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ON THE UNIVERSITIES

The visit of Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia to the Dhaka University campus on Wednesday was a momentous occasion for the teachers and students of the country's premier educational institution. It reflected the commitment of the democratically elected head of government to the continuing patronage of Dhaka University. It also revealed the government's unstinted support to the anti-terrorism campaign in educational institutions.

Begum Zia was the first popular leader to visit the campus in the last 14 years. Her presence at the award giving ceremony was a great source of inspiration for the students and the teachers alike. She spoke for the dignity of higher education, the need for stamping out violence from the campuses and the creation of a congenial environment for the pursuit of education. The Universities should be the places for the culture of the democratic spirit, of the tolerance of opposing views. It is in the universities around the world where political, economic and social debates are held in a free and unrestricted environment because it is only such institutions which provide the scope for free thinking. It is from the interaction of these debates that new ideas emerge and human civilization advances utilizing them. Our universities bedevilled as they are by students' violence cannot provide a similar environment to their academics. They are gripped by session jams which continue to play havoc with the academic routine and the future careers of the students.

The time has come to look into the factors responsible for such a deplorable situation in the universities and other higher seats of learning. The Prime Minister has launched an appeal to all quarters, students, teachers, guardians and political parties to join the anti-terrorism campaign on the campuses. It is obvious that only united efforts can uproot the deeply embedded tentacles of terrorism and the government has the political honesty to admit that it alone cannot do everything in tackling the challenge of student terrorism. The nation expects that, at least on the issue of campus-violence, there will be a broad range understanding among the major political parties in the country so that a national campaign in the true sense can be undertaken.

The Prime Minister distributed awards to the faculty members who made their mark in research in various fields and the students who had achieved outstanding results. There are certainly very bright students in the universities. Those who make the top grades are among the best by any standard and their achievements are even more appreciated when one considers the environment and psychological pressure within which these have been made possible. But despite these top rankers the general achievement level of our universities is pitifully low. There is indeed a great gap, between the top few and the rest of the students.

The effort of the universities should also be to raise the average standard of the students. For this again we will need academic discipline and an appropriate climate on the campus. The nation is certainly being deprived of many talents because of the poor standards. As the universities remain enveloped in problems the country as a whole loses on its investments on the future.