

No space for govt to dither on extra school fees

IT IS encouraging that the government has finally decided to take formal action against the schools that realised additional fees from 2015 Secondary School Certificate examinees. As the education minister said, 3,038 schools reported to have charged students extra fees were asked to return the money and inform the education boards of doing so. Of the schools, 830 complied with the instructions, 999 said that they had not taken more than what the boards set – and their claims are being examined – and the rest 1,209 schools neither returned the extra fees nor informed the authorities of anything. The government asked the 1,209 schools, after they had failed to comply with the directive, to give satisfactory explanations for their inaction to the authorities concerned in 30 days, failing to do which may result in further action in line with a High Court order, according to the minister.

The High Court earlier directed all schools to return to students the extra fees they had realised from the SSC examinees by January 20. There are allegations that schools realised additional fees from students under dubious heads such as mandatory coaching, millad mahfil, mosques, salaries of Class Four employees and others. In view of the allegations, the High Court asked the government in November 2015 to take appropriate action against the managing committees of the schools found to be doing so. It also asked the government to force the schools in Dhaka found to be guilty of charging extra fees to refund the money to the examinees. The High Court's role in protecting the public interest by giving these directives to the government seems to have worked. A top ministry official, however, said that they had an intelligence report that about 500 secondary schools realised extra fees from the SSC examinees in 2016 again, despite the public outcry and the High Court directive. Such glaring malpractices by the schools, it can be argued, has only come about because of previous government inaction against the errant schools, which has created a dangerous air of impunity.

Given the situation, it is encouraging to see the government finally taking the necessary step to stop the practice. The government must, however, force the errant schools to refund extra fees to students, as directed by the High Court, and not dither from its current course of action, back to its former course of rhetoric.