

WITNESS TO HISTORY

How the Stage was Set by Yahya for the Crackdown...

The testimony of Vice Admiral S M Ahsan before the Hamoodur Rahman Commission

by Brigadier A R Siddiqui (Retd)

Among many crucial phases that marked the history of Pakistan prior to its crackdown on its eastern wing, finally paving the way for the liberation struggle, the governorship of Admiral Ahsan in the erstwhile East Pakistan, from Sept 1, 1969 to March 4, 1971 occupies a place of its own. While this distinguished Navy officer went on with his efforts to resolve the crisis between the province and the centre. The stage was being set by Yahya Khan for the crackdown.

Ahsan narrated his version of events before the Hamoodur Rahman Commission and gave a copy of his statement to Brigadier A R Siddiqui (Retd), a former Pakistan army officer, a few days before his sudden death on 4 August, 1989. With comments by Siddiqui, the statement appeared in Dawn, Karachi on December 16, marking the fall of Dhaka. With courtesy to this leading Pakistani paper, we reproduce this historic document. But The Daily Star takes no responsibility for the views expressed in Admiral Ahsan's statements or in comments made by Brig. Siddiqui.

VICE Admiral SM Ahsan, DSC, a former Commander-in-Chief of the Pakistan Navy, before his sudden death on 4 August, 1989, had given me the text of his statement before the Hamoodur-Rahman Commission. I regard this as a rare and most illuminating document on the circumstances preceding the 1971 crisis, by a man known for his outstanding courage, candour and calibre as civil and military leader.

Much as I would have wished to see the full text of late admiral's testament in print it has not been possible owing to constraints of space. While excerpting the statement I have taken good care against tampering with the meaning or the sense of the statement even slightly, at any place either by editing or quoting any part out of context. Excerpts together with my own notes, here and there, are as follows:

I (Admiral Ahsan) was appointed the Governor of East Pakistan on September 1, 1969 after relinquishing my position as DCMLA (Navy) and member, Council of Administration for Finance, Planning Commission, Industries, Commerce, Food and Agriculture. On the same date I was compulsorily retired from my substantive appointment as Commander-in-Chief, Pakistan Navy — a position which I held for less than three years.

When the Council of Administration was being dissolved, ushering in a civilian cabinet, I had begged to be allowed to revert to the Navy. I had gone to sea at the age of fifteen and during the thirty-three years service as a sailor I had learnt something of defence and war, but little else. As a disciplined officer I had abjured politics and only met political leaders in the course of official duty. For seven years prior to my becoming the Commander-in-Chief, I had been kept away from the Navy on outside assignments; four years as the Deputy and Chief, Military Planning Office of SEATO in Bangkok and thereafter for nearly three years as Chairman of IWTA in Dacca. The governmental duties following Martial Law had kept me away from the rest of my working life in contributing to the modernisation and strengthening of our neglected service, and was naturally averse to a premature termination of a career which I had followed with great dedication and some success.

President Yahya understood my reluctance to accept a political office but felt that the problems of East Pakistan were at that time extremely complicated. He required a person with previous experience in that region to be its Governor. He said that my liberal outlook and sympathetic attitude towards the people of Bengal was a priceless asset as it was the policy and purpose of his government to win over the people there an obtain their willing co-operation in the period ahead. I was persuaded to accept the proffered appointment as an act of public duty much against my private interest and inclination.

(Shortly after his arrival in East Pakistan, Governor Ahsan found the province facing what appeared to be "intractable" socio-economic, political and administrative problems summed up as follows:

i) Police: The law enforcing agencies, like the Police and the East Pakistan Rifles had suffered serious setbacks in the last days of the Ayub Government. Their image was "anti-people", coercive and corrupt, serving political tyrants thrown up by the Basic Democracy System. The police force lacked confidence and readily sided with the strongest of the two opposing sides without too much regard to the ends of justice.

ii) Civil Service: The civil service was thoroughly demoralised and reduced to masterly inactivity. The fear of their screening, trial and reorganisation gave them another cause of excuse for passive immobility, decision-making and shirking of responsibility they dreaded and avoided well beyond the limits of prudence.

iii) BDCs: The Basic Democrats had received the special attention of the agitating mobs in urban as well as in rural areas. Gory details of terror and torture against them were fresh in public minds. Their corruption and dishonesty was legion, and yet the Basic Democrat System was the only political institution available and operating in the local bodies, through which, vast sums of public money had to be channelled for the rural works programme.

iv) Students: The students always the most truculent po-

litical activists, were seething with restlessness. They had forged a strong and militant grouping. The strongest and most numerous comprised the Students League the avanguard of the Awami League political party; the two Student Unions aligned with the two wings of the National Awami Party; and the Islamic Chhatra Sangha of the Jamaat-i-Islami.

On the imposition of Martial Law, political activities were suspended, but political parties were not banned nor leaders arrested. This was extremely frustrating for the popular leaders who had opposed the last regime and had hopes of early assumption of power. The extremist political leaders on the other hand favoured the curb on open political activities as the genus of their particular species flowered best in a closed society. They preferred the continuation of Martial Law indefinitely so as to continue their struggle in a covert and clandestine manner. They felt the time to be on their side, and held high hopes of a leftist landslide. (Maulana Bhashani and his lieutenant Mashtur Rahman had been vocal in their opposition to elections. They knew they had not a chance to win against Mujib. Mashtur Rahman advocated elections on the ba-

lity, against West Pakistan and against the goodwill which was our endeavour to establish.

I pointed out these factors to President Yahya and recommended that the time had come when a gradual disengagement of military forces from civilian duties was in order. While cover of Martial Law would continue, military officers were to be more circumspect and military power was

Pakistan differed from the Maulana's opinion about me. Knowing the strict code of discipline under which the Jamaat operated, Professor Ghulam Azam's remark in opposition to his leader's view was generous of him and satisfying for me.

To Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who I met usually in the company of MLA zone B (Lt-Gen Sahajada Yakub Khan)

"During June 1970 or thereabout I heard whispers both in East and in West Pakistan that some military as well as civilian people felt that the Provincial Administration ought to become more authoritarian. After all, it was asserted, this was a Martial Law Government and it ought to exercise "discipline" and "firm control". In practice the different groups of interests who

1970 was much later than I had wished and advocated, that date too had to be postponed due to heavy floods in September. The President arrived in Dhaka and in his first meeting with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman agreed with him that postponement was undesirable. However, after his inspection of the flood affected areas, he changed his mind. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in

Islamabad followed by the under delay in the despatch of helicopters required urgently for rescue work was capitalised upon by Mujib, Yahya did go back to Dhaka to stay there for several days. By then, however, Mujib had been able to expose the shocking indifference of the Centre towards East Pakistan.

(As for deploying the army, commander, Eastern Command, Gen Yakub when requested by Governor Ahsan for help, regretted he had no troops to spare. His troops were all in their operational areas and could not be touched. "The cat would land square amongst the pigeons," he said as a result of any shifting of forces from their battle locations).

(The fullest advantage of the catastrophe was taken by the Awami League whose popularity increased by leaps and bounds. Leaders like Sabur Khan and Mohan Mian withdrew from the field and called it a day). The elections to the National and Provincial Assemblies gave Awami League a victory more decisive than Sheikh Mujibur Rahman himself had believed possible).

With the elections over, I telephoned the PSO to consider the advisability of inviting both Sheikh Mujibur Rahman

course, sir, kindly see the Assembly as soon as possible suggest 15th February 1971. You will see that I was not only a simple majority, but almost a two-thirds majority. I remarked, "with an absolute majority in the Assembly, the Awami League can bulldoze their constitution without bothering about West Pakistan's interests". Sheikh Mujib said "No no. I am a democrat and the majority leader of all Pakistan. I cannot ignore the interest of West Pakistan. I am not only responsible to the people of East and West Pakistan but also to world opinion. I shall do everything on democratic principles. To begin with, I hope you will arrive in Dhaka 3 or 4 days before the Assembly session. I will show you our draft Constitution. If you find objections, I will try to accommodate your wishes. As the leader of the majority party, I will prepare a draft for President's address to the Assembly. I will express my gratitude to you in the Assembly for restoring democracy. Then we shall go through all the processes of a democratic parliament. We will have the subjects committees, we will discuss the issues and find acceptable formulae inside and outside the Assembly."

"After further discourse on the methodology of Constitution-making, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman said 'Sir, my party intends to elect you as the next elected President of Pakistan. This is a great honour and we think you fully deserve this for restoring democracy in the country.' The President replied 'I am a simple soldier. I will go back to the barracks or go home. I will exercise my fundamental rights! Sheikh Mujib said 'No sir, we will not allow you to turn down this honour. When the nation demands your services, you cannot refuse.'

"After further discussion in a lighter vein, the President reminded Sheikh Mujibur Rahman of the importance of the Awami League working closely with the largest party of West Pakistan, the People's Party. Sheikh Mujib replied 'I will certainly seek the cooperation of the People's Party and also the other parties of West Pakistan. He went on to say 'I do not wish to impose any solution the problems of West Pakistan provinces. I realise they cannot have nor do they need the same extent of autonomy as East Pakistan, I am prepared to help, if required, but I will not interfere with any arrangements the West Pakistan leaders themselves wished to make.' Sheikh Mujibur Rahman again recalled the President to call the National Assembly on the 15th February as the people were getting impatient, there was a great deal to be done and time was marching on. The President promised to do so as early as practical. The President also mentioned to Sheikh Mujib that on his return he was visiting Larkana for a shoot and will meet Mr Bhutto there. He requested that the Governor should be called upon to seek counsel from the elected leaders on all important issues. The President decided that proposals for an interim arrangement should be submitted to the Central Government after consulting the Awami League. Mr Tajuddin Ahmad and Dr Kamal Hussain were appointed to liaise with the Governor.

"The same evening at the President's House some Army Officers made the suggestion that the President should not only be elected as President, but he should also continue to remain as the actual C-in-C or Supreme Commander of the Forces, not just as a figure head. President himself was silent, but I pointed out that in my opinion it was unthinkable for the elected representatives to accept such a proposition. It would be far better for the President to refuse being elected as the President and retire gracefully, honoured in history as one of the few dictators who had willingly handed over power, rather than ask for a position which would negate the acceptable norms of democracy.

"On the way to the Airport, I expressed my anxiety to the President on the delay in convening the National Assembly. To be sure, the LFO had not prescribed how early the National Assembly was to be summoned but it was already one month after the general elections, and the spirit of the LFO was towards dispatch rather than delay. The President said 'Sheikh Mujib wants the Assembly to convene on the 15 February and Mr Bhutto wants it in March. I will straddle these dates and summon the Assembly immediately after Eid.

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Men who mattered



Maulana Bhashani and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman



Muzaffar Ahmed of NAP



Comrade Mont Singh of CPB

Some people wanted the growing Bengali nationalism to be checked by a West Pakistani Jingoism. They regarded the people of East Pakistan as a vast colonial population waiting to be proselytised.

sis of class composition in place of adult franchise or on the basis of one man one vote). "Bengal has always been a difficult province to administer. Historically, it has passed through decades of anarchy. It has always been in the forefront of political struggle and advanced thinking. The geography and climate, the pressure of population and economic distress had all contributed to a growing sense of disharmony and discord. It was not just a dislike of East against West, the local against non-local, the Chittagonians against the Daccaites, the poor against the rich or the haves against the have-nots, but there appeared to be in Bengal at the time a kind of metaphysical rebellion against the total environment itself.

"Around November 1969, I warned the Government that the regime was exposed to many stresses and strains and was vulnerable to great risks. Until then, the Armed Force had acted with commendable restraint but there was no guarantee of this in the future. I said I could foresee some scenarios depicting many things going horribly wrong, causing conflict between the people and the Armed Forces.

"For these and other reasons, I urged that the general elections should be held as early as possible. In my previous appointment I had proposed March 1970 as a possible date. This was then thought to be too early and I had reminded my colleagues that the Indian Empire was partitioned in just six weeks.

"During the period between the 1st September, 1969 and the 31st December, 1969 there were two incidents which necessitated a call to the Army in aid of civil power." (In November 69, Bengali-non-Bengali riots broke out in Dhaka affecting the two non-Bengali localities, Mirpur and Mohammadpur most. The Army was called in for the first time since the imposition of Martial Law. There was widespread condemnation in the province against the use of troops, and resentment against the Army rose steeply. I was desperately anxious to minimise the risk of deaths due to Army firing which would immediately lead to the strongest public reaction against the mil-

itary, against West Pakistan and against the goodwill which was our endeavour to establish. I pointed out these factors to President Yahya and recommended that the time had come when a gradual disengagement of military forces from civilian duties was in order. While cover of Martial Law would continue, military officers were to be more circumspect and military power was Pakistan differed from the Maulana's opinion about me. Knowing the strict code of discipline under which the Jamaat operated, Professor Ghulam Azam's remark in opposition to his leader's view was generous of him and satisfying for me. To Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who I met usually in the company of MLA zone B (Lt-Gen Sahajada Yakub Khan)

After the crackdown ...



Mukti Bahini soldiers preparing for a counter-attack

Programme had a wide and sweeping appeal.

"During these months of campaigning when the East Pakistani leaders were seeking public approval of the party's programmes and personal popularity, I followed the path of neutrality to the best of my ability, and enjoined the government officers to follow my example in all their official dealings whatever their private inclinations. I had established working relations with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Maulana Bhashani, Professor Muzaffar Ahmed, Khawaja Khairuddin, Professor Ghulam Azam, Khan Sabur Khan, Mr Waheed-uz-Zaman, Mr Nurul Amin and a host of other political workers. Maulana Maudoodi once charged me for, pro-Mujib sympathies, but, Professor Ghulam Azam to whom I complained replied that the Jamaat in East

or Major General (Civil Affairs), Major Gen. Rao Farman Ali Khan or both, I counselled particular reference to the interests and aspirations of the people of West Pakistan and words of praise for the armed forces who were a sentinel against ultimate disorder or over aggression.

"I often asked the President to relieve me from governorship, as I was working alone in an atmosphere of growing Bengali nationalism and suffering in addition from ulcers. He declined to accept my resignation on a number of occasions and always said: 'We shall both go home at the same time.'

"Around March 1970 the Legal Framework Order was discussed by the President at a closed session with the two Government of East and West Pakistan before the document was taken to the Cabinet. The Draft had been prepared in Rawalpindi and I saw the document for the first time at the meeting. I suggested that the LFO should contain the minimum provisions necessary for

favoured a severe application of Martial Law did so for their own various purposes. Some of the industrialists wanted to use the Army to brutally suppress the labour. Some of the politicians wanted Army support for arrests of opposition workers and their trial by Martial Law Authorities. In other words, in order to gain some particular advantage for themselves, they wanted to expose the Army to a dangerous confrontation with the people. Some people wanted the growing Bengali nationalism to be checked by a West Pakistani jingoism. They regarded the people of East Pakistan as a vast colonial population waiting to be proselytised....

"I mentioned to the President and to the PSO that if such views of the militarists were to prevail, I was not equipped mentally or emotionally to carry on as the Governor. While I understood the wisdom of the adage that a 'coercion without virtue was disaster and virtue without co-

The image of law enforcing agencies had suffered serious setbacks during the last days of the Ayub regime. Their image was anti-people, coercive and corrupt. The civil service was thoroughly demoralised and reduced to masterly inactivity.

the meantime, having obtained the President's first reaction, publicly spoke against the need for postponement. At a subsequent meeting, the President informed him of his latest decision. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman remonstrated: "On the basis of your previous assurance I have opposed postponement in public. Now if you decide to postpone I shall be accused by the public for showing concern for their welfare. The people of East Pakistan live half-submerged in water. There can be no insurmountable difficulty to vote."

The widespread devastation caused by the cyclone had cre-

and Mr Z A Bhutto to Rawalpindi with a view to ascertaining together with them the desirability of forming an interim government or any other course of action.

"In early January 1971, the President visited East Pakistan. One day the PSO called at my office and asked to see the Six Points of the Awami League. While this document was being obtained I asked him 'the purpose of his request. He said 'The President is having a meeting with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his colleagues tomorrow when 6 Points will be discussed. You are also invited to attend'. I asked PSO if a searching analysis of the 6 Points had been made and whether its defects and deficiencies were noted, so that the President was able to ask pertinent questions and sought clarification of the most important issues. PSO and 'No such analysis has been made. This will be a preliminary briefing session. There will be further discussions. (Whether genuine or feigned the President and his PSO's ignorance of Six Points was at once shocking and comical. Several detailed studies of the Awami League manifesto and 6-Point agenda had been carried out at the HQ CLMA).

"Next day, a meeting was held in the President's House, Dhaka at which besides the President, the PSO and myself, the following were present: a) Sheikh Mujibur Rahman b) Mr Tajuddin Ahmad c) Mr Nazrul Islam d) Mr Kamaruz Zaman e) Mr Khundkar Mushtaq Ahmed

f) Captain Mansoor Ali. The Awami League leaders made a presentation of their 6 Points programme and answered the questions which the President raised. "Sheikh Mujibur Rahman asked the President Sir, you now know what the Six-Point programme is, please tell me what objections you have to this programme?" The President replied: 'Sheikh Sahib, I have nothing against the Six-Point programme, but you will have to carry the West Pakistan leaders with you.' "Sheikh Mujib replied: 'Of



The arduous trek to exile

ercion was weakness'. I must record with truthfulness that until alas in February 1971 such sentiments of mine were always endorsed by the PSO Lt-Gen. SOMM Peerzada and approved by the President. I supported them neither of guile nor guilt. From September 1, 1969 when I was appointed the Governor and March 1, 1971 when I was relieved I held these views consistently and advocated them on all appropriate occasions. I felt them to represent the quintessence of my religious belief in such matters as also the correct practical policy in the circumstances. "Although the date fixed for holding elections in October

ated doubts about elections being held as scheduled on December 7, 1970. Yahya, however, dispelled all doubts on that score by declaring categorically at his Press conference (November 29) that election shall be held exactly as scheduled.

However the visitation proved to be as great a man-made calamity as natural disaster. Gen Yahya had been on a state visit to China. On his way back, he made a short halt at Dhaka, had an aerial view of the cyclone ravaged areas and decided for himself that the actual damage done was less than it was being projected by Mujib and other political elements. His hasty return to