The nature of the activity has not been spelt out. But that does not really matter.

What matters is the fact that there yet remain, in this country, elements all too ready and willing to take us back to the Dark Ages through their convoluted interpretation of religious edicts. You think here of places like Taliban-influenced Afghanistan and fanatic-occupied portions of Pakistan. You condemn everything wrong that has been going on in those two unfortunate places on the face of the earth. And yet those very sinister happenings are coming to pass in your own country.

And the fatwa is not the only thing that worries us. Take a look around your circumstances and you will know. An upazila education official has the temerity to cause huge anguish to a teacher through giving her a bad tongue-lashing. You wonder what might have gone wrong with education in the case of this official. Those old values, that particular sense of them which instilled into us the thought that all individuals must be respected, that every man and every woman is to be treated with dignity,

has gone missing for many of us.

The education officer here is not alone. There are hundreds of others like him all across the country. Think of the men who have been creeping towards those lakes in Gulshan, Banani and Baridhara in the wicked expectation that they can lay claim to chunks of them. And, indeed, they have made a goodly part of the lakes vanish under the weight of brick and sand they have brought in, to tell us that it had all been theirs from the beginning. You almost feel, in a twisted way, that those lakes must have been earmarked for these modern-day predators in biblical times. These were the promised lakes, say these robber barons. Moses, leading his people toward the Promised Land, would surely not have known what was coming centuries down the line.

There are all the rivers, which have been receding from our vision over the years. And that again can be explained. If lakes can be commandeered by a greedy bunch of men, rivers can equally be stolen by an even greedier cabal of robbers in the guise of socially prominent people. Back in the 1960s, as you wound your way through the developing urban population centres of Kalabagan and Kathalbag, you felt a keen sense of outrage at the thievery homeowners had resorted to in these areas. Take a walk there. You will be appalled at the robust manner in which space marked out for streets and roads was gobbled up by these putatively honest men of the 1960s.

And the trend they set in motion clearly has gone on. These days you bump into developers, businessmen, retired govern-



Ghosts from the past?

ment officials and so many others who have felt little or no shame in laying claim to property not theirs. You ask, in that moment of desperation, what government has been doing about these monumental wrongs being perpetrated every livelong day in society. And then you realise that many within the quiet shade of government have themselves been participants in the thievery. Think here of the venal elements in such organisations as the Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha.

Does it not bother you that good, honest people are a dying breed in Bangladesh today? You watch all those politicians pontificate to you on those ubiquitous talk shows on television. And then, with a jolt as it were, you remember that some of these politicians have been trying for years, as owners of private transport establishments, to push BRTC buses to the roadside and possibly into the nearby ditches in order for their own buses to capture the market.

You watch in horror that long beeline of

former bureaucrats, those you and I could not approach in their days of glory (for power gave them a halo not ours to break through), now trying to reinvent themselves as politicians and so extending their not so munificent shadow over our future. You hear almost everyone speaking about democracy and the concurrent need to sustain it through transparency and accountability; and yet many of these proponents of pluralism have yet to learn what it means to be tolerant, to listen to the other person's point of view. Democracy is a process of competing thoughts. It is never an exercise in the evolution of the inimical. Or the provocative.

It just might be that tribalism in its worst manifestation has been pushing our basic decency overboard. How else would you explain those fires and gutted industries in Ashulia? And those macabre faces behind it all?

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## Doing away with campus violence

No one is banning student politics; instead student politics should be limited to students' issues such as academic programs, library facilities, classroom conditions, residential halls, dining, sporting activities, health and campus security, plus everything else that uplifts students' well-being.

ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

**T**HERE are as many reasons why the academic environment in college and university campuses nationwide has been deteriorating as there are national political parties. Eruption of violence among student groups has resurfaced with monotonous regularity soon after Awami League's landslide election sweep. Although I had been thinking about this situation for some time now, two successive incidents in one week triggered this piece.

**June 26:** At least 35 students were hurt as two rival factions of Bangladesh Chatra League (BCL) clashed at Bangladesh Agricultural University in Mymensingh. The clash was about establishing control over student politics, job offerings, drug business, and anything else that may open up money-making opportunities.

**June 29:** Student activists led by the general secretary of Banpara Degree College (Baraigram Upazila) unit of the BCL physically assaulted a guard and then a teacher who dared to come to his rescue. The guard was enforcing the rule barring students from entering the campus without uniform. The injured were rescued by other students and taken to a local clinic.

Although, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina officially disassociated herself from the BCL, kerfuffle between factional BCL

groups continues -- often violently. Many of us believe that these groups -- some of whom are outside miscreants who masquerade as students -- are the surrogates of local and national AL leaders. The PM should take stern action against these leaders of her party if they are found to be involved in such nefarious activities.

Available evidence indicates that these campus activists are unlikely to be future doctors, engineers, civil servants, academicians etc. Many of them, in all likelihood, are destined to be the future politicians of the country at local and national levels.

The graduates who perform well in public and private universities will take up all the goods jobs the country has to offer while leaving politics of mischief for the under-performers. Many of the under-performers and dropouts are already self-employed in street hooliganism, extortions, land-grabbing and other degrading activities.

Over the span of the last three weeks, I sat with two former vice chancellors -- Dr. S.M.A. Faiz of Dhaka University and Mr. Muslehuddin Ahmad, the founding VC of North South University -- on separate occasions during their visit to Michigan. Among the issues discussed, campus politics topped the list. They both agreed with the prevailing view that only major political parties could extricate campus politics from national parties.

No one is banning student politics; instead student politics should be limited to students' issues such as academic programs, library facilities, classroom conditions, residential halls, dining, sporting activities, health and campus security, plus everything else that uplifts students' well-being.

VC Faiz is in general agreement with the prevailing notion that the quality of graduates from public universities has deteriorated relative to the pre-liberation period. Consequently, overwhelming public opinion has recently swayed towards abolishing student politics altogether.

Both the vice-chancellors stressed that, unlike private universities, students in public universities engage in politics and mischief partly because of weak enforcement of many rules and regulations. They believe requirement of participation in regular debates and seminars on national and international issues would keep them engaged.

Following the models in US, politically ambitious students should be required to engage in community service, work as interns in local and national government offices (such as election commission) and political party offices, and get academic credits.

VC Ahmad reasoned that private universities are free from national party politics, tender manipulations, extortions and other mischief because of the pressure from parents who pay the very high tuition fees, plus the pressure to maintain a minimum GPA for continuation in the program, and the time constraint for finishing their degree within four years. Then there are prospects of landing a high paying job upon graduation -- one that acts as a huge incentive for distancing themselves from engaging in mischief while being a student.

The last caretaker government acknowledged the pragmatism of student politics for developing future leadership, but argued that students', teachers' and workers' organisations and professional bodies should be pursuing their own agendas instead of being pawns in the hands of the political parties.

Student politics in Bangladesh universities had a close parallel with that of the state of Kerala, India, prior to 2004. There were times when college campuses exploded in deadly violence, resulting in death of students. In one incident, a student, when barred from taking an exam for lack of required attendance, sued the college for monetary and emotional damages.

A Division Bench of the Kerala HC, on February 20, 2004, directed the state government and universities to lay down rules and regulations for curbing dharnas, strikes, gheraos and demonstrations by various students' organisations on college campuses (The Hindu, February 21, 2004).

The court said that the educational institutions could lay down a code of conduct and guidelines to be enforced by the principals. The students were bound by the code of conduct, and the students' organisations had no legal right to interfere with the fundamental right guaranteed to the management.

Despite initial protests, the ban on student politics has worked miracles. "There are no political activities, no party-based elections, no union chairman or officials, and no loss of academic days in Sacred Heart College anymore," (The Hindu, Jan 28, 2006).

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## Long drawn-out battle

Over a longer period, the government needs to re-establish the authority of the tribal leaders loyal to Islamabad. It should also make calculated, though incremental, moves to bring the troubled area into the national mainstream.

EDITORIAL DESK (THE NATION, PAKISTAN)

**D**ESPITE the army having achieved major successes against the extremist militants, much needs to be done over the next few years to establish the writ of the state on firm foundations. Unless these measures are undertaken, there can be serious reverses leading to the weakening of the hold of the state.

What has been achieved in Swat is the downgrading of insurgency to the level of simple militancy. The army has pushed the militants out of the towns and cities of Swat, Buner, Malakand, and Upper and

Lower Dir. What it has failed to do is to nab the principal leaders. What is more, avoiding a head-on clash with the army, the TTP managed to save hundreds of its armed supporters who are now lying low waiting for a chance to regroup and strike back.

An NWFP minister has announced that from July 10, the internally displaced persons (IDP) from Malakand Division would be moving back to their homes. This seems difficult because as long as the major TTP leadership remains free to issue threatening statements, it would be difficult to provide a sense of security to the IDPs.

The army's next target is South Waziristan, an area which, unlike Swat and

the rest of the Malakand Division, is a part of Fata, where the writ of the state has traditionally been confined to the security forces' forts and the office of the political agent.

The local tribes were independent in internal affairs, which, till the arrival of the militants, they settled through tribal *jirgas*. The allegiance of the tribal leaders to Pakistan was ensured through a complicated system of rewards and disincentives. Baitullah Mehsud changed all that by physically eliminating the tribal elite and replacing them with local commanders loyal to him.

The army faces a hard task in the region where the TTP leadership reportedly enjoys the support of thousands of battle-hardened militants drawn from a number of countries, where they cannot hope to go back for fear of being imprisoned or hanged. The foremost aim of the army should be to deprive Baitullah Mehsud of his capacity to orchestrate terror attacks in

the rest of the country.

Over a longer period, the government needs to re-establish the authority of the tribal leaders loyal to Islamabad. It should also make calculated, though incremental, moves to bring the troubled area into the national mainstream. For this it has to allow political parties to operate in Fata and set up ROZs to kick-start economic activity. The government has to fulfil the responsibilities it has ignored too long, good governance being the foremost.

There should be rule of law in the country and the courts should provide efficient and cheap justice. A system based on merit should replace the present one based on privilege. Unless the measures are taken in good earnest, whatever military victory is achieved is likely to be lost through misrule.