

Campus: why deal with Dhaka only?

A good number of students at Dhaka University, thirty seven per cent to be precise, are of the view that the overall responsibility for violence on the campus lies with the nation's political parties. That is indeed a severe indictment of the nation's politicians, and of their attitude towards student politics. It is not that what the students believe is a fact that has been unknown to us, but what is of interest in the present context is that if such a large number of students have it in them to point fingers at the political parties for the damage being done to education, it is a significant pointer to things. In the first place, it conjures up before the conscious citizen a picture where in the years ahead, political elements will continue to smear education with their all too blatant partisan motives. Or, in the second place, it could mean that as students grow increasingly frustrated with the attitude of the politicians in large numbers, there could be a move away from all that has so long been unsavoury and towards things that allow scope for optimism. That is the central point of the findings of a survey carried out recently by the Institute of Statistical Research and Learning of Dhaka University. The institute, we shall venture to point out, has done a commendable job; and now that it has presented the nation with some facts and figures about the perceptible causes behind campus indiscipline, it ought to be the task of politicians to work out a system that will not only help make education a positive and worthwhile proposition but also succeed in giving our political parties an unambiguously clean image of themselves. All that is needed for the job to be done is for everyone involved to do his or her necessary bit.

The Dhaka University Teachers' Association has taken the first step towards the creation of a congenial atmosphere in the campus through withdrawing its strike programme and deciding to resume classes on Saturday. Another sign — one would like to believe it will yield results — of things that could come is the prime ministerial move for a meeting with opposition politicians to deliberate on the ways and means of curbing the violence that has already taken a toll of two hundred educational institutions across the country. Lest one forget, the prime minister held, last August, a similar meeting with the opposition, the offshoot of which was the formation of a special parliamentary sub-committee to deal with the issue. That was about all, and after all these months, the result that has been achieved is of a kind which is certainly unenviable. Which is one good reason why, as Begum Zia proceeds to her second meeting with her political rivals, one feels the need to keep fingers crossed. Very little has, after all, happened in the past few weeks to inspire one into hoping that a transformation will really

take place in the campus. Unless, of course, one is ready to accept as re-assuring the recent move by Sheikh Hasina to keep the activities of the Awami League-affiliated Chhatra League suspended in Dhaka University. Even here, the gesture was not matched by the ruling BNP. Be that as it may, the fact remains that there is hardly anything, at this point in time, to convince the nation that conditions in Dhaka University will truly begin to turn towards the positively better. But, then again, is a proper dealing insofar as Dhaka University is concerned all that matters? The question is important because the issue that we happen to be discussing at present concerns other places too.

Those other places include, as they must, Chittagong University. While one dwells, rather exclusively, on the happenings at DU, one falls into the danger of skirting around the ills that have laid the campus low in Chittagong. It was only the other day that the Chhatra Shibir, the student organisation aligned with the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami, forced a hartal in the port city as a means of drawing attention to certain demands regarding some of its activists. There is, in the purely political sense of the term, hardly any way of suggesting that conscious people ought not to take recourse to action that is guaranteed by democracy. But what happened in Chittagong was only, and once more, a reflection of the way the Shibir has been creating — and handling — conditions that do not go down well with any citizen to whom the future of the country matters more than anything else. The vice-chancellor of university has been, to put it mildly and yet clearly, hostage to the Shibir's strong-arm tactics; and the climactic point in the whole sordid episode at the university was reached when the VC was prevented from attending the funeral of a teacher. One remembers that, not long ago, Dr Badruddoza Chowdhury visited Chittagong University in his capacity as education minister and promised action to rectify conditions. Unfortunately, that has not come to pass. Thus it is that, at this stage, the very pertinent question arises: if it is the campus situation that the nation as a whole wishes to direct its attention to, why not bring everything within the ambit of the discussion? It would be naive to emphasise a return to normal conditions in Dhaka University without at the same time resolving to right the wrongs being perpetrated in Chittagong and elsewhere.