Lt Col Shawkat Ali Says

'We Have Gained Independence But Not Emancipation'

***LIEUTENANT Colonel Shawkat Ali** is no ordinary man. As a captain in the then Pakistan army, he was arrested in connection with the so-called Agartala Conspiracy Case in the late 1960s and made its No 26 defendant (Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was the No 1 defendant). In 1971, he joined the War of Liberation in the Madaripur sector, and later moved to Sector Two headquartered in the Indian state of Tripura. He finished the war as a member of General M A G Osmany's staff at Bangladesh Forces Headquarters. In 1978, he broke away from the Muktijoddha Sangsad and became the founder-convener of a new freedom-fighter's organisation, the Muktijoddha Sanghati Parishad. In a frank interview given to The Daily Star Assistant Editor **Sabir Mustafa,** Lt Col Shawkat explained his views on a range of issues affecting freedom-fighters, including the reasons behind the Sanghati Parishad's formation:*

***DAILY STAR** : Under the present circumstances, what role do you think freedom fighters can play in society ? How do you think they could be unified again ?*

LT. COLONEL SHAWKAT ALI: We often talk about the unity of freedom-fighters, and why they cannot get together or if they could get together then a lot of things would be possible. We often say it, and to a lot of people this is highly desirable.

However, in reality I do not think that sort of unity among freedom-fighters is really possible. It is not possible because of the political polarisation in the country.

Before joining the War of Liberation, freedom-fighters were in different political camps, they did not come from the same political position.

They came from different political parties, different ideological outlooks and thoughts. More might have come from one particular political camp, but that is a different matter, because there were more than one camp.

And after the war, freedom-fighters belonged to different political and ideological camps. They did so, and still do now. So, unity in that sense I don't think is possible.

What is possible is a unity of thought, of consciousness, and I think that is there.

Here we may suffer from narrow-mindedness about history and a lack of an objective, liberal attitude. We don't give credit where it is due; we only want to project the leader of our own party or camp. To some, Maulana Bhasani was the

Lt. Col. Shawkat Ali

greatest hero of the liberation struggle, while others would say Ziaur Rahman did this and he did that etc.

But even amid all this, I'd still say that there is a definite convergence of consciousness.

Now how do we bring freedom-fighters closer? They don't live in barracks that you can blow a whistle and all of them will fall in line. They live in society like the rest — in villages, towns, doing jobs, professions, farming, business.

In order to bring them together, we have to bring that consciousness, the ideals of the liberation war together. We have to clarify that.

We have to speak-up about the ideals and objectives of the war of liberation loudly and unitedly: that yes, *this* is the reason we went to war. If we cannot say under whose leadership the liberation war was fought, if we cannot be big-hearted enough to say that under Bangabandhu's leadership Bangladesh became independent, if we cannot be that liberal, then at least we can say for which *objectives* we became independent?

What was that objective? We can say that in one, brief sentence, and if all of us, all freedom-fighters, all parties in one voice say it, then freedom-fighters can play a major role in society.

And how are you going to summarise that objective?

Bangladesh became independent because of one reason. The reason was that none of the thoughts, beliefs and ideals of the Bengalee nation could be fulfilled within that militaristic, communalist state named Pakistan ruled by people with attitudes and outlooks borrowed from the Middle Ages.

What are our beliefs? Our beliefs are democracy, freedom of thought, freedom of speech; we are secular, we are not communal; all of us — Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Buddhists — want to live together, we don't believe in communalism or any religious bigotry. We want to live in a non-communal, democratic country.

Because this was not possible in that state called Pakistan that the creation of Bangladesh became essential for the inhabitants of this geographical area. In short, to ensure equal rights of everyone irrespective of race, religion or caste.

But if you bring it to the present-day context, do we have it? No, we don't. And because those ideals have not been fulfilled, then that leaves a role for freedom-fighters.

That role isn't just about rehabilitation. Allowances for families, jobs for freedom-fighters etc. are all necessary and any organisation has to do its part for those. Any government has to do its bit for rehabilitation and welfare of freedom-fighters, it is obliged to.

But if you think about the ideals, the consciousness of the liberation struggle, then it is not there.

It is not there because, the types of governments that came to power in this country by killing Bangabandhu in 1975, they did not believe in those ideals.

They compromised with the Razakars, Al-Badrs and Al-Shams, in short with the forces opposed to liberation; they shared power with those forces. Now, the Razakars and Al-Badrs certainly would not want Bangladesh to be built on the ideals of the War of Liberation.

Those who came to power after the killing of Bangabandhu compromised on those ideals. Why? To beef-up their camps. To do that, they gave power and position to Razakars, made anti-liberation people prime minister. In doing so, they could not maintain their ground on the question of ideals. Or maybe they never had any belief in those ideals. As a result, today we are far removed from the consciousness of the liberation war.

What is the difference between the two states named Bangladesh and Pakistan? What is the difference in the *state concept* of Bangladesh and Pakistan today? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

I don't think there is much difference between Bangladesh today and what an unbroken Pakistan state would have been like had we lost the War of Liberation. In fact, the government of Ziaur Rahman was worse then what Pakistan is. In many ways.

If you ask me what the role of freedom-fighters should be, then this is their role.

Of course, the Sanghati Parishad will work for the welfare of freedom-fighters, of martyrs and their families. Any freedom-fighters' organisation is obliged to work for that.

But the Sanghati Parishad puts the greatest emphasis on the struggle to ensure equal rights to all men and women irrespective of race, religion or caste. This has not been fulfilled. To use a phrase of Bangabandhu's : We have gained independence, but not emancipation. We will keep working for that emancipation.

Whatever we have done since 1978, we have done it with the full knowledge and understanding of the situation, not to please anyone, nor out of hate for anyone.

DS: Do you think the government is doing enough for the rehabilitation of freedom-fighters? What role should it play?

SA : Again we come back to the point of ideals. You see, the freedom-fighters have been defeated. In Bangladesh. On August 15, 1975, the freedom-fighters lost. Until we can reverse that defeat, rehabilitation will not be possible.

What is rehabilitation? You will build houses for them? Reinstate those who lost jobs? You will give them bank loans to start businesses? I don't think any of that is feasible.

If we can return them their victory, remove the ignominy of their defeat, then their material and psychological rehabilitation will be possible.

They have been thrown out! The ground on which they stood and fought for their ideals, their beliefs, their thoughts, they have been rooted out of that ground. Where are you going to plant them after uprooting them from there?

They have lost their ground! You cannot rehabilitate them in the air. You have to give their ground back. Not you, but *they* have to get it back.

But is they don't understand that, if they don't realise what they have lost, and just go around holding grand rallies without tackling the real issue, then they will just go around in circles without getting to their real destination.

What will you do? Give them jobs? the anti-liberation forces will drive them out. If you cannot clean-up the whole environment, how are you going to rehabilitate them? That is why we believe the problem is a political one.

Yes, a lot can still be done. Like increasing allowanced for families of martyrs, of crippled freedom-fighters; help them when they face problems at places of work. Then there is a need to do some reorganisation in the freedom-fighters welfare trust, because that institution is performing below potential. So matters of welfare can be improved with a little more thought and effort. Then there is the question jobs. The children of freedom-fighters, and of martyrs have now grown-up, and need to be ensured. But it is a matter of attitude.

DS: Since 1972, the Muktijodha Sangsad had been the only organisation for freedom-fighters. Why did you feel it necessary to come out of that and launch the Sanghati Parishad? What were the ideological and organisational causes behind the launching?

SA: The Muktijodha Sanghati Parishad was set up on August 26, 1978 with myself as the convener.

If we analyse the situation at the time, we will see that a great deal of politics used to be conducted in the name of freedom-fighters, which was not correct. The name of Muktijodha Sangsad used to be misused to advance or propagate the interest of certain individuals.

For instance, it used to be said in the name of the Sangsad that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman played no role in or made no contribution towards the independence of Bangladesh, and that General Ziaur Rahman was the principal hero of the independence struggle. These things started after August 1975.

Following the killing of Bangabandhu and the change in the political leadership of

(continued on page 11)

Freedom-fighters Still Neglected, Say Muktijoddha Sangsad Leaders

By Farid Ahmed

"NEITHER the government nor the Muktijoddha Sangsad itself has taken any perfect and effective measure so far to help the freedom fighters."

This was stated by Abdul Ahad Chowdhury, Chairman of a fraction of Bangladesh Muktijoddha Sangsad, in an exclusive interview to The Daily Star.

Abdul Ahad Chowdhury

Ahad Chowdhury said "What I observed so far the Sangsad is a well-profitable business centre for the leaders of freedom fighters", he continued adding." Ignoring the shares of the common freedom fighters, a limited numbers of leaders are bagging profits from the Sangsad".

Abdul Ahad said that the sangsad was devided into two — one group was elected by the national council of the sangsad on March 5 and 6, this year and the other was a disbanded group which was patronized by ousted president Hussain Muhammad Ershad.

"We—the elected body of the sangsad carried out normal activities only or three months until the defeated group (Ershad's one) being patronized by some of the ruling party and protected by police, forced them to leave the sangsad's central office," said the chairman.

Ahad said, "We are ashamed that the freedom fighters' office is now protected by police."

About the objectives of the sangsad, the chairman said, it was expected that the organization would be an independent and neutral one. It would applaud any good decision by any government and at the same time deplore the misdeed, the chairman added.

About the present conditions of the freedom fighters and the martyred freedom fighters' families, the chairman said that those who are alive are living as like the mass—some belong to upper class—some belong to middle class but many of them are in the lower class.

The chairman said that many of the martyred freedom fighters' families were deprived while many doubtful cases were being benefited by the Muktijoddha Kallyan Trust. The same was happening in the case of the crippled freedom fighters, the chairman added.

The chairman also said that his sangsad had taken a programme to help those freedom fighters who are living under the poverty-level.

MAHFUZUR Rahman, Chairman of Bangladesh Muk-tijoddha Sangsad said that the cherished dream of the freedom fighters was not implemented after twenty years of independence of the country.

Exclusively talking to The Daily Star, Mahfuzur Rahman said "Observing the activities o the past governments ir the last twenty years, the freedom fighters are frustrated now —they no mor want rehabilitation of the freedom fighters but of the liberation war itself."

Mahfuzur Rahman

The Chairman said that the freedom fighters fought against the Pakistani forces for an independent, democratic and oppression free Bangladesh, but the freedom fighters themselves had been oppressed humiliated in many ways during the last twenty years instead.

Mahfuzur Rahman said, owing to oppression on the freedom fighters by the then government, the freedom fighters hid their identities during the period of 1972 to 1975. Ousted Ershad used the freedom fighters for political purposes which was not excepted by the cautious and sensible freedom fighters, he added.

The chairman said, "Only President Ziaur Rahman, a real patronizer of freedom fighters, took effective measures to rehabilitate the freedom fighters."

About the present conditions of the freedom fighters and the martyred freedom fighters' families, the chairman said that they had been utterly neglected in the country for which they fought.

"We—the freedom fighters who actively took part in the war were not more than three lakhs but after the war certificates were distributed among thirty three lakhs," said the chairman and continued, "The fakes grabbed the chance but the actual freedom fighters, of whom eighty five per cent was not educated, are living in an inhuman condition."

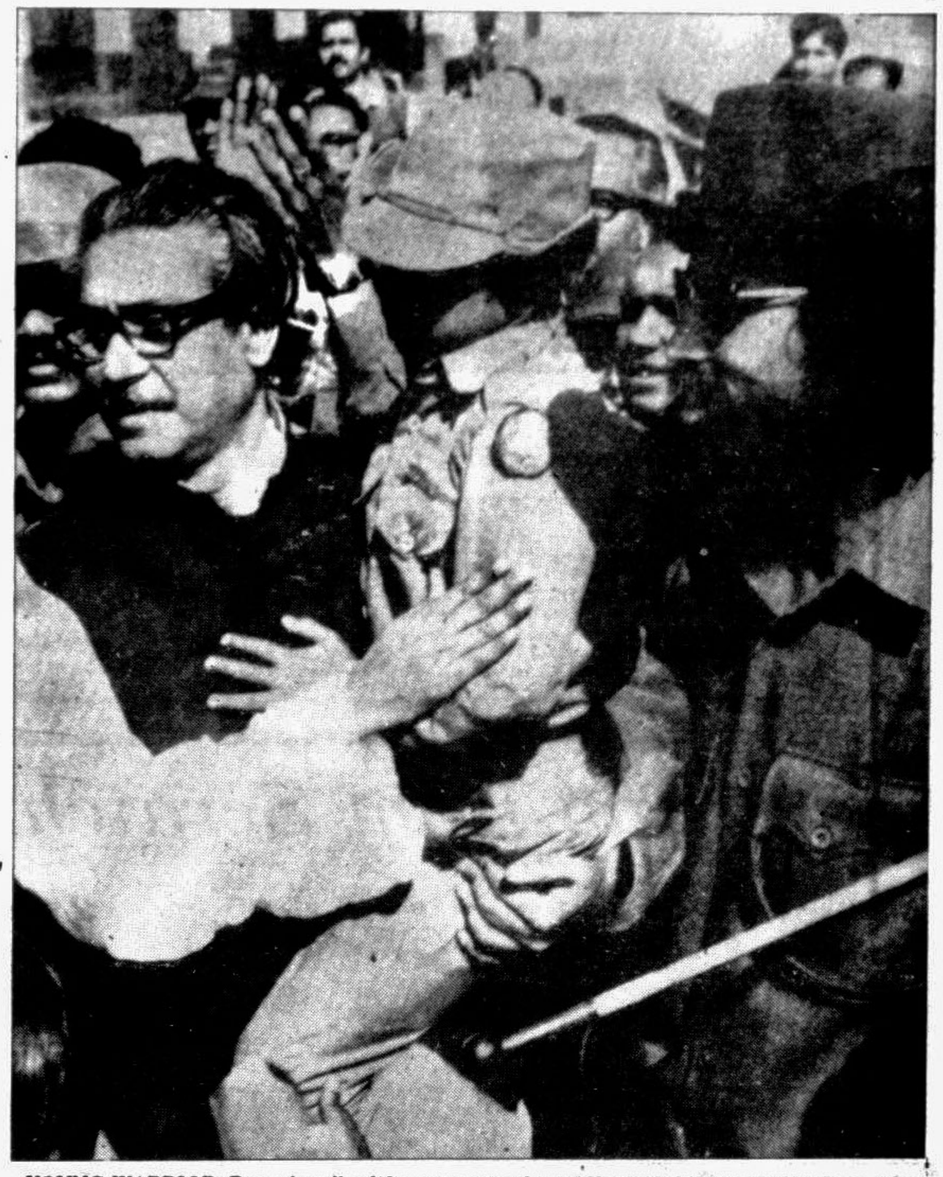
Referring to government service age limit of 32 for the freedom fighters, the chairman said, "After twenty years of the liberation war it is nothing but a farce and also to humiliate the freedom fighters."

The chairman said that the Muktijoddna Kallyan Trust was formed to help the martyred freedom fighters' families and the crippled freedom fighters, but of the genuine, many were deprived due to various malpractices.

Bangladesh Muktijoddha Sangsad was formed to help the freedom fighters so that they might lead a better life and the sangsad was still working for it, said the chairman.

Rahman also said that the freedom fighters were now devided into two.

"But I invite them to join us of work for the welfare of the freedom fighters," said Mahfuz.



YOUNG WARRIOR: Bangabandhu lifts a tiny member of Kader Siddiqui's (right) force, who once lobbed a grenade into a Pakistan army bunker. Photo : Aftab Ahmed

নানা প্রকার রাসায়নিক ও পারমাণবিক পরীক্ষা-নিরীক্ষা, বৃক্ষ নিধন, অতিরিক্ত জ্বালানী কাঠ ব্যবহার, যানবাহন, কলকারখানা, তৈল শোধনাগার ও তেলকূপ সমূহে অগ্নিকাণ্ড ইত্যাদি কারণে পৃথিবীর ওজন স্তরের ক্ষতি হওয়ায়

ভূমণ্ডল উত্তপ্ত হচ্ছে

ঘূর্ণি

ঘন ঘন বন্যা, খরা, ঝড়-ঝঞ্ঝা, সাইক্লোন, টর্ণেডো, জলোচ্ছ্বাসসহ নানা প্রাকৃতিক দুর্যোগ ও তার তীব্রতা বৃদ্ধি পাচ্ছে

বৃক্ষ বাতাসকে সজীব রাখে, তাপ শোষণ করে, মাটির ক্ষয় রোধ করে, প্রয়োজনীয় প্রাণী ও পতঙ্গকূলকে আশ্রয় দান করে, মানুষের জন্যও একাধারে খাদ্য ও আবাসগৃহ উপহার দেয়

এবং

পৃথিবীকে শীতল রাখে

জন্ম থেকে মৃত্যু পর্যন্ত মানুষের জন্য গাছ অপরিহার্য

অধিকহারে গাছ লাগান।। পরিবেশকে রক্ষা করুন

পরিবেশ আমাদেরকে রক্ষা করবে।

পরিবেশ অধিদপ্তর

গণপ্রজাতন্ত্রী বাংলাদেশ সরকার

ডি, এফ, পি (জি) ১৪৯৮১-১০/১২

বিজয় দিবসে আমাদের শপথ
স্বাধীনতার বীর শহীদদের আত্মবলিদান
বৃথা যেতে দেব না ।

আসুন, আমরা সবাই মিলে
নিষ্ঠার সাথে নিজ কর্তব্য করে
বিজয় দিবসকে অর্থবহ করে তুলি ।

তিতাস গ্যাস ট্রান্সমিশন এ্যান্ড ডিষ্ট্রিবিউশন কোম্পানী লিমিটেড

(পেট্রোবাংলার একটি সাবসিডিয়ারী কোম্পানী)

১০৫, কাজী নজরুল ইসলাম এভিনিউ
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