

VICTORY DAY 2020

# Our pride and glory: The Mukti Bahini in 1971

AHMAD AHSAN

BANGLADESH belongs to a select group of countries that fought their way to independence. We won our freedom by winning a fierce nine-month Liberation War against a very well trained, well-armed Pakistan Army. We remember with solemnity and gratitude the sacrifice of the millions of our people who achieved martyrdom, who were assaulted, brutalised and raped by the occupation army and had to flee their homes during the war. The occupying Pakistani Army brutalised us because they wanted us to surrender to them. Instead, the Pakistani Army's 93,000 soldiers laid down their arms on December 16, 1971, in one of the largest surrenders in history. On that day, Bangabandhu's Declaration of Independence of Bangladesh on March 26, 1971, became a reality.

In the 1971 Liberation War, we were victors, not only victims. Alongside paying homage to our people's immense sacrifice, we must also equally celebrate the pride and glory of our Mukti Bahini—the Bangladesh liberation army—in achieving victory and making independence a reality.

To say this is not to diminish the contribution of the Indian armed forces' leading role in achieving victory, for which we will always be indebted. It is, instead, to highlight the critical role that the Mukti Bahini played. The Mukti Bahini's victory with the aid of allied Indian forces in December 1971 was precisely analogous to the American Revolutionary Army's victory over the British Army in October 1783, aided by their allies, the French Army and Navy.

Two crucial tasks await. First, we must embed the stories of bravery of our Mukti Bahini in our national consciousness, telling our children how they fought relentlessly in the nine months before the Indian Army joined the battle to form the Allied Forces and jointly defeat the Pakistan army. Our school curricula, history books, movies and theatres need to tell stories of their tremendous acts of courage, heroism and dedication during the war. Second, we need to reach a more profound appreciation of the strategic role played by the Mukti Bahini in achieving victory. They were not merely auxiliaries as depicted in several Indian accounts, and as even some Bangladeshis believe. In nine months of war, the Mukti Bahini's attacks systematically destroyed the Pakistani Army's morale and supply routes and restricted their mobility. That, and only that, enabled the Allied Forces' lightning campaign, victory and liberation.

As a schoolboy in Chattogram in 1971, I saw and heard the Bangladesh Liberation War's first battles in all their intensity. On the evening of March 27, 1971, I saw, with awe, Bangladeshi troops—then East Pakistan Rifles—setting up positions and machine-

gun nets on the Railway hill. I felt humbled knowing that they were getting ready to fight and die for Bangladesh. Later, reading the memoirs of a Pakistani Special Services Group Commander (Brig ZA Khan, *The Way It Was*), I realised that those soldiers and their comrades in Halisahar wiped out two companies of Pakistan's 2nd Commandos that had flown to reinforce Chattogram.

The Pakistan Army had to fight through Chattogram, neighbourhood by neighbourhood, to take over the city. In late March, we saw shells fired from PNS Jahangir on Bangladeshi soldiers resisting the Pakistan army's advance and Pakistani Air Force jets carrying out air raids to shut down Bangladesh's first independent radio station at Kalurghat. The Pakistani casualties in these March battles were so numerous that when they reached Dhaka, it caused widespread shock. After that point, to avoid demoralising their soldiers, the Pakistani military ordered that fallen soldiers' bodies not be returned to Dhaka.

Through the nine months, Mukti Bahini guerrillas kept continuous pressure at night through attacks on power lines, substations, buildings and other targets. On August 15, Chattogram's ground shook from the exploding limpet mines laid by Bangladeshi naval commandoes sinking Pakistani ships. In December, Chattogram's earth and the sky became fused by the cloud of dense smoke of the bombed oil refineries. The bombing of the

Chattogram oil refineries was a heroic act by Flight Lieutenant Alam and Captain Akram of the emergent Bangladesh Air Force, who flew a single-engine Otter plane hugging the ground to avoid radar to make this daring attack.

What happened in Chattogram happened all over the country. After regrouping and training in India and the beginning of the monsoons, more than 70,000 Mukti Bahini soldiers, guerrillas, and sailors in river gunboats started continuous attacks on the Pakistani Army. These attacks took place not only in the border areas but also in the interior. Tiger Siddiqui's forces in Dhaka's North and the Toha faction of the East Pakistan Communists in the South fought unyieldingly from bases inside the country.

The Mukti Bahini's attacks over the nine months destroyed or damaged 231 bridges—including the vital rail bridge near Feni connecting Dhaka and Chattogram—and 122 railway lines, disrupting the Pakistan army's supply lines and mobility. Internal Pakistani Army briefings by June 1971 described the war outlook as a stalemate: they would hold the towns while the Mukti Bahini would control the countryside.

Even that assessment proved to be too optimistic as the Mukti Bahini started attacking in cities and towns. Bomb explosions inside and around prominent buildings such as the DIT, Hotel Intercontinental, government offices, and automatic gunfire became part of Dhaka and Chattogram evenings. Towns

would plunge into darkness as guerrillas blew up 90 power substations and transmission towers. Army jeeps with mounted machine guns and Army jeep patrols became a familiar sight. As we know from the brilliant account of Jahana Imam in *Ekattorer Dinguli*, Pakistani soldiers were not safe inside the city as the Crack Platoon could brazenly attack them.

One of the most significant attacks took place in Dhaka on June 6, when Governor Tikka Khan was hosting a dinner for a visiting high-powered World Bank mission that had come to evaluate the situation. Just when the Governor and his officers were making the case that everyday life had resumed, the Mukti Bahini launched coordinated attacks around the Government House. As Hassan Zaheer, later Pakistan's Cabinet Secretary, writes in his memoirs, "bomb explosions and machine-gun fire at regular intervals drowned out any attempt by Pakistani government officials to persuade the visiting mission that things were normal."

By November, the Pakistani Army had been fought to a standstill with enormous casualties: 237 officers and more than 3,695 soldiers had been killed or wounded by Mukti Bahini attacks. The demoralisation of the Pakistani Army was nearly complete, as evident from the following anguished passage from *The Pakistan Army 1966-71*, written by General Shaikat Riza: "[Pakistani] troops facing the enemy in one direction found themselves outflanked, their rear blocked. Troops moving

from one position to another got disoriented and then encountered hostile fire when they expected friendly support. By November 1971 most of our troops had... fought for nine months... in a totally hostile environment. For nine months they had moved on roads, by day and night, inadequately protected against mines and forever vulnerable to ambush... By November 1971, most of the troops had been living in waterlogged bunkers, their feet rotted by slime, the skins ravaged by vermin, their minds clogged by an incomprehensible conflict."

So, was the Mukti Bahini only another allied unit of the Indian Army, or did they play a critical role in the Pakistan Army's defeat? The evidence is compelling. The Mukti Bahini's contribution to victory was strategically decisive in at least five ways: first, their attacks broke the Pakistan Army's morale, as the previous paragraph makes abundantly clear. Second, the Mukti Bahini forced the Pakistanis to weaken their positions by spreading their forces thinly over the country. Third and fourth, they largely confined the Pakistanis to their bases, without reliable supply lines. Finally, they made the Pakistani army blind, devoid of that critical ingredient for battlefield success: information about what was happening around them. In his book *Surrender at Dhaka*, General Jacobs, then Indian Army's Chief of Staff in the East, recognises some of these factors even in his passing.

The plea here is that over the next few months, as we approach the 50th anniversary of our Independence and Victory Day, we launch a national campaign to tell stories about the glory of the Mukti Bahini and reach a national appreciation of the strategically decisive role of the Mukti Bahini. To make this effort creative and scholarly, let the Liberation War Museum take the lead in this campaign with the government's support. The Liberation War Museum's valiant efforts have collected many exhibits and artefacts, but surely the Museum appreciates that narratives by historians still await. Such a national campaign must quickly build up a library of oral histories of our freedom fighters and commanders. They should also draw on excellent books by Mueyeedul Hassan, *Mudhara Ekattor*, that provides the most thoughtful and informed account of the Mujibnagar Government's historical leadership in 1971. We should draw on that book both as a source and as an example. Let what Mueyeedul Islam's book has done for the Mujibnagar government be done for the Mukti Bahini.

Dr Ahmad Ahsan is Director, Policy Research Institute of Bangladesh, and previously a World Bank economist and Dhaka University faculty. The views expressed here are personal. He can be reached at aa42@caa.columbia.edu.



Members of the Mukti Bahini preparing for their next guerilla attack.

PHOTO: ARCHIVES

## Benapole stronghold: The free land of 1971

SARTAJ ALIM

*During the last three days of April and the first week of May, Pakistani forces repeatedly attacked the Mukti Bahini's lines.*

DURING the 1971 Liberation War, the Pakistan Army's 9th Infantry Division was deployed in the Khulna region. Supported by two additional tank squadrons, the Division was the strongest one in East Pakistan. Fighting such a Division was nearly impossible for the Mukti Bahini (the Bangladesh Liberation army), which did not have sufficient troops and arms.

But on March 31, even before the Sectors of the Bangladesh forces were formed, the Mukti Bahini, under Bengali soldiers and bureaucrats, launched a surprise operation and liberated Jashore. However, seven days later they had to retreat due to intense artillery firing by the Pakistani troops, and Jashore fell to the enemy. Pakistani troops then rapidly advanced to Jhenaidah and occupied the town on April 17. Then they took Kushtia, which had been liberated on March 30. As a result, retreating freedom fighters from all over the Khulna front were withdrawn and gradually pushed towards Benapole.

The Pakistani forces were superior in every category and quickly made their way up to Benapole by outrunning the freedom fighters. Benapole remained

the only unoccupied zone in the Khulna region. Major Abu Osman Chowdhury planned to hold Benapole at any cost.

Major Osman built a defence line in front of Benapole in the Kagojukur area. Three Bengali paramilitary companies were deployed to hold the defence line, and one more East Bengal Regiment company was put on reserve at the Benapole headquarters of the Mukti Bahini. Some of the soldiers on the front lines didn't even have a rifle. They were outclassed by weapons but superior in courage. Pakistani troops encircled them from all three sides. The Pakistani military's strategy was penetrating the defence line, pushing them to India and sealing the border.

The refugees coming from Jashore informed the freedom fighters that the Pakistan army had deployed long range artillery pieces near Navaran. All of Benapole was under their range, and it could even shell Indian territory if needed. The artillery available to Pakistan could have turned the whole area to dust.

On April 21, a raiding party consisting of 20 Bangladeshi soldiers led by Captain Hafizuddin Ahmed raided Navaran. Marching eight kilometres to the west, they engaged their targets

with mortars and rockets. The Pakistani enemy fired tracer rounds to find them but they crawled back. The next day, the Indian Signal Corps intercepted Pakistani radio messages and found that they had lost two artillery pieces. It was a successful raid but it was the opening round of a furious battle.

From April 23, enemy troops launched attacks on the Mukti Bahini. They tried to flank them from both sides. The north flank retreated but the south side was able to hold the Pakistani forces back. In the middle point, the Mukti Bahini was about to retreat but Nayeub Subeder Mujibul Haque fired his machine gun and wiped out a whole enemy platoon. The Pakistani army then resorted to deceptive tactics. Putting on East Pakistan Rifles (EPR, fighting for Bangladesh) uniforms, they started to walk to the Mukti Bahini's line like friendly troops. The right flank discovered their trick and started firing immediately. Pakistani troops failed to break through their position. Meanwhile, there were no field telephones on the battlefield. This incident in the south remained unreported to other positions.

The Pakistani army dressed as EPR came very close to Nayeub Subedar

Mujibul. He refrained from firing, thinking them to be part of his own force. He understood the trick later, but by then it was too late. Bullets pierced his body. In the meantime, the mortar battery was advancing from the Mukti Bahini headquarters to behind Mujibul Haque's position. A car was carrying ammunition for the mortars. As the unprepared driver faced enemy soldiers, he abandoned the car and the mortars and ammunition fell into Pakistani hands.

After retreating from Kagojukur, the freedom fighters quickly assembled behind the Customs Colony. There, they built new defensive positions just behind the Colony, near the border. This time, two companies of the East Bengal Regiment were put on the front line of the defence. The southern defences were set up one mile behind the Benapole checkpoint.

During the last three days of April and the first week of May, Pakistani forces repeatedly attacked the Mukti Bahini's lines. They bombarded them continuously and charged with infantry again and again. The Mukti Bahini endured the barrage of shells, wave after wave, but they managed to hold their positions. The enemy used to fire 30/40 rounds of shells and charge infantry,

but they failed to capture the Mukti Bahini or drive them back. The situation was a stalemate, which was costly and humiliating for the 9th Division and a tactical victory for the freedom fighters.

In early May, high ranking military and government officials met at Benapole to build a strategic plan. Foreign journalists and photographers used to come to Bangladesh during the war through Benapole. The newly formed Immigration Department of Bangladesh put an entry seal on their passports. When the BBC's *Panorama* broadcasted the interviews of Major Osman and Captain Hafizuddin, the world came to know that this area was part of independent Bangladesh, even in the face of the modern weapons of the Pakistani army.

The 9th Division had to send portions of their troops to other fronts as they were bogged down by hit and run attacks in parts of Khulna. Despite the Pakistan army's best assaults, the freedom fighters continued to maintain the stronghold. This part of Benapole, after being liberated by the Mukti Bahini, not once felt the boots of enemy troops on its soil.

Sartaj Alim is a final year student of Economics at Jahangirnagar University.

QUOTABLE Quote



MARCUS GARVEY (1887-1940)

Jamaican political activist, publisher and journalist.

*The ends you serve that are selfish will take you no further than yourself but the ends you serve that are for all, in common, will take you into eternity.*

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

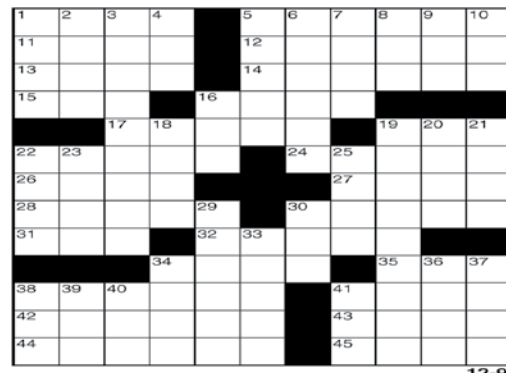
- 1 Folded food
- 5 Cube face
- 11 Not quite closed
- 12 Pound parts
- 13 Foal's mother
- 14 Western contests
- 15 Work phone no.
- 16 White House power
- 17 Poker action
- 19 Writing tool
- 22 Submit taxes online
- 24 Tire in the trunk
- 26 Ray of films
- 27 Diva's piece
- 28 Wise ones
- 30 Duo quadrupled
- 31 Needle feature
- 32 Inferior
- 34 Visibility lessener

- 35 Radio's Glass
- 38 Minty rum drink
- 41 Party time, for short
- 42 Roused
- 43 Fairy-tale monster
- 44 John of Monty Python
- 45 Honey bunch

DOWN

- 1 Unexciting
- 2 Trojan War hero
- 3 Copier insert
- 4 Smelter supply
- 5 Tender areas
- 6 Brokers' numbers
- 7 Edit menu choice
- 8 Tennis feat
- 9 Early auto
- 10 Scrollwork shape
- 16 Compete

- 18 Lotion additive
- 19 Bobwhite's cousin
- 20 Buffalo's lake
- 21 Orderly
- 22 Move slowly
- 23 Criticize harshly
- 25 Tempo
- 29 Lists of candidates
- 30 Need to pay
- 33 UV stopper
- 34 Walk in the woods
- 36 Quite uncommon
- 37 Pro votes
- 38 Buddy
- 39 Symbol of wisdom
- 40 Coffee, in slang
- 41 Move up and down



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



BEETLE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES



BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.