

Violence mustn't overshadow rightful demands

We condemn vandalising DU VC's house

WE strongly condemn the violence perpetrated by all sides—protesters, law enforcement, and BCL activists. On the one hand were police excesses in the form of teargas shells, rubber bullets, water cannons and batons which led to many injuries, including those sustained by journalists. There was clearly disproportionate use of force by the police. Photos of protesters bleeding profusely from serious injuries are already doing the rounds on social media. To no one's surprise, BCL activists also swooped on and attacked protesters. Who gave BCL the authority to act as the police's ancillary force? On the other hand, the home of DU's Vice Chancellor was vandalised, cars were torched and brickbats were hurled by protesters which we have no words to condemn. All this is simply unacceptable. And we fail to understand how vandalising the VC's home would help protesters' cause.

We would also like to reiterate that the violence we have witnessed in Sunday's protests should not undermine the legitimacy of the demands for reform of the quota system in public service—which we have consistently voiced our support for. The existing quota system is highly disproportionate, does not reward meritocracy and has been abused by the political parties in power.

The prime minister has already given the green signal for dialogue to begin between the protesters and the government which should be acted upon forthwith. The quota system should be rationalised as the current 56 percent quota seriously undermines meritocracy. The ruling party should also rein in BCL activists who are only adding fuel to the fire in the midst of all this agitation.

'Chemical attack' on Syrian rebel enclave UN must investigate

IMAGES of the aftermath of what has been claimed by medical aid groups operating in Douma as a chemical attack on the besieged rebel-held Syrian town cannot fail to horrify. At least 49 people are reported to have been killed in the attack on April 7. Videos published by international media show lifeless bodies of children, women and men, some foaming at the mouth.

Like past reports of alleged chemical attacks on the rebel-controlled enclave, the international reaction has been polarised. The Assad government has denied the latest attack, backed by its allies, Russia and Iran. On the other hand, first-hand reports from the area clearly indicate that an attack has indeed taken place—aid workers in the area have said that the hundreds affected show symptoms consistent with a chemical attack. The images and the accounts that have reached us are horrific, and we stand in strong condemnation of the use of chemical weapons, that too on civilian populations.

Amidst the claims and counterclaims about who did what, clearly independent investigation is crucial. That the attack comes at a time when a possible deal was being brokered by Russia between Assad's government and the rebels means that violence, in all likelihood, will continue.

So, it is imperative that the United Nation acts urgently on the matter. If the allegations of the attack prove true, the perpetrators need to be made accountable. We call on the international community to prioritise the safety and lives of civilians instead of taking sides based on political alliances, not only for the sake of a proper investigation, but to ensure such attacks are not repeated.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Consider demands of quota protesters

The fact that the government has responded heavy-handedly to the legitimate protests by the students should be condemned. A large number of students have for so long protested what they consider an unfair quota system in the public recruitment sector. Instead of hearing their demands, the government has tried to simply ignore the issue. However, the government has reportedly wanted to talk to the protesters. That's a good sign. I would urge the authorities to sit with the protesters and consider their demands.

Nazib Bashar, By e-mail

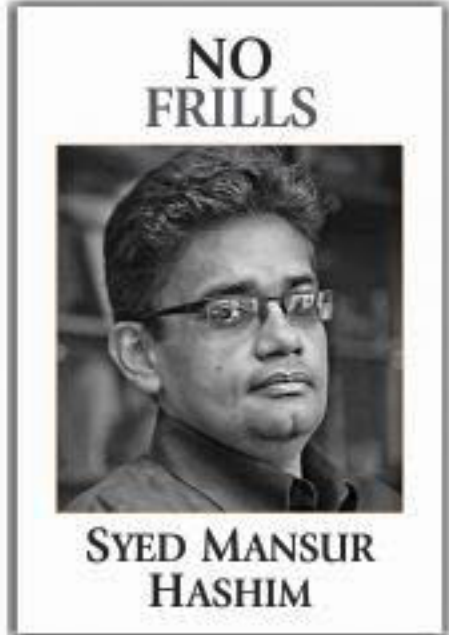
The prospect of 'Sonali Bag'

The Daily Star on April 8 ran a report titled "Forget polythene." The report stated that a group of Bangladeshi researchers invented an environment-friendly alternative to polythene bag. That's certainly big news. Sonali Bag is biodegradable, yet air and water resistant. The lead scientist of the project, Dr Mubarak Ahmed Khan, deserves our kudos for having invented a much-needed solution to the polythene scourge.

Already, a number of foreign institutions have expressed their interests in that. I urge the government to continue assisting the team and provide them with necessary funds so that the product gets acceptance and necessary coverage, and people here as well as in other countries can use it.

Mehedi Hasan, By e-mail

Why bother with fitness certificates?



IT is a common enough sight on Dhaka roads to see policemen hailing cars and motorcycles to stop and check their papers. It is within their rights to do so. What is equally common on the roads is that while the dutiful policeman is doing his job, a dilapidated jalopy resembling a monstrosity straight out of a "Mad Max" movie gushing out big, black plumes of smoke chugging along the road pretending to be a bus or one of those mini vans or jeeps turned into a people carrier, with parts missing at times, running along merrily on our roads without giving two hoots about fitness certificates and what not. According to a report in this daily, we have 55,000 vehicles, including 3,740 belonging to various ministries and government agencies that have not renewed their fitness certificates in decades.

The data sheet published by BRTA is very interesting. For instance, we have a vehicle that belonged to The Pakistan Petroleum Ltd and its fitness expired on January 1, 1957, and it is not clear whether that vehicle (like so many others) even exists! We have vehicles belonging to practically all branches of the government that have failed to renew their fitness certificates (in different districts) from the oldest one listed in 1957 onwards. Fast forward to the present day, and we find that whilst it is mandatory for us lesser mortals to renew fitness certificates if we wish to have our vehicles to be on the roads, we have public transports of various capacities running around with parts missing like actual body work. Beyond the much publicised "fitness week", which is like publicising in advance to those vehicle owners who have never bothered with renewing any paperwork for their vehicles to go on a week-long holiday. The whole issue of fitness check is a farce in our country, which is more than just sad. The police, according to BRTA data, own the highest number of vehicles on the list of 3,740 defaulting vehicles. We also have 52,686 vehicles owned by



A minibus with no visible number plate or indicators, a bumper tied with a rope, and a windscreen that has six pieces runs on a street in the capital's Rayerbazar.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

individuals, NGOs, government educational institutions, like Bangladesh Agriculture University (expired 1992), Head University, LGID (expired 2004), Dhaka University (expired 1994), to name but a few.

The government is being deprived of valuable revenue, and the people are being deprived of a safe passage when they are forced to board these "unsafe" vehicles. Why is it that after repeated calls by BRTA, there is no visible change in either attitudes or practice about obtaining fitness certificates? The law states that according to Section 47 of the Ordinance, each vehicle must obtain a fitness certificate every year from BRTA. It is nice to see that BRTA took a tough stance with vehicle owners at the end of 2016 that unless they renewed their papers, vehicle registrations would be cancelled after December 2017. That notwithstanding, one must take into account the fact that the Ordinance itself is not

without limitations. According to BRTA officials, there is nothing mentioned in the Motor Vehicles Ordinance (MVA) about the higher limit of the lifespan of a motor vehicle. It is a ludicrous omission which basically handicaps BRTA from declaring a vehicle "write-off", and this is the loophole that owners of decrepit and basically unfit vehicles take advantage of in plying roads. Indeed, this is what road transport experts have been harping on for some time now. With vehicles that have outlived their operational lives still allowed on the roads, accidents are simply waiting to happen. Vehicles falling into this category are also prone to frequent breakdowns which of course add to the woes of traffic gridlock because a salvage operation can take hours.

When we look at the number of vehicles coming on to our roads (114,271 registered in the first 10 months of 2017), one can appreciate the fact that if authorities actually went after decrepit

vehicles with some seriousness, it would free up a lot of space on Dhaka's congested roads. Because we are handicapped by a lack of provisions in MVA Ordinance on the one hand and a lack of implementation of existing laws, nothing really improves in the city. This is gross injustice to the bulk of vehicle owners who happen to follow the rules and dish out thousands of Takas annually on renewing licenses and certificates to keep their vehicles legitimately on city roads. They are also the ones who are being stopped and questioned about their papers whilst unfit vehicles are not asked any questions. BRTA has records to prove whether a vehicle has or has not renewed its fitness certificates. Isn't it about time that the record was set straight by authorities that the law is applicable for all, or are we to believe that we are living in George Orwell's "Animal Farm" where "some animals are more equal than others"?

Syed Mansur Hashim is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

US-CHINA BROMANCE Is China giving US another chance?



SINCE March, when President Trump announced his plan to slap tariffs on USD 50 billion Chinese imports to the USA, the world has been anxiously waiting to find out about the nature and extent of China's response. On April 2, China retaliated in kind, with tariffs on US exports to China, including meat, wine, fruits and grain. Many, particularly Wall Street, heaved a sigh of relief that China did not come out swinging any harder. China's response was measured, although analysts and China-watchers cautioned that China would play its cards deftly, and in incremental phases, and other trade measures could be coming. However, it was indeed remarkable that President Xi, who just got a strong vote of confidence from the People's Congress and could have unleashed his own version of "fire and fury" against the USA, showed restraint in sharp contrast to the continuous bluster coming from the White House.

All this comes at a critical moment in US-China

war at this juncture which could only distract both countries from working in concert to make the US-DPRK summit a success and harm future collaboration needed to follow through on agreements made at the summit. Many observers have referred to the negotiations between the USA and DPRK as "trilateral" in view of the major role that China as North Korea's most important benefactor will play in its implementation. It is widely held in the USA that President Xi is the "gateway to Pyongyang". This special bond between DPRK and China was visible during Kim's visit with Xi, when both leaders reiterated their common socialist roots.

Thus, to get a better picture of the current geopolitical dynamics between the USA and China, one has to consider the complex interweave between geopolitical and economic relationships as well as the broader economic milieu. China and USA need each other, and in many different ways. Since President Trump came to power, he soon came to terms with the fact that China is the largest lender to the US and holds more than a trillion dollar of US Treasury notes. It also means that, if provoked, China could deal a heavy blow to the US financial system by flooding the

friction with the USA. China sees itself as a great power and a strong one, and a manifestation of this ambition is its "zone of influence" in South Asia. The view from Beijing has always been that "USA and DPRK can talk all they want, but if it involves South Asia, China needs to be involved."

There are many areas of interdependence between these two countries. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is widely seen as an attempt to build a massive, multi-national zone of economic and political influence. For successful implementation of BRI and President Xi's "Made in China, 2025" initiative, China relies on market development and access to western technology including blockchain, AI, and autonomous cars. To pull itself out of the "middle income trap", China covets access to US technology, and adopted a three-pronged approach: higher education in US learning centres; coercing US firms to share technology; and copyright infringement. A total break with the USA will be detrimental to China's long-term interest in becoming the dominant political and economic power by the middle of the next decade.

China watchers notice that Beijing reacts quite differently to conflicts with the USA on "sovereignty matters" as opposed to trade issues which count as "money matters". On issues such as its claim on Taiwan or the South China Sea, China defends its rights with greater fervour than trade and currency, i.e. money matters. In other words, China is willing to "give" in trade negotiations, but in return expects the USA to review the recently passed Taiwan Travel Act, which it considers a violation of One-China Policy. As a warning to the USA, it has hinted at hitting back in diplomatic areas by not cooperating on regional issues as well as finance and investment.

China has also shown flexibility at the behind-the-scene negotiations on intellectual property (IP) protection and China's insistence on transfer of technology as a precondition for US investment/exports in China. While a high level economic dialogue with China in July 2017 ended without an agreement, USA and China plan to continue these talks.

China is focused on its strategic goals to make Chinese companies more competitive across the board, to localise production of components and final products, to have Chinese firms move up the value-added chain in production and innovation networks, and to achieve much greater international brand recognition. Access to US market and technology is important in this scheme of things.

One can then see that both USA and China are using tariffs or threats as a "negotiation strategy". On April 5, The New York Times ran a front-page news item under the headline, "(White House) Hints That Tariffs on China May Never Go into Effect." It reports that "White House officials moved on Wednesday to calm fears of a potential trade war with China, saying the administration's proposed tariffs were a "threat" that would help, not hurt, the US economy." Most US observers now feel that China is not treating US tariffs as a signal to begin a trade war, and China's leadership appears to be understanding of Trump's domestic political manoeuvres before this November's mid-term elections. China's counter-measure is just a "shot across the bow", a cautionary message to the US President to not allow things to get out of control.

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US President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping in the Great Hall of the People, Beijing on November 9, 2017.

PHOTO: JIM WATSON/AFP

relationship. The much-anticipated meeting between the presidents of the USA and North Korea (DPRK) is scheduled for May. It is not clear what role China played in facilitating this meeting, but China's involvement in reining in Kim Jong-Un's erratic weapons programme is important. China is DPRK's most vital trading partner, and the recent trip by Kim to Beijing, his first since he assumed office in 2011, only validates the importance of Chinese diplomacy in the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula and holding in check DPRK's nuclear ambitions, two key items in America's foreign policy agenda. Thus it is clear that neither USA nor China want to get into an all-out trade

market with these bonds. This would put upward pressure on US interest rates and destabilise the exchange rate of the dollar. If higher interest rates, in view of recent acceleration in economic growth, reflect expectations of stronger future growth, this would make the US currency more attractive for investors to hold. Thus as the interest rate increases, the dollar gets stronger. The stronger dollar, larger federal budget deficits, and low national saving rates might cause the US trade gap with China to widen rather than narrow and defeat one of Trump's goals.

Turning to China, there are plenty of reasons why China would be keen to avoid a trade war or prolonged