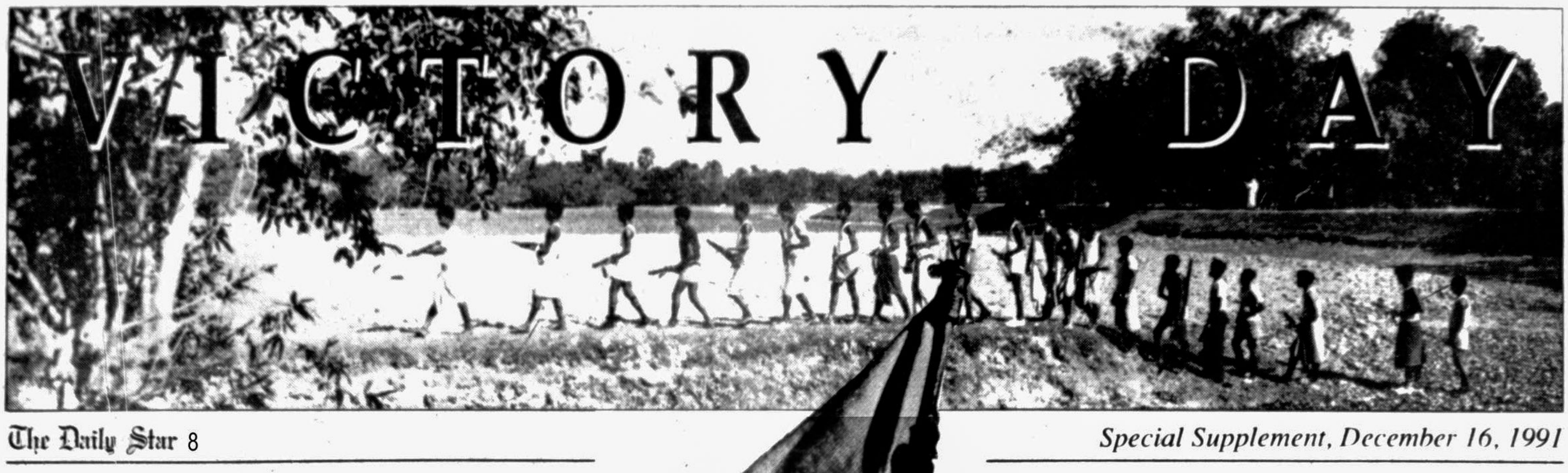

From Mukti Bahini to Bangladesh Army

Building a New Structure from Scratch

July 11, 1971 is a highly significant day in the history of the War of Liberation. The Armed Forces of Bangladesh were formally established on that day. But even earlier than that, patriotic Bengalee officers and men of the Pakistan army had left their posts, to fight alongside the millions of inspired people of this country, to capture the glory of independence for the motherland. Few days after the barbaric Pakistanis launched their assault on innocent Bengalees on March 25, many Bengalee soldiers got together at Teliapara in Sylhet. Then came the soldiers' war alongside the people, across 11 combat sectors, and creation of history through final victory. Major General K M Safiullah Bir Uttam, a valiant sector and brigade commander during the War of Liberation and the first Chief of Staff of the Bangladesh Army (1972-75), recalls how the army was built up from virtually nothing.

IN 1971, the Bangalee people witnessed a barbaric display of military might from the Pakistan armed forces. But not even all the atrocities and destructions carried out by the Pakistani forces could subjugate the people.

Bengalee members of the East Bengal Regiment, East Pakistan Rifles (EPR) and Police, trained in the use of arms and tactics of warfare, stood up to defend their motherland.

Nine months of bloody warfare, and then came the hour of final victory, a triumph for the people in the War of Liberation. December 16, 1971. And a new country was born.

Basically, the War of Liberation was the foundation of today's Bangladesh army. The great contribution of the armed forces to free this country from the clutches of the Pakistani occupation forces will forever remain in the consciousness of the people. But here, we do not only have the incomparable sacrifice and heroism of the freedom fighters to remember. The roots of this nation's armed forces are also inherent in this struggle.

During the war of liberation one name was very popular and that was Mukti Bahini. It had two wings and those were Mukti Fouj in short MF and Freedom Fighters in short FF.

Those were the two official nomenclature given to the forces which I started to fight the War of Liberation. MF were the *Nyomito Bahini* or the regular troops and the FF were the *Onyomito Bahini* or the guerillas.

To the Pakistani troops both these forces were known as Mukti Fouj whereas in *Shwadhin Bangla Betar Kendro* they were refereed as Bhichhis'.

The reason to have these two categories of troops was that their role and tasks were different. While the MFs were trained to fight conventional as well as unconventional warfare and were capable of holding ground, the, FFs were trained only to fight guerilla warfare.

Their battle techniques were to hit the enemy where it hurt and run. They were not designed or trained to hold ground. So during the war the MFs comprised mostly of the troops of East Bengal Regiments. EPR, Police, Ansar and some newly-trained troops whereas the FFs comprised mostly of students, peasants i.e. general public.

After the war broke out and before Bangladesh Forces took any organised shape on April 10, 1971, an announcement was made by the Provisional Bangladesh government in exile through *Shwadhin Bangla Betar Kendro* from Agartala, in which Colonel M. A. G Osmany was made the Commander-in-Chief.

In this announcement, the appointment of four Sector Commanders were also announced and they were, Major Ziaur Rahman — Chittagong Sector, Major K. M. Safiullah — Mymensingh Sector, Major Khaled Mosharraf — Comilla Sector and Major Abu Osman Chowdhury — Kushtia Sector.

Later as the war progressed and more informations were available, new Sectors were created and new Commanders were appointed. Bangladesh Forces Headquarter was established at Mujib Nagar. This was on the western side of Bangladesh. In order to facilitate the work of the Commander-in-Chief in the Eastern Zone another Headquarter was established and it was known as Headquarter Eastern Zone. The Commander of this area was known as COS Eastern Zone. Lt Col Rabb was appointed as its Commander.

In order to give this organisation a better shape and also to activate the war potentials a conference of all the Sector Commanders were held in mid-July '71 at Mujib Nagar. During this conference the whole of Bangladesh was divided into 11 Sectors and the Sector boundaries were demarcated.

In this conference it was decided that we should have, conventional i.e. MF and unconventional i.e. FF types of troops, where MF will fight the conventional as well as unconventional battles and FF will be fighting the guerilla warfare. This was the most high level conference that was held during the war and first two days conference was chaired by the Prime Minister and Minister for Defence Mr Tajuddin Ahmed. It was here the concept of Bangladesh army was first conceived and the approval was given to recruited and train the MFs.

The first regular formation was officially approved to be raised in this conferences but unofficially the raising started from mid June '71.

Zia was appointed as the commander of this force named 'Z' Force. It had 1,3 and 8 East Bangal Regiment under its command. They got concentrated for training at a place known as Teldaha about two miles north of Mainker Char.

Thereafter in the month of September '71, the order came to raise 'S' and 'K' Forces. 'S' Forces strength was approved for two battalions and 'K' Forces for three battalions. 'S' Forces was thus consisted of 2 and 11 East Bengal Regiment and 'K' Force with 4,9 and 10 East Bengal Regiment. 'S' Force was raised at Fatik Chhari about half a mile east of Mantala railway station and 'K' Force at Melaghar about two miles South East of Kashba. Apart from these infantry formations two artillery units were also raised. They were 1st Mujib Battery, equipped with 120 mm mortars and 1st Field Regiment equipped with 105 mm howitzer. Over and above these units few hospitals came up. Our biggest hospital was at Melaghar. There were many small hospitals established all along the border. These hospitals moved in to Bangladesh after the war.

After the war these Forces and sectors got concentrated in various areas. 'S' Force, 2, 3 and 11 Sector troops — in Dhaka, 'Z' Force, 4 and 5 Sector troops — in Comilla, 'K' Force and 1 Sector troops — in Chittagong, 8 and 9 Sector troops — in Jessore, 7 and 8 Sector troops — in Rangpur.

In the month of February '72, General Osmany held a conference of all Force and Sector Commanders. During this conference he divided the whole of Bangladesh into five areas, and also appointed commanders of those areas. These areas were — Rangpur as Northern area, Jessore as South Western area, Chittagong as South Eastern area, Comilla as North Eastern area and Dhaka as Central area.

I become the Chief of Army Staff at this stage.

These areas were later developed in to brigade group. Each brigade consisted of three or four battalions. On independence Bangladesh army had only 8 battalions of East Bengal Regiments and immediately after independence these 8 battalions grew in to 16 battalions. This quick growth was possible because of training of Sector troops as MF. and East Bengal Regiments provided the nucleus.

I had the unique honour to organise the various forces into an Army. The associate problems were too many.

Being the first Chief of the Army what did I inherit?

I inherited a group of armed people, some of whom were trained, some partially trained and most of them were untrained. The army was not organised into any regular formation. There were hardly any accommodation available for the troops.

During Pakistan time in the cantonments of the then East Pakistan, the accommodations which were built could hardly accommodate about 10,000 troops. The army's strength in '72 were about 30,000 Pakistan army did not establish any training institution in this past of Pakistan. To equip the Armed Forces there were nothing available or produced in Bangladesh. From boot laces, boot pins, to equipment, clothing and armament everything had to come from outside.

On being appointed as Chief of Army Staff, my first task was to organise, equip and train these forces into a disciplined body. We prepared an adhoc organisation for the Army into five brigade groups. Each brigade group with three infantry battalions except Dhaka which had four battalions.

These brigade groups were located in those five areas i.e. Dhaka, Comilla, Chittagong, Jessore and Rangpur. Apart from the infantry battalions, each brigade group also had other arms and services like Artillery, Engineers, EME, Supply and Ordinance etc. Wherever possible these units were raised and the rest were provided with nucleus only.

Having organized these forces into brigade groups, the first problem that I faced was to give them shelter. As I said before, the accommodation that was available in the existing Cantonments could hardly accommodate only about 10,000 troops. By mid '72 we had about 30,000 troops.

The country was war-ravaged. I could not force the government beyond certain limit. Banga Bandhu had other problems which were much graver than to build accommodation for the troops. Even

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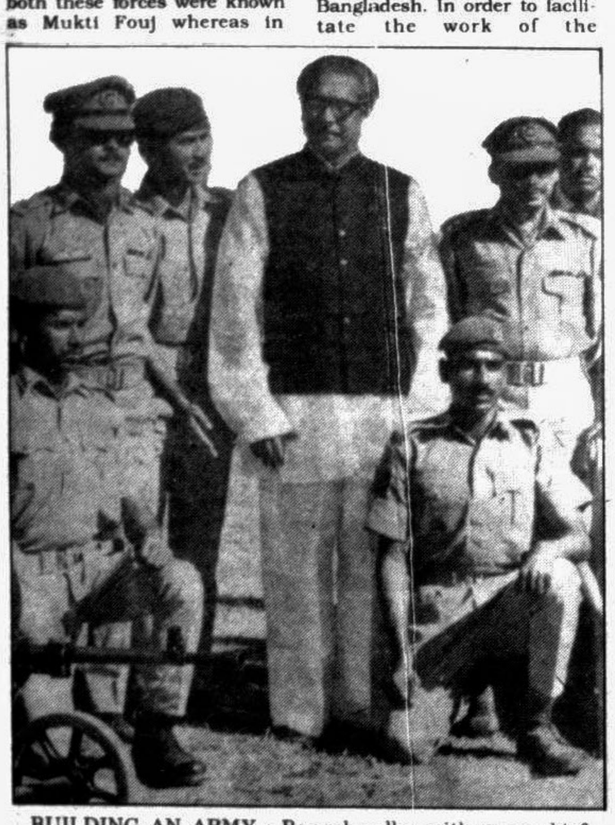

BUILDING AN ARMY : Bangabandhu with army chief Safiullah (right) and deputy chief Ziaur Rahman (left).
—Photo : Quamrul Huda Khondker

A Tale of An Unlikely Hero

By Waheedul Haque

IT was day of triumph and victory on December 16, 1971. We are only celebrating an anniversary of that day now — the real thing seems to have gone out of our life years and years ago. Victory is a state that passes and has to be built anew all the time and remembrances of old victories would be hollow and false unless rejuvenated by the touch of the magic wand of new victories. Defeat — an unending procession of it — has been stalking us and getting the better of all our achievements during Pakistan's two decades starting in 1948. The welter of our reverse performance far outweighs even the euphoric ideas of what we realised on December 6, 1990. Where and how did the rot set in? And how shall we get out of this vicious and mean hole?

Bangladesh, born in the declaration of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on the early hours of March 26, was legally consummated on April 17 in a mango-grove in Baidyanathpur, not far from Plassey — as perhaps a demonstration of poetic justice — and in a bare span of nine months defeated the marauding Pakistani aggressor making a haul of nearly a lakh of their soldiers — the whole of what forces that monster of a state had massed in Bangladesh — as war prisoners. This couldn't be done without, first of all, the all-out help from India which sustained a refugee influx of more than nine millions for the whole duration of the Liberation War, provided the forces and guerillas of Bangladesh not only with sanctuary but with all the wherewithalls of warring — and then fought along the Bengalee fighters and sacrificed her own sons by the thousands. It is India's world diplomatic initiative that ranged international sympathy for the genocide-scarred Bengalees into a formidable array of positive support for the fighters of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and on the one hand prevented the United States and China and the so-called Islamic States to dither and fail to come to any material help of Pakistan and think of intervention only after the fate of the engagement had been sealed — and on the other pave the way for not only the victory of Bangladesh but also to an early universal recognition of it as a state. And, crucial to all that India did was the response of the Bengalees on the other side of the border — which literally catalysed the lukewarm and wary Delhi reaction into a positive involvement. Without the warmth of the Indian Bengalee population's total sympathy and all-out identification with our war of liberation — the approach epitomised by Jagjivan Ram's admonition to Indira Gandhi — Betia, one Pakistan is nuisance enough, don't go to create two which will be killing — could very well have won the day. And it was also the vital role played by Indira's partners in power, CPI, which proved instrumental in both encouraging Indira to arrive at a decision and getting Soviet Union and the other Eastern bloc socialist nations' unambiguous support for Bangladesh which did much to materialise India's wonderful midwifing of the new state into birth.

This is history. If our state has to be true to the Liberation War and if it would not want to renounce the justifications of the genesis of this state — that is history. And that all-important element of Bangladesh's history has been distorted beyond recognition and the nation made to mostly forget it altogether. Bangladesh to the neo-Razakars are a new Pakistan born out of the blue. A shady entrepreneur passing for an editor has gone to the length of suggesting it in so many words that this nation was born out of the spite of India for Pakistan and nothing besides. People of his ilk have killed Tajuddin who knew the whole truth and we who were on the battlefield shared the knowledge with him.

But history was being forgotten years before Tajuddin was killed. The rot started setting no sooner than the fighters had retired from armed engagement in the battlefield and the Great Leader come home from the Islamic fraternal dungeons of Rawalpindi. As in India, the intellectuals, writers and poets and artists were mostly of the socialist persuasion of the Moscow-leaning brand. As close collaborators of Awami League during the Liberation War and before, then knew all about the unaccommodating and uneducated approach of the behemoth to politics and everything else. Some forwarding thinking left intellectuals tried to pre-empt. AL in forming a broad cultural morcha which could act as a pressure point to keep the ruling party within tolerable limits of nuisance as also push that to populist and truly socialist-democratic paths. There was another very cogent reason behind the move. Even after the return of the Great Leader things were pretty amorphous although Tajuddin, the loyal Bharat had presented his Ram in Mujib the throne of a much more organised and unthreatened state than he had taken over from the Pakistanis. The Al-Badr and Al-Shams and the predatory Behari hordes had gone underground only to bide time and begin acts of sabotage with their arms and organisation as intact as in the nine months of liberation war. The cultural morcha was going to be a mass motivational weapon that could inhibit the possibility of an otherwise certain backlash by the killers anywhere any moment.

The turn out at the Bangla Academy was impressive. All the people of proven wholesomeness to the infant state were there. And many were the elevating words articulated and resolute pledges made and plans formulated to keep up the spirit and carry forward the task of materialising the goals set during the deliberations.

Among the listeners was one come from Calcutta. Let me confide to my readers here — not unlike some PD James masterpiece of thrillers — that this Hunchback of Notre Dame character standing up to much less than four feet in height was actually the tallest of mortals that participated in our Liberation War and that he did so even as Andre Malraux and Christopher Caudwell participated in the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War of the early thirties, is the hero of my piece today. This writer has seen quite a bunch of war heroes — in fact one of the boys from the group he led to the Liberation War became a Bir-Uttam — the highest decoration for valour. And he has known Khaled Musharraf during action and Ziaur Rahman while on a furlough visiting Santiniketan. But he hasn't known any greater fighter for the liberation of the Bengalee than Zahir Raihan and this diminutive fellow who was a universal guru to the new generation of West Bengal writers that included Sunil Ganguly and Shakti Chattopadhyaya and more directly Debesh Roy.

Well, Dipen Bandyopaddhyaya — you can as well spell him Deepen which is closer to the Bengali and Sanskrit original and in fact is more truly descriptive of him as his was indeed a truly deep deep soul — came out of the meeting with a very worried look, his forehead all furrowed. Something wrong, Deepen? He wouldn't answer, for he couldn't — he was evidently very troubled in his mind.

When after much pestering he talked — it was the talk o a possessed Jeremiah. I see bad things ahead and soon, he said. All of you had been in the war. And you are all leaders of the victorious nation just coming out of the bloodiest national liberation war in all history — three million killed in 236 days or 1300 Bengalees killed on God's every day over that period. And you do not re-

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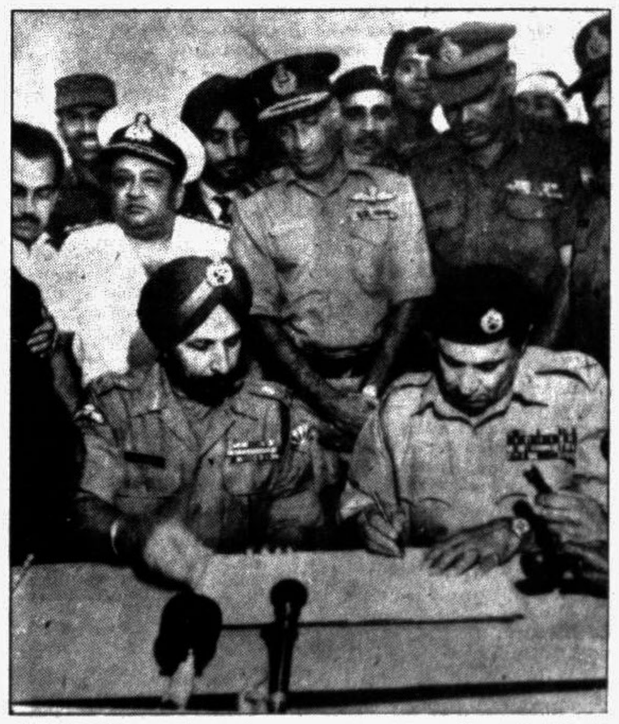

VICTORY : Pakistani commander Gen. Niazi (right) surrenders his troops to joint Indo-Bangladesh Forces commander Gen. Jagjit Singh Aurora.

Photo : Aftab Ahmed