

DU vs NU

Students caught in the crossfire



NAZMUL AHASAN

SIDDICUR Rahman, while protesting, was injured in his eyes by a tear gas canister in yet another case of police brutality. One eye will never see again, another one is damaged. The reasons for his protest, along with students from seven Dhaka-based major colleges, handed over to Dhaka University from National University a few months ago, couldn't be more legitimate. While thousands of their batch mates studying in other colleges under National University are already waiting for their Masters' admission, Siddique and his classmates still don't know what the results of their Bachelor's exams are. Several Masters' batches are in limbo, with no idea when their examinations may take place. Why shouldn't they be agitated?

For AAMS Arefin Siddique, the vice chancellor of Dhaka University, however, "everything has been taken care of." But his own examination controller Bahalul Haque admitted that all was not well. He claims that National University is to blame for this fiasco because it failed to hand over tabulation sheets and other relevant data to Dhaka University despite repeated requests. Of course, National University disputes this claim, leaving us wondering which side is less to blame for messing up

the future of hundreds of thousands of students.

Mr Siddique doesn't see any legitimate reasons why the students should be concerned. He terms student protests as "propaganda movement" and opines that it "must be investigated". It sounds like a move to suppress a spontaneous voice by insinuating sabotage. His failure to empathise with thousands of students, whose responsibility he took over a few months ago, is absurd, especially after the much-condemned incident of Siddique Rahman sustaining injury to his eyes in such a protest rally.

We also fail to understand why the university was so interested in taking control of the seven colleges in the first place. Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid said the university was adamant about assuming control. Given DU's own incapability to escape the clutches of session jam completely, the idea that it will be able to handle an extra two lakh students is ridiculous. In its defence, the university can claim it had 104 colleges under its control prior to the addition of seven colleges. But what has to be noted is that the number of the students of these seven colleges is more than twice that of Dhaka University, its affiliated colleges and institutions combined.

Most importantly, with all its faults, National University is carrying out an unnoticed yet commendable job. It has largely reduced its notorious session jam and simplified almost all of its long bureaucratic



The students were preparing for a united demonstration for the past one month, and their principals were well aware of their increasing discontent with the status quo.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

process. Especially, its "crush programme" has already yielded positive results: the current first-year students have completed their form filling, hence, waiting for examinations soon to be held—all that within less than a year. While many students saw their sessions unfairly cut short, almost all the students welcomed this programme because of its far reaching potential.

The way it conducts admission tests countrywide is impressive. In addition, National University's web based services have proven convenient for its countless students.

One, therefore, wonders why National University's significant progress has not been taken into consideration while handing over seven major colleges to Dhaka University. Many students fear other

government colleges will probably be conferred on regional major public universities, who are themselves mired in suffocating session jam.

Dealing with hundreds of colleges scattered around the country requires extensive coordination mechanism in place. National University with its resources solely devoted to managing these colleges has failed to be anywhere near to developing such

mechanism until now. So, how could we expect public universities to develop this apparatus overnight while its main liability remains to be its own students?

What also worries everyone is that, according to a report published by *Prothom Alo*, personal and professional friction between two Vice Chancellors of Dhaka University and National University may be to blame for this mess. Dated back to 2012, their animosity revolves around alleged nepotism, teacher recruitment, teacher politics etc. Now, their internal discord threatens the future of scores of students. Irresponsibility is the last thing we expect from the heads of the two most important educational institutions of the country.

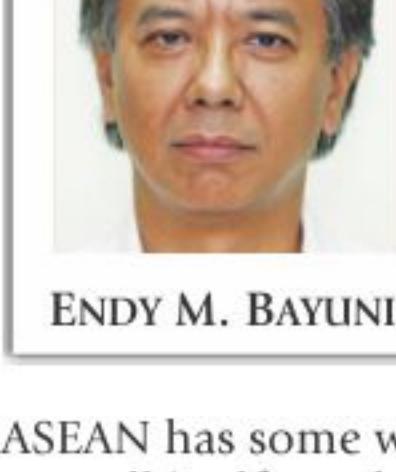
While the two authorities are engaged in a childish blame game, it's the students who are running out of time. Thousands of students may not be able to sit for 38th Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) examination.

Many students are the last hope of their respective families. Siddique, for example, lost his father when he was three. His brother Nayeb Ali has been his only patron. So, when Siddique's eyes were damaged, a family dream was also shattered. And when Nayeb Ali said his last refuge of hope had been destroyed, he wasn't speaking only for his own family. Too many families are seeing their hopes disintegrating due to the delay in academic sessions.

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ASEAN AT 50

More a neighborhood than a community



SOUTHEAST Asian countries today are far more integrated than they have ever been in the modern history of the region, but ASEAN has some way to go before it can call itself a real community.

The 10 member countries grouped in the Association of Southeast Asian nations (ASEAN) are glued together more because of their geographical proximity, and out of that perhaps comes a sense of shared destiny.

But a community, where members have shared values and principles, ASEAN is not.

For now, it is looking more like a neighborhood.

It's a neighborhood of nations, big and small, rich and poor, at different stages of economic and political development, and they are already trading with one another more and more.

But they ruled under vastly different political systems and ideologies, and often they have little in common other than the knowledge that their prosperity is closely tied because they are neighbours.

ASEAN marks its 50th anniversary on August 8, and although the group has officially become the ASEAN Community since the end of 2015, one could hardly find the spirit or the sense of being part of an emerging community when traveling and meeting with ordinary people across the region.

Their governments rarely talk about ASEAN being a community. In speeches, they still refer to it just as ASEAN. Some call it an ASEAN

economic community because of the closer economic integration. Their peoples, according to most surveys, are mostly ignorant about the community idea. Many do not even know what the ASEAN acronym stands for let alone the benefits the association brings. Yet, ASEAN officials tirelessly churn out new acronyms with every new meeting.

The ASEAN motto "One Vision, One Identity, One Community" has hardly taken roots among the 625 million citizens. Few people will be singing the ASEAN anthem, aptly titled "The ASEAN Way". Few people actually are aware that there is such an anthem.

But at least there is the aspiration, or the stated intention, to turn the region into a community. As the anthem goes, 'we dare to dream, we care to share, for it's the way of ASEAN'.

What is grossly missing is the political will of its leaders to take up the community idea more seriously and more than just a geopolitical and economic concept.

This, however, does not take away the value of ASEAN in the first 50 years of its existence, to the member countries, to their peoples, and to the rest of the region of Asia and beyond.

People's ignorance about ASEAN extends to the most important contribution that the association has given: Five decades of uninterrupted peace which has afforded member countries the time to focus attention and devote resources to nation building and economic development. People in the richer ASEAN countries



may not appreciate that they owe their prosperity to the relative stability their leaders have painfully built through the association.

ASEAN meetings have expanded with offshoots such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit that bring all the major powers in the world and the Asian region to discuss political and economic security of the region and the world.

ASEAN has been dubbed as the most successful regional organisation in the world. So successful, in fact, that ASEAN has often been in the driving seat for some initiatives seen in the Asia Pacific region. ASEAN enjoys the centrality of its role in the larger region.

Fifty years ago, this region of Asia

was a zone filled with tensions and conflicts. Every country had some bones to pick with all its neighbours over historical overlapping territorial claims or ideological differences. In the Cold War context, Southeast Asia gave the perfect theatre for the big powers to conduct their proxy wars.

The original five founding Asean members — Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand — worked out the perfect way to overcome their differences and their territorial disputes: Put them aside, literally sweep them under the carpet.

It's a formula that has survived the test of time as the group expanded over the years, with the addition of Brunei in 1984, and later Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam in the late 1990s, to make it a complete 10.

Throw in the principles of non-

interference in the internal affairs of other members, and of the decision-making process by consensus, together these make up the elements that created the "ASEAN Way", a slow but almost sure, and most importantly, peaceful mechanism. It takes one member to kill any initiative or to slow down the process.

ASEAN has moved nevertheless. That is the way how ASEAN has grown — some ascribing it as the recipe for its success. It is still going to be the way it moves forward for the foreseeable future.

With the group now turning 50, the ASEAN Way may become the one factor that slows and limits the process of closer integration. The ASEAN Way defines not only how fast but also how far it can move with the community idea.

The integration of their economies has moved so far afield with countries trading with one another more, and investing in one another more than before.

The political integration is a different story. It is moving at a slower pace, if at all.

ASEAN never has the pretension to replicate the European Union (EU), and the Brexit episode makes it even more unlikely for ASEAN countries to want to move faster towards political integration.

The EU places more emphasis on members having shared values and principles. Former East European communist states had to work hard at political reforms to strengthen their democracy, freedom and human rights guarantees before they were admitted to the club.

No such requirements in ASEAN. It's purely geography. If the map shows you're part of Southeast Asia, welcome to the neighborhood. No questions asked.

Unlike the EU, ASEAN is a collection of diverse political regimes: An absolute monarchy (Brunei), communist states (Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia), military junta (Thailand), semi-democracies (Singapore and Malaysia) and struggling democracies (Philippines, Indonesia and now Myanmar).

There was an attempt to write in the principles of democracy, freedom and human rights when ASEAN was drafting its charter as part of the move to become a community.

The original white paper, prepared by eminent ASEAN persons, was a very progressive document, but by the time their officials got their hands on it, they shot down the requirements that member governments must ascribe to on basic democratic principles.

The ASEAN Charter, enacted in 2008, was a milestone nevertheless for the regional grouping.

The official launching of the ASEAN Community on December 31, 2015, marked the intention of their leaders to bring their countries closer together, if not politically, then certainly economically. Now they look to 2025 as the new target for some of the community ideals to be fulfilled.

But the march towards a community, in the real sense of the word, will likely have to wait until these countries decide to come and live together under some shared principles and values.

For now, let's be content with ASEAN being a neighbourhood. It's not a bad one.

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This is a series of columns on global affairs written by top editors and columnists from members of the Asia News Network and published in newspapers and websites across the region.

QUOTABLE Quote



At some point in life the world's beauty becomes enough. You don't need to photograph, paint or even remember it. It is enough.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 34 Haul in
- 37 "Toodleoo!"
- 39 Where Gauguin painted
- 43 Follow orders
- 44 Man of the cloth
- 45 Ties the knot
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- 19 Fell back
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- 24 It has a blade
- 25 Flying whiz
- 30 Orderly displays
- 33 Clear sky
- 35 Engrave
- 36 Mall come-on
- 37 Road rescue
- 38 Writer Burrows
- 40 Hot blood
- 41 Frank McCourt book
- 42 Arctic

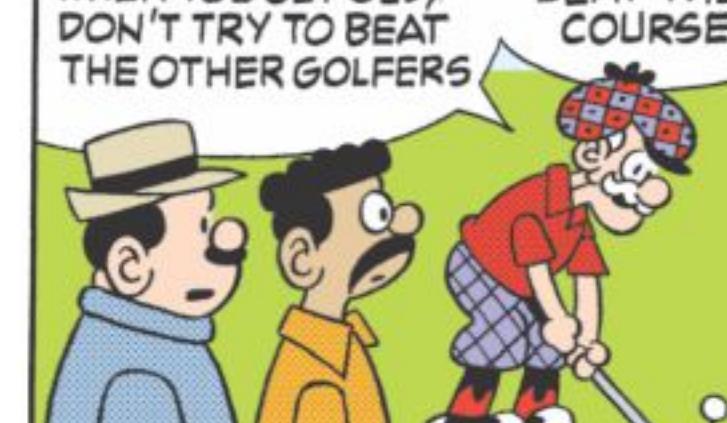
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- 31 On that spot
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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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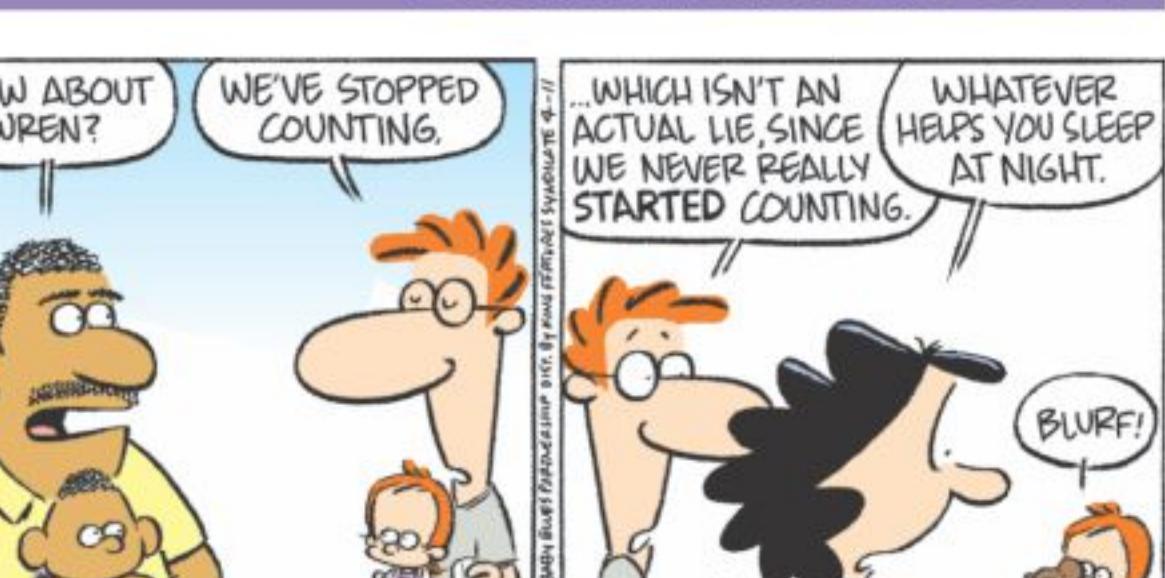
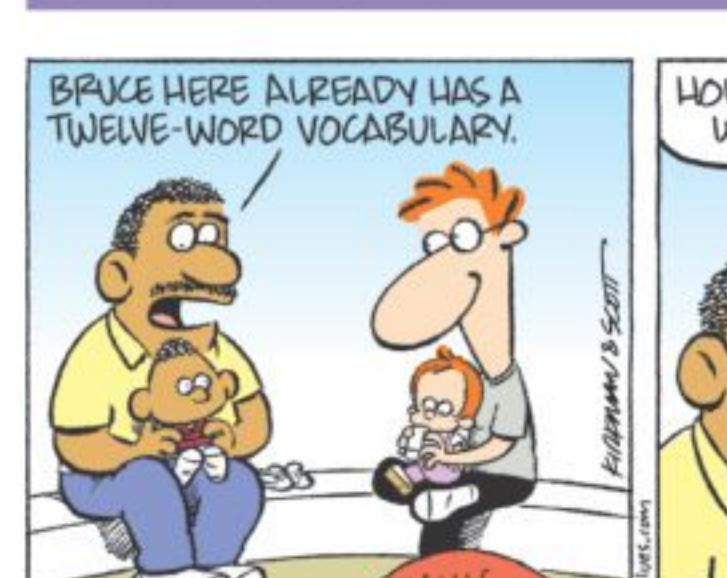
BEETLE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES



BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT