

Appalling conditions at Jagannath University

Return the dormitories to it

AN entirely untenable situation has been created at Jagannath University. There can be no denying that the manner in which twelve dormitories of the university have been under illegal occupancy for the last so many years has brought conditions to a pass where both teachers and students of the university now feel that urgent action is necessary to correct conditions. The outburst that was noticed in old Dhaka a few days ago was, given the realities of the situation, a reaction to old grievances that successive governments have either ignored studiously or have not had time to pay attention to. The present government, having been elected to office with a massive mandate, has made it clear (and that was in light of the students' outburst) that it will not tolerate any violence at academic institutions.

That is a fine and logical expression of the government's determination to maintain law and order. But where the Jagannath University situation is concerned, a deeper and harder look by the authorities into the reasons behind the current troubles has now become necessary. It is by now obvious that elements of all sorts --- and they include activists of both the Chhatra League and Chhatra Dal, to say nothing of policemen and others --- have been in possession of these dormitories in what can rightly be termed as a well-organised, unholy nexus of vested interests. It is the preponderance of these elements that has kept the university, its teaching staff as well as students, hostage to helplessness for years. The time has now arrived when a full and unambiguous reversal of the situation must be brought about. For that to be done, let the authorities take the first and urgent move of constituting a task force to inquire into the matter of how these twelve dormitories have gone out of the university's control. And then must come the act of identifying those responsible and dealing with them under the law of the land. That done, ways must be found, and swiftly too, of recovering this university property from the predators and restoring it to the university. There can be no two opinions on the issue.

Jagannath University, situated as it is in old Dhaka, has for long enjoyed a reputation as an institution catering to young men and women of the area and elsewhere. But matters such as the dormitory issue have gradually eaten away at its moral authority and left it a pawn in the hands of the unscrupulous. We will expect that with the recovery and restoration of the dormitories to the university, a process of intellectual rejuvenation of Jagannath University will be set in motion. Meanwhile, let it be ensured that in future no one will ever make any move to grab property that belongs to educational institutions or to any organisation serving the public interest.