

## Deceptive govt policies on private univ VAT

PRIVATE university students, especially in Dhaka, continue with their protests against the imposition of 7.5 per cent value added tax on their tuition fees giving rise to an unwarranted situation, particularly for city dwellers. Their boycott of classes and examinations, because of the protests, also causes an uncertainty to loom large over the timely completion of their courses, which, in turn, will not only cause their families, largely from the middle-income groups, to bear additional expenses but also delay their preparations for jobs that have already become scarce for various reasons including lack of investments in the private sector. What is, however, more regrettable is that instead of heeding the protesters, the government seems to have resorted to deceptive means to pacify them. It is a common practice across the world that recipients of goods or services pay VAT. But the government wants the protesters to believe that it is the authorities of the institutions — the service providers, if we at all seek to call them so — would pay the VAT in question. It is important to note that even in such a situation, university authorities will have to collect money from none but the students.

Meanwhile, according to the law that governs private universities, all of them are non-profit organisations. In other words, while the government, in principle, cannot impose taxes on the highest seats of learning — as this would encourage commercialisation of education contravening the constitution that recognises education as a right, the law also does not allow it to do so. In any case, by seeking to make private university authorities pay VAT, the government has made it clear that private universities are, in fact, doing a profitable business in the name of higher education in violation of the constitution and the law concerned. That apart, in such a situation, the government's responsibility is to stop the unauthorised practice without any delay, which is also crucial for unburdening the students concerned of the excessive cost of education, on the one hand, and maintaining a congenial academic atmosphere in the universities, on the other. It is also important to note that the government appears hell-bent on realising some Tk 450 crore or so by imposing VAT on the students at a time when it is unable, if not unwilling, to realise thousands of crores of takas in taxes from delinquent businessmen, as its functionaries have so far admitted on several occasions. Nor did it make any serious efforts to recover the huge amount of money siphoned off by different quarters such as the Hallmark Group from the state-owned Sonali and other banks in the period.

The government needs to realise that its failure to address the protesters' concern about not only the unjustified imposition of VAT but also the overall unabated increase in the cost of education in private universities, which play a significant role in providing higher education to thousands of students, because of various fees reportedly imposed by the authorities at will may further aggravate the situation. It is, therefore, time that the incumbents addressed the gamut of the problems that higher education is faced with, instead of aggravating them further.