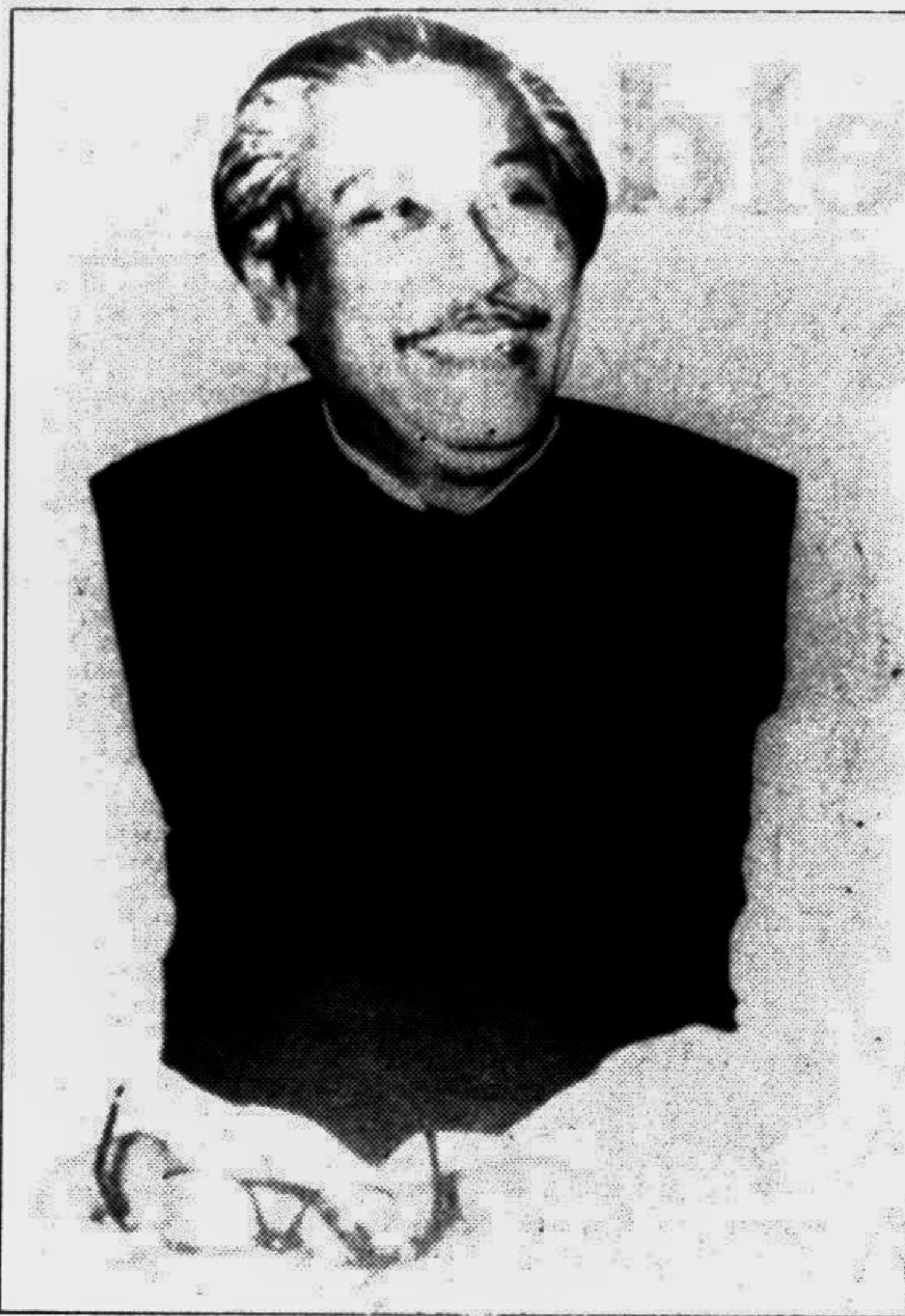


PM Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's First Official Visit to USSR

by Md Matiul Islam

Mr Kozyn's response to the Prime Minister's request for assistance was positive. His government had actively supported the liberation struggle and was now ready to provide whatever economic assistance they could to help the process of rehabilitation.



BANGABANDHU assumed the office of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh on 11 January, 1972 and planned a visit to USSR for early March. The Soviet Government's active support to the liberation struggle that prevented intervention by other big powers to delay or disrupt the process and her timely intervention in the Security Council that saw the successful conclusion of the liberation war prompted Bangabandhu to visit USSR to offer 'thanks' of a grateful nation to the Soviet Government who could also be counted upon to provide some economic assistance to help rebuilding of the war-ravaged economy. The Chittagong Port was clogged with sunken ships and implementation of a number of Soviet assisted projects including the Ashuganj Power Plant started during the Pakistan time under agreements with the Government of Pakistan had come to a standstill. These agreements had to be renegotiated and the project implementation reactivated.

The Prime Minister's entourage comprised the Foreign Minister, Mr Abdus Samad Azad, Deputy Chairman, Planning Commission, Dr Nurul Islam, the Foreign Secretary, the Finance Secretary, Cabinet Secretary, Chief of Protocol and other personal staff. A contingent of senior journalists also accompanied the Prime Minister.

The Soviet Government sent an Ilyushin 18 airliner, a four-engined turboprop passenger carrier, for the VIP flight to the Soviet Union and back. The VIP Cabin for the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister was at the rear of the plane where Dr Nurul Islam was also placed. The other members of the entourage were seated in the forward section of the aircraft which was large enough to give all of us enough room to stretch ourselves during the long and tiresome journey to Moscow and back. To avoid the Pakistani air-space, the VIP flight, which took off at around 6 pm was first routed to Bombay for a technical halt for refueling. A grand reception for the Prime Minister was arranged at the Bombay airport by the citizens of Bombay attended by the Governor of Maharashtra and the Sheriff of Bombay.

It was during the first leg of our journey to Bombay that I strayed into the VIP Cabin to spend some time with the Prime Minister whom I found in a very relaxed mood. He started reminiscing his fateful days in the Lyalpur Jail where he was lodged and tried for waging a war against an established Government and was sentenced to death. He even saw his own grave being dug inside the jail. He was totally in the dark about the liberation of Bangladesh, fall of Yahya Khan and the dramatic changes in the political scenario that had in the meantime taken place until he was brought by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to a rest house outside Rawalpindi. Bhutto came to see him and announced that he (Bhutto) was now the President and Chief Martial Law Administrator of Pakistan. Bangabandhu's spontaneous response was "Bhutto, I won the election, not you. Therefore, if anybody is to become the President and CMLA of Pakistan, it should be me." It was Bhutto who briefed him about the changing political scenario of the sub-continent and that Bangladesh was now a reality and that Bhutto had decided to release him to go back to Bangladesh and lead the nation.

We left Bombay around midnight for the second leg of our journey to Tbilisi, capital of Georgia, before proceeding to Moscow. It was a seven-hour flight mostly over Iran and Central Asia and all of us got comfortably settled for the long night.

As we disembarked, the bitter cold of USSR hit all of us instantly. Although it was early March, the winter in USSR was continuing unabated and most of us were not properly clothed to withstand the Russian winter. The Prime Minister was re-

ceived by the Governor of Georgia and other dignitaries and taken to the Airport Terminal Building which was an old massive structure, not at all like a modern airport terminal. We were all escorted to a hall where tables were laid with glittering crystals in preparation for our breakfast. Moments later, we were asked by a senior official of the host Government that, except for the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister, everyone should follow him. We dutifully followed the Russian official through the maze of corridors of the airport building.

We did not realize the big surprise in store for us until we were finally led into a big hall full of merchandise arranged and decorated like a big western-style departmental store. These merchandise which included shirts, under-garments, socks, shoes and boots, sweaters, suits, top-coat, fur caps, hand gloves and many other items were neatly placed in racks and shelves in two big-sized halls. The Russian official who led us into the hall finally said "Gentlemen, help yourselves."

We pounced upon the apparel and frantic search started to select the proper size, colour and design to fit and suit our individual taste. We picked up everything from shoes, socks, shirts, undergarments, overcoats to leather gloves, fur caps, pullovers, put them into shopping bags provided by the hosts to carry our acquisition to the plane where we got ourselves fully clothed to face the bitter Russian winter. At one point when I was trying a top-coat, the Foreign Secretary asked me whether the Russians would ask us to return these items at the end of the visit. My firm reply was "No way."

We took off for Moscow, after breakfast, on the last leg of our journey and reached there early afternoon. The Prime Minister was received by Mr Kozyn, the Soviet Prime Minister and his Council of Ministers and an impressive guard of honour by a contingent of Red Army was presented. The Prime Minister emerged from the plane and walked down the gangway fully attired in his newly acquired Russian outfit. The Bangladeshi National Anthem, Sonar Bangla, played by the Russian band was the best rendering of our national anthem I ever heard.

By the time we reached Kremlin where the Prime Minister and most of his entourage stayed, it was already late afternoon. The writer is a former Finance Secretary.

tion of work on them.

The Prime Minister had an exclusive, one to one, meeting with Mr Brezhnev fixed for 11 am on the third day of our visit. The same day, the Prime Minister was the guest of honour at a luncheon organized for him. The Prime Minister, however, did not emerge from his meeting with Brezhnev until after 2:30 pm and the luncheon was delayed. At an opportune moment, I asked the Prime Minister what did he discuss in his long three-and-a-half-hour meeting with Brezhnev. Bangabandhu's reply was that it was a very productive meeting. He did not elaborate nor did I probe further. I do not know whether there was any official record of the discussion between the two leaders at that critical juncture in the history of Bangladesh.

The Prime Minister and his entourage were taken to Leningrad for a short visit during which time we visited the art gallery "The Hermitage" where one could see one of the world's best collection of paintings. It was during a dinner at the City Council Hall that I was summoned by the Prime Minister. When I approached his table, he took me aside, gave an envelope and told me: "I am afraid, you have to forego your dinner. Here is a decoded important message from President Justice Chowdhury. Please go back to the hotel, prepare an appropriate reply and send it off by to-night. I read the message and was stunned.

Just before we left for Moscow, it was arranged that the high-denomination Pakistani currency notes in circulation in Bangladesh should be demonetized immediately and 15th of March, 1972 was the date fixed for issue of the demonetization order. It was feared that Pakistan, which was yet to reconcile to the loss of East Pakistan, might decide to demonetize Pakistani currency notes in circulation there and dump them in Bangladesh to destabilize our economy.

The President's message, which we received in Leningrad on the 9th or 10th of March, informed the Prime Minister that Pakistan had already demonetized her high-denomination currency notes and that the President had been advised by Mr Tajuddin Ahmed, the Finance Minister, to issue a proclamation demonetizing these currency notes in circulation there and dump them in Bangladesh to destabilize our economy.

The official level talks was scheduled for the next day between the Bangladesh Prime Minister and his Russian counterpart. From our side, the Foreign Minister, the Dy. Chairman, Planning Commission, Mr Shamsur Rahman, Bangladeshi Ambassador to USSR, the Foreign and Finance Secretary assisted the Prime Minister. Bangabandhu spoke for about three hours during which time he gave a detailed account of the atrocities committed by the Pakistani Army. The extensive damages done to the economy and physical infrastructure and the urgent need for assistance for relief and rehabilitation. The Prime Minister spoke in Bengali which was translated word for word into Russian by the interpreters provided by the host government. That took almost the whole of the first session of the talks and, therefore, Mr Kozyn's response to Bangabandhu's proposal was scheduled for the next day. That also gave time to the Russians to make up their mind as to what assistance they could provide to Bangladesh.

Mr Kozyn's response to the Prime Minister's request for assistance was positive. His government had actively supported the liberation struggle and was now ready to provide whatever economic assistance they could to help the process of rehabilitation. But then he explained the limitation of the Soviet Union to provide massive economic assistance as requested by the Bangladesh Prime Minister. The Soviet Union also had their share of economic problems. However, he briefly outlined the assistance that his Government had decided to extend on an immediate basis which included clearing of the Chittagong Port, providing locomotives for the Bangladesh Railway, small quantity of wheat, resumption of the ongoing assistance to the Russian assisted projects like the Power Plant, GEM plant etc and a few other items. Dr Nurul Islam and myself renegotiated the economic assistance package for the ongoing projects with the concerned Ministry.

Having been allowed to enter the premises of Bangabandhu's house by the officer in charge of the guard, I crossed the main gate and found a very familiar red Prince car parked on the driveway. It took some time to realize that this very familiar car on which I had taken so many rides back in Pakistan belonged to colonel Jamil. I was

overtook the personal bondage.

As he approached Sobhan Bagh Mosque he was halted and asked to identify by soldiers which he did and insisted on them to clear his path and allow him to perform his duty. He was told to go back which he refused. Deserted by his driver he stood alone to face the death. After heated exchange of words he was shot dead by the soldiers. He made the supreme sacrifice beyond the call of his duty when many other close associates of Bangabandhu, father of the nation, did not respond at the peril of their life. It was a soldier, Jamil, who did not budge from discharging his duty and displayed loyalty to his command.

As I was standing near the car, gazing at Jamil's dead body, looking at his ever smiling face, my memory flashed back to those events which we shared and the dramatic event through which I first met him and his very refined family in Lahore, Pakistan, where we

met. When we reached Major Latif's place unannounced, it was lunch time. There were

The Day the Children Learnt of the Assassination of Their Father

by MM Rezaul Karim

One expression of Rehana still rings in our ears as if we heard it again and again. Her last words were "Then even Russel is no more?" (রাহেনা কি মানেন কোর?).

Frankfurt from where we went to Bonn to stay briefly with Ambassador H R Chowdhury, the present Speaker, before taking the earliest flight to London en route to Dhaka.

One of the most memorable events I witnessed in life was that day when Sheikh Hasina and her younger teenage sister Rehana arrived Bonn from Brussels. The late Ambassador Samail Huq decided to send them to Bonn in the care of Ambassador H R Chowdhury, who readily accepted them without hesitation. Then came the most difficult and almost impossible task of breaking the terrible news to the two sisters. They appeared to have received some vague indication of a fallen catastrophe the exact nature of which was still unknown to them. The continuing sounding of tape, reciting the Holy Quran, at the residence compounded their fear enormously. Begum H R Chowdhury proved her unique skill to console them after breaking the news gradually but cautiously. Sheikh Hasina being more mature was somewhat composed at least outwardly. We had no words to console them and remained almost speechless.

One expression of Rehana still rings in our ears as if we heard it again and again. Her last words were "Then even Russel is no more?" (রাহেনা কি মানেন কোর?). The heart-rending muffled cry of a sister can never be erased from the memory of those who had the unique opportunity of witnessing this most pathetic episode.

Gruesome: Eighteen Corpses at Three Houses

A Recollection by Major Alauddin Ahmed

Major Alauddin Ahmed PSC was working as the Station Staff Officer at the Dhaka Cantonment headquarters in 1975. One of those repatriated in 1974, Ahmed was once arrested on charge of anti-state activities but was soon exonerated following an order by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The same tale was repeated during Ziaur Rahman's regime. He was accused of involvement in a military uprising and arrested. But charges against him were dropped and Major Alauddin Ahmed was a free man again. However, he lost his job, being asked to quit the service in 1981. Although he was appointed as the head of the Village Defence Party during Ershad's rule, he was out of job again in 1985. It was Major Ahmed who had collected the corpses of those killed on the fateful night of August 15, 1975 and buried them under Lt Col M A Hamid's instruction. Following are the gory, ghostly recollections of that unforgettable experience.

AUGUST 15 morning, I was busy in my habit of circling the radio knob when the news torpedoed my ears. Bangabandhu killed. Samail Huq Dalim, one of the leaders of the killing was addressing over the electronic media.

I rang up Station Commander Lt Col Hamid immediately and broke the news. "Sir listen to the radio" He asked me to be at the office quickly.

It was seven in the morning. On reaching the office, I found officers and soldiers engaged in tense conversation in small pockets at the premises.

I came to know that some senior officers had gone to Bangabandhu's residence at Road number 32 in Dhanmondi. I myself saw a few jeeps racing out of the cantonment, one of them being that of the Chief of Army Staff and the other, his deputy's.

It should be mentioned here that an Indian helicopter crashed in the Bangladesh territory the previous day, August 14 and I was assigned to collect the charred bodies of the crash victims and preserve them at the Combined Military Hospital (CMH). That night I went home and left home quickly.

I was in the office since evening. At around two at night Col Hamid rang up. He asked me to be at Road number 32 by three with two trucks. Some body gave me a chit containing the hand-written instruction too. We did not have any trucks then. So I managed two trucks from Supply and headed off for the slain President's residence. I had some 15-20 soldiers with me.

Col Hamid was there before me. I found Captain Bazlul Huda too. I had probably seen him before. May be, I had not.

But he certainly did not know me then. And that was probably the reason he obstructed me at first but let me in once Col Hamid moved forward to introduce me.

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At around 12:30 my batman told me that the 2 Field Artillery which was scheduled to have its nocturnal exercise that night had not returned to the regiment. Unusual I thought but since it was none of my business, I did not bother myself too much about it.

Returning to the muttons, I hung around my office on August 15 until two in the afternoon. Col Hamid who was mostly out of the office that day, later called me at my place in the afternoon and asked me to be close to the telephone set. I thought it would be better if I stayed at the office instead of

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