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The Crackdown On Campus

There will be unqualified popular endorsement for the police crackdown on six residential halls of the Dhaka University early Wednesday morning, which resulted in the recovery of a substantial quantity of arms and ammunition and the arrest of some 34 students. Many would say that the move was long overdue and that it should be followed by more measures, not just in Dhaka but also in other cities and towns, to restore peace and order in the country's educational institutions.

The move came at a time when continuing gang warfare in the university campus, involving opposition student factions, had created an alarming situation in the country's premier educational institution. Thousands of students had been watching the near-collapse of law and order with a mixture of dismay and resignation, while the situation left their parents in anguish and bitterness. Again, some regarded the delay in police action as one of drift on the part of the authorities. One justification for the delay could well be that the authorities had been planning a surprise move which needed preparation. Perhaps, the government also waited for the views among the opposition leaders to crystallize into a strong condemnation of the so-called student activists who resorted to the use of arms. This condemnation from both Sheikh Hasina Wajed of the Awami League and Begum Khaleda Zia of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party was heard last week, giving the signal to the authorities that a crackdown would meet with a wide measure of approval from all political parties and groupings.

Despite the popular approval given to the crackdown, there will still be questions in many minds relating to various aspects of the Wednesday's raid. The quantity of arms and ammunition recovered from the six residential halls was indeed substantial. But, many observers believe, it was only 'a tip of the iceberg', as the saying goes, and that much of the arms have been moved elsewhere or are lying in other halls. There are also questions about the sources of the supply of arms, which must be identified and dealt with. Finally, what kind of measures do the authorities have in mind to prevent the return of the arms to the same halls which were raided on Wednesday? True, no one can expect the authorities to answer these questions and thus reveal their tactics. But they should at least have the answers in their own minds. The important thing is not to allow the situation to become one of drift again. That will only aggravate the sense of frustration among all sections of our people.

Whatever steps the authorities have in mind to maintain the tempo of their operation against armed 'activists' in our educational institutions, the perspective must remain clear, without suffering from any distortions. For one thing, the authorities must continue to treat it on non-political terms and go after offenders regardless of their supposed or real political affiliations. Another important consideration should be to ensure that the operation must never be allowed to degenerate into political victimisation in any form or into a witch hunt. In their understandable zeal to show results, police may often feel tempted to go after genuine student political leaders who are as opposed to violence as any law-abiding citizen of the country. Such temptations should be kept under check. It is the responsibility of the Home Minister to ensure that the police force handles the job in a manner that brings credit to the whole department.