

DHAKA TUESDAY FEBRUARY 27 1990

Campus, Yet Again

Despair is the only feeling with which to regard the recrudescence of violence on the Dhaka University campus in which a student leader was killed and several others injured. The closure of the university, sine die and the condemnation of and condolences from political and student leaders are a routine sequel to such incidents which only mark the point where campus violence has reached.

The more despairing outlook is that neither the closure of the university nor the charges and counter-charges by student and political leaders or the clarification from the law and order authorities will ever help stop the violence. Their effect will be rather to escalate tension with chances of further outbreaks from a sense of revenge and retaliation. That indeed has been the order of things over the past few years as far as campus outrages are concerned.

The urgent need is to reverse this cynical order and to think up a positive means of reducing tension and initiating a process of conciliation, as against confrontation, between student and political leaders of all parties, in the first place, over this single issue of restoring campus peace, treating it as an exclusively academic issue and detaching it from national party politics.

This is what is very much on the mind of the general public and is what the parents and guardians are anxiously wanting to see happen. For at the heart of campus violence lies the local and national rivalries exacerbated mainly along political lines. The university authorities, the police and the higher administrative authorities should join in this collective, yes, national, pursuit of peace to achieve one single, unmixed objective, namely, campus normalcy. This setting of peace on the campuses of nearly all the universities in the country, Dhaka University in particular, has become an urgent necessity not merely to keep the academic programmes going undisturbed. It has become critically necessary to save the lives of students and avoid all the horrors that have so far marked campus student conflicts. Incidentally, it is a thousand pity that national politics vitiating the university atmosphere to the extent of students killing students is seen nowhere on the scale on which it is happening in Bangladesh.

Horrors of killing, deaths and injuries in campus battles apart, the campus degeneration looks headed towards a situation when the universities, particularly Dhaka University, will be last place for students to want to get into. It will have eroded more decisively both academically and physically unless effective measures get underway immediately to set things right.

Considering the circumstances the question of steep decline on the academic side seems to have receded into the background. This is, to be sure, a measure of the deterioration of the campus atmosphere where restoration and improvement directly devolves on the administration, the political leaderships and student leaders.

One question insistently asked by the public is why no effective pre-emptive action is seen ever taken either at the police or university level to forestall such outbreaks of violence. The background preparations by rival groups remain as a rule so clear that a positive move, chiefly through a bold initiative at persuasion and even persistence with it, followed, if necessary, by police measures to preserve peace is bound to work. What is happening now is a standoffishness on the part practically of all the agencies whose moral and official duty is to preserve peace and protect lives. All the huha and concern come after the event, after excited and excitable young fighters have killed or injured each other in a violent fight, with no one ever trying to stop them doing so. This reflects a degree of irresponsibility on the part of all concerned, from which they cannot exonerate themselves on any excuse whatever. We want to see a change of this cynical order of things on and around the campuses. Will any one care to listen to what we have said, in fact, to what the people say?

If education has been all but destroyed should we not try to save the lives of our students from being destroyed so easily and cheaply?