

## Dealing with unruly students

*Why must the police prepare lists?*

WITH student politics degenerating into a pursuit that makes its hardly distinguishable from criminal activity, it was expected that the government would do something about it. However, it is not clear why Dhaka Metropolitan Police has been asked to prepare what it calls a list of 'unruly' students. Obviously, it is not the law enforcers' job to draw up lists, if they did so it is bound to be biased. Basically it is the university or college authorities which should identify and if necessary expel the students whose presence in the academic arena may be regarded as undesirable.

There is no way that the major political parties would disown the unruly students as long as they claim to represent this or that party, although we would have liked them to do it. The parties appear to be trying to evade the job of reining in their student activists responsible for all kinds of violent activities and placing the responsibility at the doorstep of the police with grave risks of partisan listing. The parties claim that the student outfits are now working on their own, but certain developments do suggest that they derive strength from their parent organisation.

Another point that the decision-makers must not miss is that armed hooligans and murderers cannot simply be termed unruly students. The DMP can find out how many hardened criminals have infiltrated into the academic arena but these rank outsiders should not be treated as students.

The hall authorities have to keep track of the goings-on and it is their duty not to allow outsiders to occupy seats in halls. The allegation that students with party affiliation take control of halls only reconfirm the unpalatable truth that it is the political parties which are responsible for the chaotic situation prevailing in colleges and universities.

If the government really wants to rely on the law and order approach, it has to ensure two things. First, political interference by the ruling party members must be prevented, as it will make it difficult for the law enforcers to act neutrally. Secondly, all the criminals will have to be brought to justice, regardless of their party identity. There should be a clear-cut policy and a strong resolve that no innocent student will be victimised. Whatever is done, it must not be reduced to a police operation in which the college or university authorities will have no say.

## Bottlenecks to healthcare recruitment

*Come down hard on the corrupt and unscrupulous*

NEWS from the health front has not exactly been cheering for us in the past many years. And now it seems we are in for another blow where primary health care is concerned. For the last two months, the recruitment of healthcare assistants has remained stalled owing to the very large degree of corruption that has penetrated the recruitment process. It is clearly a matter of shame for us, seeing that even such a vital area as primary healthcare must become hostage at the hands of the unscrupulous, with the result that thousands of people in dire need of medical care will be compelled to remain in a vulnerable state.

These are the facts and they come from the office of the Directorate General, Primary Health itself. No fewer than 5,00,000 candidates applied for 6,391 posts, for which written examinations were conducted on 1 January this year. By early February, oral tests too were completed. That might lull anyone into thinking that everything was done according to the rules. Not so. As the DGPH notes, fat amounts of bribes passed into the hands of the civil surgeon's office and into the hands of the union parishad, upazila level and district level leaders of the ruling party. Some candidates have alleged that they paid Tk. 4,00,000 to union parishad chairmen in order to smoothen their passage into the primary healthcare jobs. As if that were not enough, more than 20,000 recommendations were despatched to health authorities from various layers of administration, suggesting clearly that the rules be twisted so that favoured candidates are given preference over those properly qualified for the posts. There have been other problems as well. In places like Gaibandha, Joypurhat and Rangpur, recruitment examinations could not be held because of demands for a bigger allocation of posts in the freedom fighters' quota.

At a time when the government has been emphasising the need for healthcare services to be expanded across the country through such measures as opening new community clinics, it is an outrage that a simple matter of primary health assistants' recruitment will be bogged down by corruption. What now happens is that services delivery, which is so crucial especially in the rural regions, screeches to a halt. Health assistants are involved in some of the most vital and basic of health issues, such as registration of births, child and maternal health, vitamin A campaigns and general health programmes. They are also expected to man the community health clinics. If now we are forced to witness a flawed recruitment process that will place the unqualified and the less than competent in the primary healthcare system, we can only imagine the grave damage that will be done to the healthcare system overall.

Firm action is called for. The ministry of health in particular and the government in general must act fast to set things right. If wrongdoing creeps into primary healthcare, it will not be long before the entire health administration is burrowed through by corruption.

## Across the border

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ZAFAR SOBHAN

WHAT is the view in India of last month's ground-breaking summit meeting between our two prime ministers?

I have been doing the rounds in Dhaka and have a fair sense of public opinion in Bangladesh, but I thought it would be useful to travel to India to see if I could get a sense of public opinion across the border with regard to the new era of cooperation between our two countries.

Thus, when I heard about a round-table discussion on the recent summit being organised by the Jamia Millia Islamic University in Delhi under the aegis of former Indian high commissioner to Dhaka, Veena Sikri, who is now the chair of the university's Bangladesh studies program, I cadged myself an invite.

Of late, I had been hearing a few murmurs of discontent that the summit had produced nothing new, that the Indians hadn't reciprocated sufficiently, that the Indians were not taking the summit as seriously as we were, etc. I decided to go see for myself.

What I found was that the Indians at the conference and elsewhere that I interacted with were very well aware of how much political capital Sheikh Hasina has risked on righting the relationship and what was at stake if India does not reciprocate in kind.

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Now, of course, much remains to be done on the implementation front, and if implementation gets snagged up in bureaucratic red tape and the promises and assurances from the summit are not realised, then we are all back to square one.

But one thing that is clear is that the

Indians know very well what is at stake. They know the price of inaction or foot-dragging. Whether Bangladesh will ultimately reap the anticipated benefits of Hasina's opening to India remains to be seen, but the Indians cannot and do not say that they are unaware of what is expected of them and of what needs to be done.

India understands that even within Bangladesh there is an asymmetry when it comes to public opinion. The economic case for a more cooperative relationship with India is essentially unanswerable, and there is striking unanimity when it comes to the policy-making, think tank, and business communities on the need for better relations and appreciation for

the leadership Hasina has shown to try to bring this about.

But at the popular level, there is more skepticism. Anxiety about India runs deep. The public is open to better relations, but will need to see tangible benefits before it wholeheartedly embraces the new era of détente. It is thus important that India understands the need for visible and tangible signs of progress, and, from what I observed, this understanding is very much there.

Of course, it is not only the Indians who need to understand Bangladeshi political imperatives. We need to understand and appreciate India's political realities, too. Just as we have our anxieties about India, so too does India have its own anxieties about us.

Specifically, we need to be more understanding about the legitimate concerns that exist in India's north-east.

Ultimately, the north-east more than any other part of India would be benefited by détente with Bangladesh, but, at the same time, the north-east is where there is the most anxiety and skepticism with

respect to Bangladesh.

The north-east's relation to Bangladesh is the mirror image of our relation to India. Just as we see India as the regional hegemon, in the north-east it is Bangladesh, with our 150 million population and \$60 billion economy, that is viewed as the regional hegemon.

We need to understand that the people of the north-east have legitimate anxieties and grievances, and that we need to try and address those to put them at ease.

For instance, we have never really considered that denying India transit rights has hurt, above all, the people from the north-east, and that our stance has been a significant factor contributing to the region's lack of development.

Similarly, simply acknowledging the north-east's concerns about Bangladeshi migration into the region and the consequent demographic implications would go a long way towards building confidence and establishing trust.

Understanding is a two-way street.

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Understanding each other's position.

## The arch

For the life of me I can't believe this arch was built. I find it even harder to believe it was built on the hallowed ground of an institution, which is this nation's centre of intellectual gravity.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

THE Romans built the Arch of Titus in 82 AD to commemorate their capture and sacking of Jerusalem. The French got inspired by that monument, and built their Arc de Triomphe. It honoured the Frenchmen who fought for their country. We have got our own shoddy substitute, a marble-and-steel arch built at Bangla Academy. Don't ask what inspired it, but I can tell why it was built. The Arch of Audacity, as we should call it, commemorates and honours monumental greed.

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believe it was built on the hallowed ground of an institution, which is this nation's centre of intellectual gravity. That this arch didn't draw any national indignation is outright scary. Nobody bothered to ask why it was built where it was built.

Booklovers, intellectuals, journalists, poets, writers and politicians, the enlightened minds and the conscience-keepers of this country, have said nothing. Two Februaries in a row they have been streaming in and out of the book fair. None was embarrassed passing through that arch. Some of them even didn't notice.

In case the readers are curious, I am talking about the white-marble arch

with shining steel trussing erected at the entrance of Bangla Academy. An inaugural plaque affixed on one side of the arch, proudly announces who has sponsored that monument. It thumbs its nose at all of us. It does indeed!

Come and visit. See with your own eyes what disgrace has been sculpted in that atrocious thing. Anyone who can guess who that owner is already knows enough of him. But this time it's not his fault that the arch was built. He was ready to do anything, spend any amount to regain his reputation. For him, the arch has been a public relations trophy.

But how could the concerned authorities allow this to happen? What was the Academy management thinking when they approved it? What about those who manage that management? What were they thinking before they cleared it?

I am asking because everything requires qualifications for people to

qualify for it. One doesn't qualify as a voter if one isn't a citizen of this country. Parliamentary elections have age and educational requirements for candidates. Even a club offers its facilities to members only.

Likewise, sponsor selection must have certain standards, and not anybody can be allowed to do anything just because he has money.

Then what qualified the company or its owner or both to sponsor the arch? Have they made a donation to buy the right to build that arch? How was it decided who should get the deal? Was money the only consideration?

Couldn't the Academy find a more respectable sponsor? Couldn't the Academy have built that arch with its own money? Did it forget what parents tell their children as common sense that a man is known by the company he keeps? Do we need to tell its enlightened trustees that their moral dilemma has been reflected in this arch no less than the sky reflected in a pothole puddle?

I don't know how many of them are familiar with the concept of multiplier effect in economics. It's an effect in which an increase in spending produces an increase in national income and consumption greater than the initial amount spent. The sheer fact that this arch is located in Bangla Academy has got strategic significance. Millions during the book fair will see it, not to speak of Dhaka University students who have to see it on a daily basis.

And, this arch, like a transmission tower, is going to send the wrong signal to all those who see it. That signal is going to multiply. It will convince more people confronted with the staggering moral dilemma whether or not to make that switch from honest living to unfair means.

More people will get even more people convinced, and one arch will multiply into many. Earning legitimises spending. Anybody who makes money can buy anything.

Most of us make money. Some of us are made by money. But the arch signifies something alarming. Man is disappearing behind the money.

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