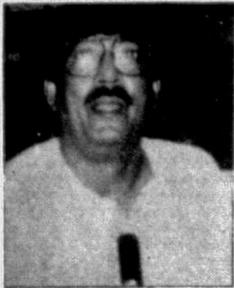


Historic March

Shahjahan Siraj Remembers

'We Knew It Was Over'

By Masud Hassan Khan



Shahjahan Siraj

DURING the tumultuous days in early 1971, recalled Shahjahan Siraj, one of the four 'caliphs' in the student leadership, the student leaders were least impressed with the result of the 1970 general polls, because they were not content with the promise of regional autonomy.

Unlike many Awami League leaders, the students were preparing themselves for the final round, for complete independence.

Talking to the Daily Star, he said that there was one time when it was almost decided that Pakistan would not split up. He said that it was only the pressure from the students that averted such a possibility and that the force student exerted came from the general people.

Siraj was then the General Secretary of the central committee of the Chhatra League.

"During elections we used to campaign that the 6-point programme of the Awami League would give us autonomy, and if it failed, we will start the one point movement", he said.

He recalled that the result of the 1970 polls also entailed a kind of division among the student leadership.

A.S.M. Abdur Rab and himself belonged to one faction, which, Siraj said, "wanted to continue the on-going movement for complete independence but the other section in the leadership was less enthusiastic about it."

Shahjahan Siraj continued, "So our covert preparation continued and we began strengthening the country-wide net work and collecting weapons for the final round of the game."

But four or five days before March, when it was announced that Yahya Khan would address the nation at 1pm over radio, "we could sense that something was wrong and something very evil was going to

take place. We planned meetings across the country. So we telephoned and sent messages to all the districts to hold rallies and gatherings at the time synchronising with the radio broadcast.

"Separate meetings were also organised at the Dhaka University, Jagannath College, Dhaka College and Tejgaon industrial area and some other places in Dhaka. I presided over the rally at the Jagannath College. It was begun shortly before 1pm and we arranged a radio near the microphone so that the people could listen to the broadcast.

"When Yahya declared that no assembly session would take place the sea of people roared. We knew that it was over and brought out in a procession. Within minutes, several processions joined from other parts of the city.

"We went to the Purbani Hotel where the central leaders of the Awami League were meeting. But it was late, the people were impatient. They demanded prompt decision from the leaders. I went up to the meeting and conveyed the message. But I was told that it would be late, so you manage the people. Later I announced that independence of the country would be declared in

a meeting of the Independent Bengal Students Action Committee at Dhaka University the next day.

The same evening, a joint meeting of Chhatra League and Dhaka University Central Students Union (DUCSU), was held at the Iqbal Hall.

The meeting at the Bat Tala began at 10 in the morning. Then, recalled Siraj, a procession came wading through people and close to the portico, which was used as the dias, and handed the flag of Bangladesh to A.S.M. Abdur Rab.

The meeting was presided over by Nur-e-Alam Siddiqui and was addressed by me and Abdul Quddus Makhan. But reports from Tongi and Joydevpur said that many died there in police firing. The meeting was then cut short and an announcement made that another rally would be held at 3pm the next day.

"On March 3, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman sent messages to us at the Iqbal Hall for a meeting. When we arrived at his Dhanmandi residence, Mujib said that he would address today's meeting", Shahjahan Siraj continued, "we were a bit taken aback but arranged due publicity. By 12-30pm, the venue was jam-packed by people. We went there at about 2pm. The meeting could not begin at the scheduled time when Sheikh Mujib failed to turn up in time. We waited till 4 pm and thought that something serious must have happened and then started the meeting without him.

"I read out the Declaration of Independence. Mujib arrived when I was reading out the seventh point of the declaration. So I read it again. One interesting thing happened at this moment. While reading out the declaration I felt that someone was pulling my pun-

jabi from behind. I heard Mujib bark at the leader who was pulling and told him to let me continue reading. I knew the person who pulled my punjabi, but his name I will not disclose.

"Then Mujib addressed. There were two kinds of reaction. He neither spoke in support of the declaration nor he opposed it. But announced the March 7 meeting at the Race Course maidan.

Then the historic address was made. Two trends emerged after March 7.

One group in the leadership wanted to compromise but the other opted for complete independence, Siraj said. March 23 was the independence day of Pakistan.

"We learnt that a committee was also formed to observe the day. We decided that this time Bangladesh Day would be observed in East Pakistan, Siraj said, "on March 19 we ordered large scale production of the new flag and decided to hoist those on top of all the buildings.

"But to my surprise I found that the people had already bought the new flag from the Qulistan area where there was nothing but the flags. On the night of March 22 we found that the new flag would not be unfurled on only the buildings of the GOC and the Supreme court.

"So on the same night A.S.M. Abdur Rab and I went to the residence of the chief justice. Before knocking the door, it opened and Justice B.A. Siddiky came out. He said that he himself had bought one flag and it was ready to fly atop his residence. I went mad with joy.

"March 23 and 24 brought an uneasy calm. Nothing significant happened. On the night of March 25 I stayed at the residence of Bangabandhu till 10-30. I returned to Iqbal Hall at 11pm and moved to the Mitford hospital area at about 11-30 pm."

Media Flashback
Compiled by Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, Ekram Kabir and Dipak Kumar Karmakar.

March 17, 1971

Recognise Independence, Or Bengal Will become Vietnam, Bhasani Warns Yahya

delay in this regard would turn Bangladesh into second Vietnam.

— The Pakistan Observer, March 18, 1971.

Struggle will go on, says Mujib

THE second round of talks between Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and President General Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan held on Wednesday morning lasted 50 minutes. After coming out of the President Bhabani Mujib told the waiting newsmen, "I have nothing to say. The discussion is going on."

When a newsmen wanted to know if he would meet the President again, Mujib said, "I hope so. No time has been fixed for it."

Later during an informal discussion with newsmen at his house Sheikh Mujib asserted that the movement

would continue "till the goal is achieved." He asked a questioner, "Have I withdrawn the movement?"

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declined to say if his talks had been fruitful or not. He told the questioning newsmen, "I do not know what you mean by fruitful and fruitless. I can only say that the dialogue is continuing."

Asked whether his talks with the President had broken down, Sheikh Mujib said, "The talks are continuing." Time for the next round of talks would be fixed later on, he said. "It may be today, it may be tomorrow," he added.

Q: Have you discussed your demands (meaning the four-point demand) during your talks today?

SMR: Naturally, when I go I discuss my demands.

Earlier when a newsmen remarked that he was smiling,



Mujib said, "I can smile even in hell."

When correspondents congratulated SMR on his birthday, the AL chief said, "What is my birthday? What is my deathday? I am with my people. There is no security of my people. They are dying."

— The Pakistan Observer, March 18, 1971.

On His Birthday

LAST Wednesday was the 52nd birthday of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. On that occasion, he said to the journalists "Nothing but the total freedom of the people is my greatest and most sacred wish."

Yesterday, while he was talking to a group of foreign journalists in his residence, one journalist wanted to know Mujib's highest aspiration on his 52nd birthday. The undisputed leader of the downtrodden replied in two words, "People's freedom."



Girl students march in Dhaka: The time was approaching to pick up real guns.

Feature

Environment

DESERTIFICATION has been one of the most contentious and important environmental issues of recent years, and was the subject of a major UN Conference in Nairobi in 1977. According to UNEP, some 29 per cent of the earth's land area suffers from slight, moderate or severe desertification; an additional six per cent is classified as extremely severely desertified. In 1984, the world's dry lands supported some 850 million people, of whom 230 million (approximately 28 per cent) were on lands affected by severe desertification. Although the process of desertification affects almost every region of the earth, it is seen to be most destructive in the dry lands of Africa, Asia and Latin America; for these three areas combined, 18.5 percent (870 million hectares) of productive lands are severely desertified. Further more, land degraded permanently to desert-like environments continues to grow at an annual rate of six million hectares, and each year, 21 million additional hectares provide no economic return owing to the spread of desertification. These trends, it is feared, are expected to con-

How Desertification Takes Its Toll

by M Aminul Islam

tinue despite some local improvements.

Very little precise data are available for many dry land populations, and Bangladesh is no exception. But there is much concern today in Bangladesh as to the environmental stresses, namely the increasing aridity being experienced in the west and north western zones, particularly in the former districts of Rajshahi, southern Dinajpur, western Bogra and some areas of Kushtia and Jessore. But in the absence of a precise delineation of the areas experiencing extreme aridity, and in the face of inadequacies in population data it is difficult to precisely define the population exposed to desertification. While incidences of sand deposition on agricultural land are on hand, withdrawal of Ganges water upstream (rivers having lost their connections with their parent stream), degradation of vegetative cover and resources, soil erosion,

and waterlogging and salinization threaten substantial populations in these areas. Persistent drought for atleast half of the year (November to March) and the intense rainfall variability together with an average of about 15 cm of soil moisture deficiency are other characteristics of the area (shown in the map). Wind, storms, flood and drought are specific natural hazards constraining economic and social well-being. Migration of population from rural areas to towns is on the increase.

The question now arises whether this region of Bangladesh is becoming vulnerable to the processes of desertification. To know the answer, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of the causes of desertification and its consequences.

Desertification as a Complex Process

People living in arid regions are subject to many sets of en-

vironmental stresses; desertification is but one of many. The extremely arid regions of the world or the hot deserts, the areas of little or no vegetation, are natural phenomena. On the other hand, desertification, the aggravation or intensification of such conditions, is a human phenomenon, resulting from certain interactions between society and environment. These interactions most commonly arise from society's search for secure livelihoods in arid lands.

According to Rapp, the process of desertification is the result of two sets of factors operating either singly or in combination. These factors are: (1) severe and prolonged drought, (2) man's overexploitation of vegetation and soil in dry lands. Contrary to this view, the origins of desertification appear to be much more complex. The controversy regarding the causes of desertification, sometimes referred to as 'desertization' in the literature, centres around a number of questions. Is the process of desertification caused by temporary high magnitude drought periods or by long-term climatic change leading to extreme aridity? Other questions relate to man-induced climatic change and the result of human degradation of the biological environments in arid zones.

Multidisciplinary research carried out in the Sahelian zone points to the fact that the main causes of desertification have been anthropogenic, according to Ibrahim. It is the work of man, his misuse of land, characterized by overgrazing, overcultivation and the clearing of the tree stock of the thornscrub including hazardous water development and equally hazardous irrigation projects. Excessive cultivation has been noted to be most hazardous. This lies in the method of cultivation itself. Ibrahim also noted millet cultivation as a major cause of desertification in parts of Sudan. The agronomic dry boundary for millet cultivation was being ignored and pushed some 200 Km northward. This transgression over the agronomic dry boundary is one of the main causes of desertification in that zone. He concluded that rapid population increase has laid

strong strain on marginal lands through excessive cultivation leading to enhanced soil deflation, soil impoverishment and to constant deficiency of soil productivity.

Empirical findings also reveal that water withdrawal or for that matter water deficiency in the soil can have adverse effects not only on vegetation but also on farm lands. Stebbing working in Nigeria pointed out that the fertility of the farmlands of the northern parts of the country were being encroached upon by sand of the Sahara and that the natural vegetation was drying out and being replaced by the drier types owing to the drying out of the water supplies.

Nevertheless there is no evidence in any arid zone that desertification is generated in the desert; rather desertization is generated locally, and on a discontinuous pattern, in arid zones through the mechanism as outlined above. Hence, desertification, the spread of desert like condition is not to be construed as a sort of wave overwhelming the contiguous less arid regions, rather it tends to be localized around settlements. Desert encroachment, if we may use the term, resulting from such activities usually occurs in scattered patches of bare ground. The different types of desert encroachment process, their extent and their rates are not well known.

Research carried out on desertification reveals that it arises from the interaction among the three major livelihood systems based on agriculture, animal and urbanisation. Out of these interactive processes, events shape up to lead to desertification through encroachment, degradation, erosion, and water-logging and salinization of lands.

Consequences of Desertification

In many ways, desertification is a selective hazard taking its heaviest toll on the marginal populations at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. One overwhelming feature of the desertification process in their lives is loss — loss in their basis of sustenance, loss in their health and well-being and finally, their loss of home and means of

livelihood. While desertification represents a degradation in environmental quality and productivity, coupled with severe drought it can result in total loss of a people's livelihood.

While desertification is directly linked to the environmental degradation and productivity, the interaction between drought and desertification should be taken to be very vital in the sense that severe drought may lead an area into a desertization spiral. During drought period, cutting of tree branches for fuel or for other purposes, in addition to subsequent grazing and burning, may result in a degradation of vegetation in which certain useful perennial species cannot reestablish themselves, or are replaced by others that are more drought resistant but less palatable. These changes result in lower sustained levels of productivity, and have profound implications for a long-term human occupation of the affected areas. Second, to obtain higher returns, people often extend their cultivation in the marginal and sub-marginal lands often constricting grazing land. This practice,

however, leads to an irreversible destruction of plant cover leaving barren patches of land unfit for future cultivation.

The degradation of agriculturists' resource base is often closely linked to out-migration. In order to seek wage employment outside their communities people are forced to neglect their terraced fields. The unmaintained terraces erode and fail to provide the moisture retaining capacity needed to produce dependable yields under erratic rainfall conditions. In general, as is experienced, labour out-migration provides short-term benefits; but, in the long run, becomes a prime contributor to the deterioration to the villages' productive base. There are increasing signs in the western part of Bangladesh that a critical point is being reached in which the resource base itself becomes imperiled by the lack of workers needed for the maintenance and operation of labour-intensive cropping systems. Furthermore, those whose livelihoods are based on irrigated agriculture, have the least flexibility in dealing with aridity conditions and often are the major contributors to its spread. For them a decrease in available moisture or the spread of salinization has immediate and catastrophic consequences.

The most important process of social change associ-

ated with desertification is demographic, described primarily as over-population or exceeding some implied carrying capacity of dry lands, at a fixed level of living and technology, beyond which desertification occurs. A review of the literature suggests that in regions undergoing desertification, many sedentary farmers, nomadic Pastoralists and recent urban migrants have been suffering from various diseases, poor sanitation, lack of health-care services and inadequate diet. Suffering from physical debilitation, demoralization and emotional stress are other characteristics of desertification spiral.

The health aspect of irrigation is another area needing comprehensive overview. Given the fact that irrigation during the dry period is practised in order to meet the growing needs of their inhabitants for more food and higher income, large scale irrigation is seen to have disrupted the geographical, economic and sociological balance of the regions. The impact of such changes on health has been noted to be considerable, in a positive as well as a negative sense.

(The writer is a Professor, Department of Geography, Dhaka University)

A related feature on desertification in Bangladesh will be published next week

