

## Student vandalism at trade fair and RUET

*Authorities must come down hard on unruly young*

THE vandalism which a group of students resorted to at the International Trade Fair in Dhaka on Friday turned all of us to shame. Our embarrassment only gets deeper when we note that at the Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology, students engaged in running battles with the police and bus workers and damaged some administrative offices of RUET. Indeed, incidents of students all too often and on the flimsiest of excuses taking the law in their hands appear to have become the norm, with the authorities clearly proving incapable of coming down on these unruly elements with a firm hand. Such inaction has sent out a very wrong message to people within and outside the country, which is that the unruly young can and do get away with their acts. In the end, it is the image of the larger body of peace-loving, classroom-oriented students that suffers because of the riotous ones in their midst.

What happened at the trade fair simply boggles the mind. Cadres of the Chhatra League and students of Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University went on a rampage on the premises of the fair and ended up vandalising as many as a hundred cars belonging to visitors to the trade fair. In a manner that causes every citizen to go red in the face, they even went around looting valuables from the stalls set up at the fair. And all of this hooliganism took place because the police had arrested some young men on charges of harassing young women visitors at the fair and trying to take away goods from the stalls without paying. That is not the sort of culture anyone can imagine students upholding before the world. Sadly enough, though, the impunity with which students have been going around waging street battles, vandalising vehicles and shops, intimidating citizens and putting up barricades on the roads has increasingly been causing despair all around. These students or the likes of them have been acting like desperadoes, much to the shame of the nation.

The important question now is what must be done to ensure that such student violence does not recur. Even more important is whether the authorities are prepared and ready to bring such violent elements to heel. In the more than one year since the present government came to office, we have heard the functionaries of the state proclaim more than once their determination to crack down on student violence irrespective of the political affiliation of those involved in such violence. Unfortunately, such determination has not been matched by meaningful action. What has happened is a platitudinous exhortation to the young to desist from violence. Obviously, many of the young have not taken such exhortations seriously.

But now the time has come for everyone, beginning at the level of the government, to take such mindless violence seriously. If citizens cannot go to fairs with their families for fear of possible violence, if firms and stall owners are afraid that their goods will be looted by unruly gangs of the young, it is a sad reflection on us as a whole. At a time when we are trying to create a better image for ourselves through democracy and an exercise of the rule of law, the sight of students going down to acts of low criminality causes a blot on our image before the rest of the world. Let the authorities note this; and then let them act before it is too late. A country where students ignore the classroom in favour of the streets is a dangerous place.

## SA games with fiesta and fervour

*Looking at the prospect of electrifying and engaging experience*

THE colour, aplomb and eclat with which the South Asian games were inaugurated were a befitting tribute to the high water mark that the regional event has reached by now since their inception 27 years ago.

The grand show at night dazzled as luminous performances from 7500 participants from schools, colleges, Army, Ansar and VDP suffused with aquatic laser and fireworks display. The cultural presentations were electrifying.

The very spectacle of 1793 athletes including 478 women from eight participating nations fighting for 156 gold medals in 23 disciplines will be captivating, let alone the stiff tests of stamina, skill and performing levels achieved through rigorous training over the years in the region and through other encounters. The participants are going to strive to uphold the spirit of modern Olympic movement etched on the words: 'faster, higher, stronger'. It is the attempts made and participation recorded that are of the essence here and not so much who wins and who loses, because there would be no winners without losers, and no losers without winners. It is the craving for excellence and raising of the bar of accomplishment that are the stuff of which the Olympian spirit is made.

This year's games have two well-marked features: first, three new disciplines like cricket, golf and handball have been included for the first time. Secondly, the games will be dispersed over divisional headquarters.

South Asian countries having rich cultural traditions have nonetheless been conflict-ridden on the flip-side, so that the bonhomie and brotherhood that are fostered through the games waft a balmy breeze at the face and heart of South Asia. This gain if consolidated can be a big strength for the region to spur on greater cooperation in the region.

At the end, however, a word about our sadness over the elevator accident in which some Nepali athletes were caught up. We wish them early recovery.

## Incongruous with India

Proud leaders build a proud country. Neither wealth nor pride, it's understandable our leaders have been incongruous with India. Ingratiating or irritating, they couldn't do better.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IT'S Catch-22. One group cries wolf that our prime minister during her visit this month was trying to sell out this country to India. Another group defends the visit as necessary and successful. Through an avalanche of seminars, discussions, roundtables, speeches, talk shows, newspaper commentaries and editorials, this group is doing what amounts to selling India to this country.

Which formulates a dilemma for us. We are damned if we believe in one group, we are damned if we don't believe in the other. Suddenly, India seems to be on everyone's mind, and it's cutting us like a double-edged knife. One group makes us feel guilty if we love India. Another does it if we hate.

It's fine that forty years after we fought for our independence, India should loom so large in our mind. We fought because we wanted to have our own country, because we wanted to take our own decisions. Our involvement with India can be termed as divine acts of providence. First, India came forward to help us win our freedom in 1971. Second, it happens to be our neighbour.

Forty years later India is a more powerful country, a stronger player on the global stage. Naturally, it has become more difficult for us to take a decision on her. One group says we owe it big time to India for the birth of this country. Others tell us something radical: No matter what, we should worry about India's intentions towards our rightful existence. All of them make it sound like a tightrope walk; one wrong step could bring us disaster.

The editor of a leading daily thought he knew better. If we are crying wolf about India, he wrote, the wolf only existed in our minds. He, however, didn't write anything about those singing praise for India. May be, the thought of snake in the grass never crossed his mind.

Like that editor, Sigmund Freud also asked us to mind our minds. He created a new picture of mind and said that it was much like a sea, conscious being its surface, a few feet of upper waters. Then there are the vast black, unexplored depths of the unconscious, full of strange monsters.

These monsters are why everyone in this

country doesn't feel the same way about India. Neither does everyone in India feel the same way about us. There are political



We must tread carefully.

groups in India, which are constantly critical of Bangladesh. Hindu fundamentalists regularly spew venom against us.

So, what is true for the goose is also true for the gander. The monsters exist on both sides of the border. As a matter of fact, they exist elsewhere in the world, the French against the Germans, the Mexicans against the Americans, the Georgians against the Russians, the Serbians against the Albanians, the Sinhalese against the Tamils, and the list goes on. Fear and hatred are why we don't live in a perfect world.

Then why are we making so much fuss about India? We should know that we can't

ignore India for the same reason we can't ignore the Bay of Bengal. These are geographic fixes over which we have no control. And, we are going to have to handle one pretty much like the other. Swim and surf in fair weather, but clear the coast if the sea gets rough.

Therefore, what we need is diplomacy equivalent of weather forecast and disaster

of cross conscience. Both groups have handled India with extreme prejudice. Neither group has been very convincing to me.

National self-confidence shows in the attitude of leaders, writes Anne Applebaum in *The Washington Post*. The Chinese leaders draw their self-confidence from export wealth and they convey their patriotism by using national rhetoric. The Russian lead-

ers derive their self-confidence from oil wealth, and they convey their patriotism by launching attacks on their neighbours.

What kind of patriotism did our leaders convey arguing over a foreign country? Perhaps the same kind as which they demonstrate in their drawing of self-confidence. Proud leaders build a proud country. Neither wealth nor pride, it's understandable our leaders have been incongruous with India. Ingratiating or irritating, they couldn't do better.

It's sad that our best minds have locked horns on India. In my opinion both sides are guilty of overkill. One group went out of the way to criticise the prime minister's visit. Another bent over backward to support. Either way, it was an unfortunate spectacle

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## Car craze

An elected representative of the public in a shining SUV, which is a mobile symbol of his power, considers it beneath his dignity to meet the poor struggling people who voted him to power and whom he claims to represent. The division thus created between the public and their representatives is becoming increasingly difficult to bridge.

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

PERHAPS there is not anything more unbecoming for a public representative in Bangladesh than not owning a luxury car. The government's decision to revive the privilege of duty-free cars for MPs, which has been a subject of strong public criticism since its introduction in 1987, is yet one more sign.

Duty-free car privilege is simply another way to plunder the public exchequer. Many MPs of the previous parlia-

ment were found guilty of purchasing for various projects which were being used or abused by ministers and secretaries. The Establishment Ministry reportedly notified the ministers to return the vehicles but only 80 were returned.

A recent newspaper report said that 97 government officials including four secretaries have been availing 101 cars in addition to their entitlement, mostly for the use of their family members, spending Tk. 6 crore annually from the state exchequer.

In his budget speech in June 2009, Kenya's finance minister ordered the withdrawal of all official cars with an engine capacity exceeding 1,800cc as a part of measures to control costs within the government in light of a contracting economy. Ministers and senior government officials have surrendered 488 cars and the finance minister has managed to reduce the government fleet from 8,900 to 6,900 vehicles.

Perks and privileges of the elected representatives are under the media spotlight and strong public scrutiny in many countries. British MPs were found guilty of

money. Extravagant claims by the British MPs for expenses have angered the public and tarnished the image of British politics. A five-week consultation on proposed reforms to MPs expenses will be launched to restore confidence in the parliamentary system.

According to an NBR source, the Bangladesh government will be deprived of around Tk. 100 crore in taxes for allowing the MPs duty-free car import and more than Tk. 15 crore a year will be spent for payment of car maintenance allowance.

The daily Prothom Alo carried a report on January 27 saying that 18 MPs of the current parliament got Rajuk plots in Uttara. Similarly 10 MPs got Rajuk plots at Purbachal despite having house or land in Dhaka city. At least 40 political leaders including state ministers and MPs of the BNP-led alliance government also got plots at Banani.

NBR detected 42 MPs of the present parliament including three state ministers, who have never paid income tax, claiming they do not have any taxable income despite spending lakhs of taka for winning election. The government should take into cognisance the public sentiment while providing more and more facilities to such people from the public exchequer.

It is an affront that public representatives being elected promising to change the living conditions of the poor, live in extraordinary opulence on public money. To see a minister in a big convoy of cars driving at break-neck speed pushing others off the street is not really a scene that comfort the common people.

Ken Livingstone, the former mayor of London, took bus and train every day for going to office and meeting. This made him more accessible to ordinary citizens who could in person vent their anger at him for a lack of service delivery.

If our public representatives took bus and train at least once a month, they would experience first-hand the daily dance-of-death that ordinary citizens experience using public transport.

An elected representative of the public in a shining SUV, which is a mobile symbol of his power, considers it beneath his dignity to meet the poor struggling people who voted him to power and whom he claims to represent. The division thus created between the public and their representatives is becoming increasingly difficult to bridge.



Does this fit?

ments brought in luxury cars from abroad, reportedly depriving the state exchequer over Tk. 280 crore in taxes, and then sold these imported cars for profit.

The car craze has also been found in many ministers and government officials. The Anti-Corruption Commission detected disappearance of 2,500 vehicles

withdrawing money in excess of their approved limits for decorating their houses. MPs including Prime Minister Gordon Brown had to return the excess

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