

Massive dearth of ICU beds

Address the situation promptly

WITH bulk of the population unable to afford treatment of life threatening ailments in private medical hospitals, their fate is decided largely by luck when it comes to availing intensive care unit (ICU) facilities in public hospitals. That there are only 80 ICU beds available in the seven major public hospitals nationwide catering to the country's 160 million citizens is absurd. As per international standards, in a hospital, the ratio between total number of beds and beds in its ICU should be 20 to 1, which translates into five beds for a 100-bed hospital.

The Dhaka Medical College Hospital with 2,600 beds is planning to add another 12 beds to its ICU wing, which still leaves it horrendously short of requirement. The situation is much worse in the general hospitals outside Dhaka. With private hospital ICUs charging anywhere between Tk 15,000 and Tk 100,000 per day, most people are left in the lurch when a loved one falls seriously ill. We take some comfort in the fact that the government is in the process of expanding ICU facilities in all the general hospitals.

Added to the shortage of ICU beds, public hospitals have been suffering from an acute lack of trained manpower to operate the ICUs. It does not say much about a hospital which has to borrow doctors, nurses and staff from other departments to keep these units in operation. Planning for health services is one area that cannot be put off and we hope the ministry will take immediate measures to increase the number of ICU beds and run the ICU units more efficiently.

Workers' training project

A timely initiative

WE welcome the government initiative to formally launch a \$1.7 billion project, Skills for Employment and Investment Programme, to train 2.6 lakh workers and mid-level managers in different sectors over the next five years. It will address a major challenge for the economy as the industries are seriously suffering from shortage of skilled workers.

In Bangladesh, every year more than two million enter the job market but the majority of them do not have any skills. Our migrant workers have to opt for low paid menial jobs in foreign lands due to lack of skills. Again, in the absence of capable trainers, foreigners take away \$4 billion from the country in salaries and allowances every year. Against this background the government programme, which will train low and mid-level employees on enhancing managerial capacity, technology, sewing operations and computer literacy, will definitely enhance productivity of the industries. Furthermore, 70 percent trainees will be employed in various sectors after completion of their training which will create job opportunities for a large number of unemployed people.

The government initiative will be supported by ADB along with other development partners. Different business organisations such as BGMEA, BKMEA, BASIS will join the training programmes. This is a good example of public-private cooperation. The government should further expand the programme and include other low skill based industries.

STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



Brig Gen SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN
ndc, psc (Retd)

DELIVING on the issue of media-military relations (MMR) in Bangladesh may sometimes be seen as an acknowledgement of the existence of a state of tension which is not totally untrue. And such a situation is not exclusive to Bangladesh. Inevitably, writings on the issue will be influenced by which side of the fence one belongs to. In that regard I consider myself in a unique position of having been on both sides of the fence long enough to be able to lend more than a modicum of objectivity in my opinion on the issue.

The topicality of the subject stems from the fact that both are important national institutions; and the way the two institutions have related to each other in the past have generated tensions in some instances. However, this is not a recent phenomenon. The history of tension goes back to the days of the Crimean War when the media's exposure of the British debacle in the conflict was instrumental in bringing down the government of the day. *The London Times* expositions reinforced the truism that, "An unfettered journalist is a burden to the military in the field, anathema to a government at home, but essential to a free society."

But unfortunately, the rueful remark that, "There can be few professions more ready to misunderstand each other than journalists and soldiers", made nearly sixty years ago by a military scholar dwelling on this topical subject still holds true in many countries, even, regrettably, in ours. This notwithstanding the fact that in Bangladesh the hiatus, that had existed not very long ago and which had deepened particularly after the tragic events of 1975, has been reduced to a very great extent. Happily, both the media and the military have come to realise that without reconciling the diverse (but not mutually exclusive) requirements, the nation's progress towards a democratic and egalitarian society will be stunted.

Unfortunately, if the historical experience of the media regarding the 'Khaki' has shaped its attitude towards the military, it is the military's mindset, shaped in the pre-1971 era and even in the pre-partition colonial period, where the military was part of the coercive arm of the rulers, that shaped the military's attitude towards the media.

No one can take issue with the contention that, "The press is the watchdog over the institutions of power, be they military, political, economic or social. Its job is to inform the people of the doings of their institution." However, at times, in its attempt to bring a current incident of national import to the public, misunderstanding might be created between the two. This is perhaps

because neither fully appreciates the other's roles. What they tend to forget is that both, in the pursuit of accomplishing their tasks, are driven by loyalty to the same group i.e. the people. While the military is driven by loyalty to their superiors and by extension to the state and the people, the media similarly owes its loyalty to the readers – the people. And this relates to both during times of peace as well as war. And in fulfilling their respective objective – which for the military is *defending* the nation from external and internal threat efficiently, for the media it is *informing* the people efficiently – both must play a complementary role whatever the circumstances may be. And this cooperation becomes even more indispensable in a war like situation where the media becomes an important factor. But regrettably the media's role in our country has been misunderstood from time to time and an aura of mistrust has stood between the media and the military in the media playing its due role during a conflict situation.

To put the matter in perspective, let us take a look at the role of the media in some of the recent conflicts around the world. The outcome of the Vietnam War, whose memory is still fresh in the minds of my generation, was due to the role of the media from its seminal stage to the end, an end to an unpopular war which, had it continued, would have added to the cost to the country in terms of human lives and money.

More recently, exposure of the Abu

Charib torture effectively put an end to a programme called "Copper Green," directly approved by Secretary Rumsfeld, to generate more intelligence. It effectively put a stop to the policy of 'Grab whom you must. Do what you want.'

And look at the media next door. In India, the media has been vocal in its criticism of the military when needed. Its coverage of the Kargil War is considered by many as a force multiplier, and it has helped expose corruption in the Indian military. On the contrary, look at the Pakistan media which has played an acquiescing role with the military - from the time of the 1971 Bangladesh War of Liberation where the media in effect became a party to the Pak army atrocities in Bangladesh by assenting to keep the public in the dark regarding the mass killings, to its role during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. It is not difficult to assess which of the two media has served the interest of their respective country better.

It should be borne in mind that the military is not a holy cow nor is the media beyond reproach. The moot point is to work out modalities to help each other fulfill their respective roles without either losing its distinctive characteristics.

MMR is a two-way street and, more importantly, the military must understand that the media is the military's main conduit to the public.

The writer is Associate Editor, *The Daily Star*.

As the tables turn

ADNAN R AMIN

IN the past week, waves of protest against the imposition of VAT on higher education brought Dhaka to a standstill, causing the denizens to take notice. For a change, private university students were leading a movement that was fast gaining ground among young urbanites. Supporters' argument was simple, "Since education is not a commodity, it cannot be taxed." For two months, the resentment simmered before finally blossoming into a full-fledged urban movement after several protesters were injured by police firing.

Now that the government has judiciously announced a reversal of the decision, there is a sigh of relief, not only because it's good for education, but also because we all love to see young idealists win. Their cause was noble. Their character seemed apolitical. Their manner was non-violent. In Bangladesh, there is nothing more we could ever hope for from political demonstrations.

The protesters got the basics right: their demand was simple and unanimous. Ancillary topics like, withdrawal of VAT from school fees or demands for the de-commodification of higher education, failed to dilute the oneness of the demand. These were students rallying for a cause that directly affected them and then, returning to their places once the objective had been achieved. That is exactly what 'citizen activism' is. That is also precisely what 'student politics' should be.

It demands our admiration that young protesters, without structured leadership, managed to keep the issue focused and buoyant. A key feature was their use of creative slogans, pronouncements and their propagation through media. Instead of violence and fear, the protesters used creativity and intrigue to hold the attention of the onlooking, virtual Bangladesh.

The virtual world did not disappoint. They offered instant empathy, massive online propagation and opinion-shaping pressure to heave the cause into mainstream discussion. Once again, the much-scuffed, most-logged-into Facebook was in the thick of things, spreading updates, reporting law enforcement abuses and showcasing bold statements by protesters. The protests brought to the fore a myriad issues including the commodification of

education, private universities' not-for-profit status vs. shrewd business-practices, comparative social-statuses of public vs. private university students and the utility of non-violent movements in the region. It was unanimity on the VAT issue that made these necessary debates possible.

The unanimity may be attributed to the fact that the movement grew out of apolitical origins and would be over before it could be co-opted. Two decades back, apolitical movements would have been unthinkable in Bangladesh. The connection that students had with Bangladeshi politics dates back to well before the Language Movement. But in

that governments are now amicable to such manners of exchange.

It is imperative that our political leaders take notice, because all governments must evolve with their citizenry. And if our citizen demonstrations are non-violent, then governments must learn to abandon their habitual 'quell or dwell' strategies and engage with them. If citizens raise legitimate demands in a civil manner, governments must be open to dialogue. Emerging leaders must note that instead of remaining quarantined to the virtual world, the movement successfully merged street activism with online consensus-building. Dealing with

of the modern reformer. Issues of greater gravity will demand that the offline, rural hinterland be included in decision-making. That, in turn, will call for greater tolerance for socio-economic diversity, a different tone and greater patience.

The "No VAT on Education" movement has some obvious similarities with the 2013 Shabbag Movement. Both emerged spontaneously out of the collective consciousness, reflected a distaste for the prevalent political culture and its trail of violence, provided popular avenues for activism, grew as polycentric phenomena and succeeded in achieving their immediate goals. The other important similarity is in that the



SK ENAMUL HAQ

the post-independence era, young activists seemed boxed inside their respective ideological tents, re-emerging only for causes that affected tribal interests. They remained focused on control of resources and territory. The main rivals nurtured a culture of 'showdowns', a form of violent street demonstrations (a possible legacy of the anti-British revolutionary tactics of the 1930s). That is why, in 2015, apolitical and non-violent demonstrations are a novelty; a very modern adaptation. They signify a growing social belief that change is possible without violence and

sophisticated methods of opinion-shaping requires a change in vision and tactics. New messages of pragmatism, in new methods of dialogues, through new media, must be conceived and employed. The alternative is guaranteed - political obsolescence.

Future activists must take note too: a non-violent model of popular protest has triumphed in Bangladesh. But let us acknowledge that this was an isolated, urban phenomenon. Not all groups will be homogenous and not all issues will go viral. Making complex issues mildly entertaining and graspable is a major role

legacies of both remain unclear. While Shabbag did manage to influence legislation – it could not elucidate the demand for historic closure and a future roadmap that young Bangladeshis wanted. Likewise, the No-VAT movement may have achieved its immediate goal. But can it usher in an age of active citizenship and civil exchanges between rulers and subjects? When it comes to the legacy of popular non-violent movements, can form become more important than content?

The writer is a strategy and communications consultant.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Peaceful agitation?

I was a little bit surprised at the news analysis titled, "Street agitation with a difference," (TDS, September 15, 2015). How can it be called a peaceful demonstration when thousands of people in Dhaka and other cities suffered immensely on the streets because of this agitation? Have you not seen in the newspapers the photo of an 80-year-old woman who had been stranded in traffic jam for six long hours? Have you not read the news of an old man (suffering from cancer and is on chemotherapy) who had to walk all the way home due to their "peaceful agitation"? There are thousands of such stories.

Instead of holding this type of "peaceful agitation," the students could have laid siege to the residence/office of the finance minister to get their demands fulfilled.

Ataur Rahman Elias
Texas, USA

"Cricket embarrassed"

I felt extremely disturbed and disgusted to read the above titled news story on cricketer Shahadat and his wife on TDS (September 8, 2015). They tortured their 11-year old house help brutally for minor reasons. He is an absolute disgrace to cricket and to the nation. These cricketers should always keep in mind that they are representing the country so they ought to be careful about the way they conduct themselves in their personal and social lives.

Aminur Rahim
New DOHS, Mohakhali,
Dhaka

COMMENTS

"V for no VAT" (September 15, 2015)

Ripon Chaudhury

It's great that we won't have to pay VAT on education.

Salahuddin Jamal

The price hike on gas and electricity should also be rescinded.

Ahsan Kazi Saqib

It was an injustice to the private university students.

Jubaira Khan

It's nice of the government to withdraw VAT on private universities.

Rumana Islam

Congratulations to all the private university students for the peaceful protest for which the government has withdrawn the 7.5 percent VAT on education.

Mian Arefy

It is sad that the students of private universities had to go through all these troubles to achieve their right.

Syed Najmul Hussain

Has anyone calculated the cost of the protests that virtually brought Dhaka City to a halt? No one cares, funny indeed!

"VAT protesters, Titumir BCL scuffle at Kakoli"

(September 14, 2015)

Zihan Raz

Shame on BCL. They have once again proved how deplorable student politics in the country has become.