

## Attacks on JU protesters condemnable

*The VC's statement is shocking*

WE condemn in the strongest terms the attacks by the BCL activists on the peaceful protesters of Jahangirnagar University who have been demanding the VC's resignation over corruption allegations. Reportedly, around 150 Chhatra League leaders and activists assaulted the agitating students and teachers who had kept the VC confined to her residence to press home their demand. The attacks left at least 35 people, including nine teachers and four journalists, injured. What is most unfortunate is the statement that the JU VC gave after she came out of her residence under BCL's protection. Not only did she thank the BCL members but also rejoiced at the BCL-led attacks by saying that "they (the BCL members) took the responsibility upon themselves and did it." What is more, she termed the agitating students as Islami Chhatra Shibir activists, an old strategy taken particularly by the BCL for thwarting peaceful demonstrations.

Although confining a university VC to her residence may have been an extreme step taken by the protesters, the VC's exulting at and taking delight in the violence perpetrated on the protesters by the BCL was not only uncalled for but also an indication of her blatant partisan position. The post of a university VC is not only an administrative one, she/he must play the role of a custodian of the highest seat of learning through taking a moral and ethical stand in times of crisis. But sadly, JU VC played a completely different role when it came to safeguarding the interest of the university as well as the students.

The situation has taken a turn for the worse since the authorities have shut down the university for an indefinite period and asked the students to vacate the residential halls. Such a decision is particularly inconsiderate for the female students who hail from distant districts of the country and have no other place to go on such short notice. Moreover, closing down the campus and halls cannot be a solution to the existing problem. As the students and teachers have been continuing with the protest, we are now worried about their safety.

Under the circumstances, a judicial inquiry must be held into the reported involvement of the university's vice-chancellor in corruption and mismanagement of the campus development fund, as demanded by the protesters. Also, the BCL members who were involved in the heinous attacks should be brought to justice.

## Dhaka's air polluted round the year

*Construction work, traffic to blame*

ACCORDING to an analysis of Air Quality Index, which is monitored by the department of environment, under its Clean Air and Sustainable Environment (CASE) project, the overall air quality in Dhaka is now categorised from "very unhealthy" to "extremely unhealthy" for 197 days of the year. Indeed, the data tells us that the situation is deteriorating with each passing year. With multiple mega projects underway in the city in terms of flyover construction, metro rail and the ballooning of automobile numbers, the combined effect of dust and burning of fossil fuels has had a devastating effect on air quality.

Studies tell us that the air in Dhaka is 5.7 times above the safe pollution level set out by WHO. There is no proper management of the sites under construction, which means Dhaka remains largely unclean. The repair and maintenance of roads being undertaken by various agencies, with little or no regard for the overflow of sewage and the haphazard manner in which materials are left on the roads, do not help matters. The continued contamination of the air with heavy metals that come from automobile exhaust and the apathy of authorities to do anything about the "fitness" of outdated vehicles simply add another dimension to the deterioration of air quality.

With worsening air quality comes the threat to public health. Experts point out that with the presence of toxic metals like lead, chromium, cadmium, nickel, arsenic, manganese and copper in the air on an average day, people of all ages are increasingly susceptible to different breathing ailments. Policymakers need to take stock of the fact that unregulated construction work, along with the presence of too many vehicles on city roads, which are not tested for fitness, pose a major threat to the health of the people. Air pollution is known to raise the risk of premature birth, low birth weight and can cause life-threatening health complications for pregnant women. The economic cost of deteriorating health of millions of Dhaka city residents has to be taken into consideration and steps have to be taken to lessen the risks posed by major polluting factors.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Stop cyberbullying

While the widespread use of technology in our daily lives has surely aided us in many ways, at the same time, it has its fair share of cons. Cyberbullying is one of them and has become a major concern in recent times especially among teenagers. Some unethical individuals steal personal information of others including photos and videos and make them available online for the public to shame the victims. As soon as the materials go viral, the victims are stigmatised by the online community as lack of empathy prevails. This in turn has severe consequences on the victims, at times leading to suicide in worst-case scenarios.

Online harassment is absolutely unacceptable. It is a shame that in a civilised society, such behaviour still exists. Even though we now have strict cyber laws, bullying online is often disregarded. The authorities need to monitor such acts and impose severe punishments for the netizens who are involved with cyberbullying or shaming innocent people online. Moreover, as users, we too should be more cautious about our actions regarding what we share online and with whom. If we fail to address this issue immediately, it will only get worse with time.

Sami Un Naby, Bangladesh Agricultural University

# BCL violence again

*Why is the story the same even after PM's stricture?*



YOU have to hand it to them—rain, hail or storm, Chhatra League manages to hog the headlines. The latest has been an attack on protesting students at JU who were demanding the resignation of the VC for alleged corruption. They did not even spare some teachers who were with the students. Before that it was when members of this organisation attacked the principal of Rajshahi Polytechnic Institute and actually threw him into a pond—because he, the head of the institute had dared to bar a few of their fellow members to sit for an examination because they did not meet the class attendance requirement. One would have thought that after the brutal murder of Abrar Fahad inside a Buet dormitory by members of Chhatra League and the widespread public outrage after that, followed by arrests of the murderers, the organisation would tell its gang members—oops—organisation members to at least lie low.

But no. They just could not refrain from what they have been trained to do for years—be bullies with no fear of consequences. Even after two of their top leaders, the president and general secretary of the central BCL were removed from their posts for allegedly demanding their "share" in the funds for development work at Jahangirnagar University, they could not resist maintaining their reputation for being belligerent and violent. Students of JU have been protesting since August demanding a judicial inquiry into the reported involvement of the Vice Chancellor in mismanagement of the budget allocated for a campus development project. It was because there had been no investigation into the allegations that the students had demanded the VC's resignation. True, confining her and her family in her home for hours was quite excessive—such a drastic step should not have been taken—but it did not warrant such a violent attack on them by the BCL members. The VC's reaction, moreover, gives an idea of how powerful the BCL is considered. In an astounding move, the VC, after the BCL members had "dispersed" the protesting students by attacking them, instead of expressing sorrow for the whole incident that involved not only students but teachers, she exclaimed how "grateful" she was to the BCL for saving her, calling the act a "mass upsurge" and the protesters as members of Islami Chhatra Shibir, thus parroting the old justification for violence that the BCL has been touting all along. It was the same rationale to justify the brutal beating of Abrar Fahad which led to his painful, untimely death.

It is not difficult to see what a dilemma

the government must be in. After years of letting Chhatra League reign freely and supremely on the campuses of all public universities and colleges, terrorising ordinary students in the halls for the most preposterous reasons—for failing to be obsequious enough for instance—and being more interested in getting tenders for constructions on campus than enlightening their minds, the parent party must be in a tizzy trying to figure out how to bring them under control. After all it cannot be very comfortable to see members of affiliated groups being constantly in the news—almost always for the wrong reasons. Not just that, it seems these "unruly elements" of the organisation, that has tried to live off its glorious heritage for far too long, have

growth, it does not need the nuisance of the unwarranted rabid behaviour of some Chhatra League cadres bringing infamy to the parent party, not to mention provoking public disaffection. The Prime Minister has very categorically shown her disapproval of the unruliness of Chhatra League—especially through the expulsion of the two top BCL leaders but it seems even this is not enough to deter the belligerent elements of the organisation.

So what can be done to rid the campuses of such terror?

There have been arguments in favour of banning student wings of political parties from all campuses. That seems to be the ultimate solution from the ordinary people's point of view with the guarantee that this will not pull the plug on student

like this. Our educational institutions are being held hostage by members of this organisation. They are crippling our education system by creating an environment of constant fear and unease. They are making university administrations weak, powerless and unethical in the eyes of the students. Can the ruling party continue to allow its student front to paralyse our campuses and severely impede the academic atmosphere required to nurture our bright minds?

The success with which corrupt Jubo League leaders have been reigned in for their illegal casino businesses after the PM's directive shows that it is not an impossible thing. Such a directive is now needed to remove all criminal elements



Former students of Jahangirnagar University yesterday protested BCL attack at the university's campus and demanded the VC's resignation. The photo was taken in front of National Museum in Shahbagh. PHOTO: COLLECTED

only managed to add fuel to the fire. Their swooping on unarmed students at various times—during the road safety and quota reform movements and of course on other smaller scale protests on various campuses including the most recent one in JU, has only made the voices of protest louder.

So unless these power hungry individuals who enjoy endless freedom to unleash their most sadistic sides are brought under control there will continue to be attacks by Chhatra League members on unarmed people and the negative public backlash that goes with it. Frankly speaking, the Awami League's power is well entrenched with practically no opposition to challenge them. In such a situation where the government is trying its best to boost development and

politics in general. From the AL's point of view, removing Chhatra League from all campuses poses a huge dilemma—what will they do with thousands of (mostly) young men whose raison d'etre will become hard to justify? After enjoying not only freedom to do what they want, but also many material benefits such as expensive cars and luxury apartments, how will the leaders of the organisation maintain their lifestyle?

The need to inflict pain and suffering on the helpless to feel good about oneself is no doubt a kind of pathology that may or may not be cured. It is frightening that many members of Chhatra League have demonstrated their proclivity to brutality at the drop of a hat. One thing is for sure—things cannot just go on

from the BCL. This will mean unbiased disciplining of all those members of the organisation who have taken part in attacks or corrupt activities. It will mean putting an end to the limitless impunity they enjoy, the implicit support they can count on from law enforcers, unscrupulous university administrators and their big brothers in the parent party. Closing Jahangirnagar University and forcing students to leave the dormitories is hardly the solution. Students protesting unnecessary environmental degradation and administrative corruption are not the problem. Those justifying it and using violence are.

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## Walking a tight rope

### Rooting out sexual harassment from educational institutions

NUSRAT JAHAN

IN 2009, the High Court Division of the Supreme Court provided a comprehensive directive on sexual harassment in educational institutions and workplaces in Bangladesh. The directive was the result of decades-long movement and advocacy by students, academics, and women activists.

It all began in the 1990s, when the students of Jahangirnagar University started protesting against sexual harassment incidents in the campus, demanding punishment of the perpetrators. For the first time in our history, women started talking publicly about their harrowing experience of sexual harassment. They started using the word *dhorshon* (rape) openly, disregarding the stigma attached to such a violation, or even the mere mention of the word. This movement prompted the universities to form a committee to which students could complain about sexual harassment and demand justice, maintaining anonymity; the committee was responsible for initiating investigation of the cases. The authorities of Jahangirnagar University also created a new platform for students, academics, and activists to talk about sexual harassment.

In this backdrop, when disturbing media reports in the wake of increasing incidents of sexual harassment in educational institutions and workplaces started to surface, Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA) invoked the writ jurisdiction under Article 102 of the Constitution for prevention, protection, and redress against sexual harassment in educational institutions and workplaces. In response, a division bench of the High Court delivered a milestone judgment on May 14, 2009 by issuing definite directives in the form of guidelines to be treated as law and strictly complied with by educational institutions as well as public and private sector employers with immediate effect.

But even after a decade of enacting these directives, sexual harassment in both campuses and workplaces is rampant in the country. Recent news of sexual harassment incidents in secondary

schools is particularly troubling. The nature of the abuses is horrifying in these cases. The brutal killing of Feni madrasa student, Nusrat Jahan Rafi, who was burned to death, sent a shockwave throughout the country. These incidents make us wonder about the effectiveness of the High Court directive.

Although the universities started following the directive, most of them do not have a written policy on sexual harassment till today. They have only formed a complaint committee as per the directive. As a result, most students and staff do not have a clear idea about what constitutes sexual harassment and what are the possible consequences of violations.



Brac University is ahead of the others as it has a comprehensive policy on sexual harassment and the administration is committed to implementing the policy. However, when the university conducted a study to strengthen its policy as well as the complaint committee, it found that most of the students and the staff do not know about the committee, nor do they know how to complain or where to complain; they just know about the existence of the policy. If this is the scenario at Brac University, we can easily assume the scenario in other institutions that do not have any written or formal policy on sexual harassment.

In other universities, students/teachers/staff often do not know about the existence

of a committee for addressing sexual harassment in the institutions and their right to complain to the committee. In fact, when someone wants to complain, they are sometimes discouraged by the authority. Even when proven guilty, the perpetrators rarely get proper punishment; they are usually told to resign from the institution. As a result, their crimes remain undisclosed and they can even continue their career in other institutions.

People involved with Jahangirnagar University's movement against sexual harassment believe that the members of the sexual harassment committee are not gender-sensitive. The committee members often do not have enough orientation on

sexual harassment. They also complained that there are allegations of sexual harassment against the members of the committee. How can we expect justice for sexual harassment when the members of the committee are not gender-sensitive and accused of sexual harassment themselves?

If this is the scenario of our universities, where students are more sensitive and raise their voice against sexual harassment, what is happening in the secondary and higher secondary-level education institutions? The High Court directive is also applicable to these institutions. Is the directive being properly followed? The case of Nusrat tells us that the answer is NO!

After the murder of Nusrat, the Ministry of Education and the Madrasa

Education Board are finally recognising the necessity of having an anti-harassment policy in these institutions. The ministry is considering taking measures for strict application of the directive in schools, colleges and madrasas. This is a commendable initiative.

But before we think of policy application, we have to consider some related issues or else this initiative will fail. First, the teachers and the authorities of schools and colleges need to be sensitised on gender and sexuality-related issues. They have to have a clear knowledge of sexual harassment. Second, students should be made aware of sexual harassment issues and available support system through a campaign. They need to know where and how to complain. Third, a system must be developed for monitoring the activities of the anti-sexual harassment committees. The nature of the complaints, identification of the perpetrators, the nature of punishment given, etc. should be monitored as well.

Finally, we have to remind ourselves that sexual harassment is not just a women's issue. Men can also become victims of sexual harassment. Some recent news reports—including the news of the suicide of a male student in his madrasa and the murder of two students after torture—remind us that sexual harassment is inflicted upon males too. We also must not forget that sexual harassment is not always perpetrated by the opposite sex. It can be committed by the people of the same sex. These factors should also be integrated into our measures and agendas.

In brief, mere presence of a policy is not enough to safeguard our people against sexual harassment. An institution may have a sexual harassment policy, but if proper monitoring measures are not in place, the committee members are not trained, and the students are not made aware of the scenario, the policy is unlikely to work. We urge the government and the educational institutes to consider these recommendations to make the sexual harassment policy effective.

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