

VIOLENCE ON THE CAMPUS

There is tension on the Dhaka University Campus and in several medical colleges run with funds from the state exchequer in different parts of the country. Clashes between police and students and between students and students have been reported. Some of the medical colleges are already closed and the Dhaka University is said to be on the verge of closure. Obviously the academic calendars of these institutions which are perennially behind time will be further distorted as the indefinite suspension of classes continues. The fallout of the recent campus violence has disrupted transports and businesses around the university and affected lives of people unattached with the university happenings. The on and off clashes on the DU Campus has brought down the image of the 75-year old University to abysmal levels. One does not know when the reputation of the premier academic institution of the country will be restored. Perhaps not within a decade or two. Along with the deterioration of the campus situation the prestige of both teachers and students has declined.

Both the Treasury and Opposition Benches in the on-going budget session of Parliament are eager about discussing the DU situation. Several MPs have already filed notices to allow a motion to be introduced in the House on the aggravating campus climate. But will such a discussion help us reach a way out of the vitiating atmosphere is the moot question. During earlier parliaments people had watched with dismay how a debate on violence and saving the country's universities and colleges from terrorism degenerated into mutual mudslinging and recriminations between rival groups. The discussions generated a lot of heat and banner headlines in the following day's newspapers. But so far as reaching a consensus solution for ridding the campus of violence and saving these once honourable institutions no progress had been made. Members on both sides of the floor used the occasion of the debate to heap accusations on rivals and gain political mileage out of it.

There is no reason to believe that a debate on the academic situation in the current parliament will take us anywhere near a solution which all right thinking citizens want. Because the urge to do politics with a deteriorating situation on the campuses is still very much in place. Unless we develop a culture of looking forward and not backwards we cannot hope to go anywhere near an effective solution. Yet the job of rectifying the situation is so simple if the main political parties agree solemnly that they will support all positive moves for restoring an academic atmosphere in our premier educational institutions. A lot of public money is expended in running these institutions. According to one statistic over 45,000 taka is spent from government funds monthly on a single medical college student while the latter pays an insignificant amount as tuition charges. When medical undergraduates indulge in parochial politics and violence forcing authorities to shut down their institutions one can very well realize what losses the country as a whole has to bear.

A Dhaka University student also pays a minuscule amount to stay on the roll's. The lion's share of his education expenses is borne by the common people through direct and indirect taxes. The Bangladesh education system in the public sector is heavily subsidized, perhaps among the most subsidized in the world. But the nation reaps very little benefits from the funds allocated annually in the budget. What is unfortunate is that there is no realization in the minds of the students to what extent they are indebted to the nation at large who are footing the bills as long as they are in universities and colleges. If some of the higher education subsidies are shifted to the agriculture sector to help the millions of farmers there would be an immediate positive impact on farm outputs. The Campus situation will start improving if the students themselves realize the level of public frustration they are causing by their "unacademic" behaviour. Those who are using them to further their political ends must also be exposed sooner than later.