

VAT on private univ tuition fees should be withdrawn

THE situation that private universities have come into because of the imposition of a 7.5 per cent value added tax, lowered from the 10 per cent as proposed in the finance minister's budget speech for the current financial year, on tuition fees for the students of private universities and medical and engineering institutions, triggering agitation mainly by the students, then on a small and now on a large scale, beginning on Wednesday, is unwelcome. Students of the private universities, generally considered places of higher education for students coming from wealthy and well-off families but these days having fairly a large number of students belonging to the middle class in the context of limited capacities in public universities, started going out on demonstrations as the imposition of the value added tax has only added to their educational expenses. The government, which has the responsibility to make higher education accessible to all segments of society, in such a situation, has, instead, used force to stop the agitation of students for their just demand in which the police on Wednesday fired rubber bullets and teargas shells into the students of East West University in the capital along with charging at them with truncheons.

We condemn the police attack on the students demanding the withdrawal of the value added tax, which in turn has only increased the cost of higher education for them. In Wednesday's event, although the Badda police officer-in-charge said that they had not attacked the students, but the 'successfully' taking control of the situation by the police and at least 15 students and the university's additional registrar being injured speak of something otherwise. We further urge the government that it should take legal action against the policemen responsible for the unnecessary 'power exercise' on the students and teachers. Private higher educational institutions, set up as non-profit organisations, are mostly reported to have been in a competition for higher revenue with annual increases in different fees for students. But this only points to the failure of the education ministry to put a leash on the education institutions, hardly missing any chance to extort money from students and it should have been dealt with differently and not by attacking the students on demonstrations. If the imposition of value added tax on tuition fees of students were to levy taxes on the income of private higher educational institutions and to stop aberrant institutions from concentrating on profit more than on the education that they have primarily been set up for, the government needs ensure that such institutions pay increased taxes without increasing tuition fees by way of tax imposition.

Under the circumstances, the government is advised, not to use the police against the students justly demanding the withdrawal of the value added tax on their tuition fees and take legal action against anyone in the police found responsible for the attack. The government should, also, attend to the issue seriously by withdrawing the tax and by, rather, lowering tuition fees in private higher educational institutions so that all segments of society have better access to higher education.