

To daddy, with love

DRASS, India, July 4: "To soldiers in Kashmir," was the only address on the envelope handed to Sergeant Mohan Dass, who had not received a letter from his own family in more than a month, reports AFP.

Grateful for any outside contact, Dass, just one of 60,000 Indian troops fighting an Islamic guerrilla incursion in Kashmir, accepted the letter written by a 10-year old in Calcutta, 1,600 kilometers (1,100 miles) away.

"I want to fight but my father does not. Can you let me know how to reach the battle from Calcutta?"

Dass, who has a young son of his own, seemed satisfied and revealed the letter before gathering his rifle and leaving the postal bunker in Drass -- command centre for a sector that has seen some of the bitterest combat in the two months since the Kashmir conflict broke out.

In the barren and inhospitable landscape of the Himalayan foothills, letters from home provide a crucial emotional lifeline for troops exhausted by high-altitude warfare.

As the air strikes, artillery duels and hand-to-hand fighting continue, one of the busiest men here is Y. Chennappa in the Drass Brigade Headquarters.

Chennappa's job is to sort the mail that arrives at the battlefront and somehow find a way of getting each letter to its intended recipient.

As well as incoming mail, Chennappa and his fellow postmen must also deal with the soldiers' letters to their families.

"We handle 80,000 letters every month in this post office alone," Chennappa said of the

tiny bunker where military postmen in battle fatigues crouched over bundles of mail that had just been brought in.

"The problem is not the number of letters, but the logistical problems of getting them delivered."

The letter's route from writer to reader is a long and tortuous one.

A letter posted in the southern state of Tamil Nadu would first be taken by train to New Delhi, before being flown to the Kashmiri summer capital Srinagar.

It is then up to the military's Motor Despatch Service to ferry the message to the army post offices in the combat zone, which is where the difficult part begins.

"It's a bit like piecing together a jigsaw puzzle," said Chennappa.

"The soldiers are all on different ridges and obviously these peaks do not have addresses."

"First we sort the letters and then we try and sort out where the men are. The mail is then delivered by helicopters on mountain tops, or through mules or given to troops moving in the general direction."

Brigadier Amar Aul, the commander of Drass sector, said delivery may take days or even weeks, but one way or another it would be made.

"We have mules going up. We have choppers going up and then we have special parties carrying the mail to the men," said Aul.

"There is always a delay but letters are never lost," he said.

You see the messages of love or sorrow from home are more important to these men than their own well-being."



Different women groups held a rally at the Osmany Uddayan yesterday demanding shifting of the proposed NAM conference centre at the park to save its trees. —Star photo



Jatiyatabadi Jubo Dal procession in the city protesting the 'indecent remarks' made by the ruling party MPs against Leader of the Opposition and BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleida Zia, Deputy Leader of the Opposition in Parliament Prof A Q M Badruddoza Chowdhury and Tareq Rahman in the city yesterday. —Star photo

GCC urges Israeli govt to resume peace talks

KUWAIT CITY, July 4: The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) foreign ministers on Saturday called on Israel's new government to resume stalled peace talks with Arabs on all tracks, reports Xinhua.

The final communiqué issued after a brief closed-door meeting of the foreign ministers in the western Saudi city of Jeddah said that Israel must return the Arab lands in line with related United Nations resolutions, the Kuwait News Agency reported.

The statement said Jerusalem must also be the capital of an independent Palestinian state.

The GCC top diplomats condemned the recent Israeli air raids against Lebanon.

Israel, on June 24 and 25, launched intensive air strikes

against Lebanese civilian targets, killing eight people and wounding more than 60 others.

The statement urged the international community to pressure Israel into respecting the 1996 April understanding and put an end to Israeli aggression.

The 1996 understanding bans Israel and the anti-Israeli resistance forces from launching attacks against or from civilian targets.

The GCC foreign ministers called on Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak to resume "serious negotiations" with the Arabs and honour the commitments of the former governments.

The GCC, a regional political and economic alliance established in 1981, comprises Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Kosovo war crimes team finds massacred children

LONDON, July 4: British war crimes investigators have unearthed the bodies of children as young as four apparently shot by Serbian forces in Kosovo, the Foreign Office said Saturday, reports AFP.

It said 12 bodies had been exhumed in the southwest village of Bela Crkva, and provided apparent confirmation of specific war crimes allegations against Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic.

This certainly does strengthen the case against him, said Britain's war crimes coordinator for Kosovo, David Gowen.

He said the discovery was the first time the British team had discovered victims below the age of ten.

"It's repugnant. It's quite clear some of them were shot at

close range in the back of the head," he added.

The 16-strong team found the corpses of two men, three women and four girls aged six, nine, ten and 12, and three boys aged four, six and seven.

The discovery appears to confirm witness accounts that on March 25 -- the day NATO's bombing campaign began -- a Serb patrol stopped a group of 13 men, women and children in the village, marched them into nearby countryside and opened fire.

Claims by survivors have already been judged strong enough to be included in the indictment issued by UN war crimes prosecutor Louise Arbour against Milosevic and four of his senior subordinates.

Foreign Secretary Robin Cook said: "This horror touches a new low, even by the dreadful standards set by the Serb forces in Kosovo."

"The people who did this are not human. These children cannot conceivably have been a danger to anyone, but the Serb forces clearly saw every Albanian of whatever age as an enemy."

The bodies had been reburied by villagers and were exhumed by the British team, led by a senior officer of the anti-terrorist wing of London's Metropolitan Police.

The group also includes a pathologist and forensic anthropologist.

The scene of the latest find, Bela Crkva, is also reportedly the site of a massacre of 65 men who were shot in a stream, according to local witnesses.

Earlier in their investigations, the team uncovered 45 bodies of people shot and then burned in the village of Velika Krusa.

Malaysian youths snort cow dung to get high

KUALA LUMPUR, July 4: Some young Malaysians are sniffing cow dung to get high, a lawmaker was quoted as saying today, reports AFP.

"They look for fresh cow dung and, on locating it, overturn a large tin can over it, pierce a hole at the top and sniff through it," Mat Isa Ismail, a lawmaker from the northern state of Perak, was quoted as saying by the Sunday Star newspaper.

Mat Isa suggested religious education be effectively disseminated to check the trend among youths.

Drug addiction in Malaysia has been listed as the country's number one enemy over the past two decades.

DPRK confirms preparations for another missile test

TOKYO, July 4: A North Korean official confirmed his country has finished preparations to test launch another missile, news reports quoted former UN Under Secretary Yasushi Akashi as saying, reports AP.

Akashi was speaking Saturday at a press conference in Beijing on his way back to Japan from a five-day private visit to North Korea, state-run Nikkei television news said.

The report quoted Akashi as saying that Song Il Ho, the head of North Korea's Foreign Ministry section for Japan affairs, told him that North Korea is "ready" to fire a missile.

He said the official did not elaborate or specify if or when the missile would be fired.

Japan, South Korea and the United States are particularly concerned about North Korea's missile development programme as North Korea appears

to be making preparations to follow up the test of a long-range ballistic missile last August by launching an even longer-range one this year.

North Korea launched a three-stage rocket that flew over Japan and landed in the Pacific Ocean on August 31 last year.

Kyodo News Agency quoted Akashi as saying he told several North Korean government officials that members of UN organisations operating in North Korea are concerned about the harm the missile issue could have on international aid for the country.

The North Korean officials, including Song, replied that because North Korea is "besieged" by various threats from other countries, there is no reason for North Korea to be the object of protests for taking "a counter-measure," Kyodo quoted Akashi as saying.

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another 20 per cent would be paid within 90 days. The 124 million dollar price tag includes basic aircraft price of 11 million dollars a piece, 27 million for equipment and armaments and nine million for training, transportation and services, the BAF chief mentioned.

The first four MIGs are expected to arrive in Dhaka by December this year and the other four by February next year.

Ten pilots and 70 technicians will leave for Russia around September for a training course and return in time to 'induct the latest hardware in the skies of Bangladesh', he said.

The Air Chief thinks that the MIG-29s are the best purchase for a country seeking latest technology and that too at a bargain. It is a government to government deal. It does not involve agents, cuts or commissions. The office of the Director General Defence Purchases (DGDP) which customarily buys defence materials was bypassed.

Meanwhile, the US State Department has expressed concern over Bangladesh acquiring this state of the art technology.

The BAF chief said it is a fair deal and categorically denied any malpractice. "I am on behalf of the whole committee ready to face any questions regarding malpractice in this particular deal."

He said BAF will not be dependent on India or any other country for spares, except the original manufacturers. The manufacturers of MIG-29s have given a certificate stating that no component of the aircraft is manufactured anywhere under licence.

Bangladesh currently has a fully trained air force outfit to fly five squadrons, each having a standard 16 jets. It has three operational squadrons of fighter jets. The fleet comprises of Chinese A-5 III ground attack aircraft, F-7 MB attack and defence role fighters and Czech manufactured L-39 jets. It has some obsolete and useless MIG-21s procured years back. It also possesses two dozen helicopters, US made Bell and Russian Mil-17, Ahmed said.

The Chief of Air Staff believes that transparency and accountability should be maintained in matters of defence purchase to keep the people adequately informed since it involves huge cost to the national exchequer. He said that the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Defence had asked for the aircraft purchase report. The Committee is due to meet tomorrow to study the report.

The MIG purchase which generated a lot of public hype has taken more than five years with the process beginning in 1994. The BAF requires at least another 24 aircraft.

Ahmed said, "There is no doubt that Air Force fighters and equipment are very expensive. It definitely involves a high cost to our exchequer. But as an independent and sovereign nation, we have to pay the price to keep our heads high and preserve our sovereignty with dignity. Even Myanmar air force now has twice the strength of BAF."

"Small nations never think of offensive strategy, they plan for their defence only. If we are given a blow, we should at least be able to strike back."

"We are entering a new millennium. We need to adopt and induct the latest technology."

Details of the conversation with Air Vice Marshal Jamal Uddin Ahmed:

On MIG-29

What we are purchasing is MIG-29 B aircraft. This is a fourth generation fighter and is a multi-role jet. It can be used for attack and dedicated defence. The MIG-29 features low speed handling that gives it the capability as a ground attack fighter-bomber. It is extremely manoeuvrable and can compete

with any fighter in service today.

When his attention was drawn to a US State Department statement expressing concern over the state of the art technology acquired by Bangladesh, he declined to make any comment but said, "We have not bought any obsolete equipment, but absolutely quality ones."

On Russian Make

The eight MIGs which will comprise half a squadron have been purchased under a state to state deal. No third party is involved and no commission is being paid in the deal. The aircraft are being purchased on a cash deal basis. All components of the jets are being fully manufactured in Russia and the package includes supply of all spares for one and a half years after the purchase.

The Air Chief showed a 'Certificate of Origin' which stated that under the Contract, Aircraft and Equipment is manufactured in Russia and all the components are produced by the original Russian manufacturers ('Military-Industrial Group MAPO'). The certificate also specifically states that the 'above mentioned equipment is not manufactured anywhere under licence.'

He said the BAF will not be dependent on India. Not a single component is made in India (which assembles some MIG versions) and the question of obtaining any component for the aircraft from India or anywhere else does not arise since it is not produced anywhere. The manufacturers themselves have given an undertaking to this effect through a written 'Certificate of Origin.'

Asked if such high speed jets operating at 'over Mach 2 speed' are suited for Bangladesh whose 'depth' is comparatively less, the Air Chief said the MIG-29 Bs had the latest avionics and gunnery equipment. The higher speed is actually advantageous both for the purpose of engagement and disengagement. Besides, he pointed out, the Bangladesh pilots are long used to flying supersonic fighters including MIG 21s in the past and Chinese F-7 MG presently. Several countries like Kuwait, Singapore and Israel which have comparatively small airspace use supersonic jet fighters.

Asked about similarity of our aircraft hardware with those of India, he replied, "Our options are limited" and pointed out that India had many similar versions of aircraft like Bangladesh's AN-26, Mi-8 helicopters and MIG-21. The BAF had those since 1972. So, why this criticism now?"

Why Russian Equipment?

Bangladesh since its independence had been familiar with Russian aircraft hardware. Our air force hardware was initially all Russian and later Chinese. We are mainly continuing with Russian and Chinese aircraft.

He also denied reports in a section of the press that Russian technology is obsolete and better quality aircraft could be procured from Britain, France and the US with a similar price tag. An F-16 aircraft has a price range of 30 to 40 million dollars while Mirage 2000 costs over 40 million, he said.

In this regard, the Air Chief pointed out that the initial cost is not the only criterion to select an aircraft. "The initial cost combined with the operational and maintenance cost as well as other related aspects are taken into consideration by experts before selecting an aircraft." It is incorrect to say that purchase of brand new western jets would cost less than that of the MIG purchase. These have been obtained at a much favourable price and on financially convenient terms. He pointed out that normally both China and Russia offer soft terms and allow deferred payment for purchase of air force hardware, which is another reason for buying the fighters from them.

The MIG deal Committee

The committee to negotiate the MIG purchase comprised members from several ministries and organisations and included Manik Lal Samadhar, additional finance secretary; Abul Bashar Bhuiyan, additional secretary, Law Justice and Parliamentary Affairs; Iftekharul Karim, Director General, Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Syed Sajjadul Karim, Controller General of Defence Finance; Ziaul Hasan Siddique Executive Director, Bangladesh Bank; Mohammad Hussain Seraniat, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Defence; Air Commodore Rashid Ahmed, Asst Chief of Air Staff (Operations and Training); Air Commodore Rezaul Karim Talukder, Asst Chief of Air Staff (Maintenance). It was headed by Chief of Air Staff Air Vice Marshal Jamal Uddin Ahmed.

"I am on behalf of the whole committee ready to face any questions regarding malpractice in this particular deal. But no one should accuse in vague terms. This is for the first time that a committee involving high government officials from different ministries have been included in the defence procurement process," the Air Chief said.

The MIG Purchase

Ahmed said the price per aircraft was 11 million US dollars and the total package including training and spare parts would cost Bangladesh 124 million dollars.

He said the MIGs have been purchased at less than half the price quoted when the procurement tender was called. In the tender floated by the DGDP (Director General Defence Purchase), the agents quoted 289 million dollars for the package and for the basic aircraft 22 million. Now it has come to 11 million apiece for the basic and 124 million for the package including training.

He mentioned that following the signing of a military technical cooperation agreement with Russia on February 9 this year, negotiations were conducted on a government to government basis. A Russian delegation that came to Dhaka in April offered a package price of 157 million dollars. The basic aircraft price it asked was 13.5 million dollars. Bangladesh side did not agree to the offer and wanted the delegation to come with its 'best price'. The Russian delegation then bargained on the price, saying that it would vary according to the mode of payment. They said the more the cash advance payment was made, the lesser would be the price. On June 2, the Defence Adviser in Moscow informed that the Russians would agree to 129.5 million dollars. For the second time a Russian delegation arrived in Dhaka and ultimately the deal was made at 124 million dollars.

On financial allegations

The Air Chief refuted allegations of any financial wrong doing. He said it is the best deal we have made. It was a government to government deal. A government committee was set up that included high officials from a number of ministries and departments which negotiated the deal and the question of procurement at higher cost or any financial gain by any quarters "does not arise". About the reports on deals with Mig Mapo and Mig Mig, he said, the Russian government had earlier through an order assigned Mig Mapo as the sole representative for marketing Mig overseas after the merger of Mig Mapo and Mig Mig, creating one company. Moreover, since the purchase has been made directly by the government even eliminating the DGDP, the question of paying any commission to any agent, person or agency does not arise. There is no scope for commission agents. He stated that the Russian government had duly authorised the Mig Mapo to carry out the deal.

He said Malaysia purchased 18 MIG-29s each costing 22

Noor Uddin Khan calls on UNESCO to implement WSC outcome

Lt Gen (ret'd) Noor Uddin Khan, Minister for Science and Technology, has asked UNESCO to materialise the outcome of the World Science Conference (WSC) and take up follow-up actions in this regard, reports BSS.

In an interview with UNESCO Radio in Budapest following the conclusion of the World Science Conference on July 1, he said the developing countries had placed high hopes on the outcome of the just concluded WSC.

The minister said he was disappointed to see most of the programmes taken up in the form of Vienna Programme of Action (VPA) during the first WSC 20 years back remained unrealised due to paucity of funds and lack of adequate level of intervention.

"This time UNESCO should be up and doing to materialise the outcome of WSC and follow-up actions must be undertaken," he told UNESCO Radio Correspondent Thomas Bouyer in the Hungarian Capital.

Noor Uddin Khan led the Bangladesh delegation to the conference where they made valuable contribution to science education and other forums, an official handout said here yesterday.

Replying to a question on priorities for his country, Khan said Bangladesh had now realisable potential on oceanography, software export and job creation and also biotechnology and its use to produce more food for a large population.

3 extortionists held at Nawabpur

By Staff Correspondent

Three extortionists were arrested after a gong stabbed a businessman and ransacked his shop at Nawabpur Road under Sutrapur thana in the city yesterday afternoon.

The arrested were identified by police as Tauhid, Rafiq and Salaudhin.

Police identified the businessman as Yusuf, owner of a hardware shop at Nawabpur Road.

According to police a gang of extortionists came to shop at 50 Nawabpur Road and demanded toll from the businessman, when he refused to pay, they ransacked his shop and attacked him with a chapatti.

Other people from nearby shops came out to help him and managed to catch three of the extortionists.

The injured businessman was rushed to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) with injuries.

The duty officer of Sutrapur thana when contacted said none had lodged a complaint, regarding the incident.

CMP rounds up 63 on various charges

CHITTAGONG, July 4: Chittagong Metropolitan Police (CMP) arrested 63 persons on various charges from different areas of the city today, a CMP press release said, reports BSS.

Detectives of CMP rounded up eight prostitutes and three pimps from a residential hotel at KC Dey Road, Panchlaish and Doublenmooring areas here.

Freedom fighter's appeal

A freedom fighter, known for killing former governor Abdul Monem Khan during the Liberation War in 1971, has appealed to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for saving him and his neighbours from the "evil designs" of a ward commissioner in the city, reports UNB.

Mozammel Haq, Bir Protik and his wife Noorjahan, along with their daughter Mousumi, a student of Class IV, came to Jatiya Press Club yesterday to make the appeal through a press conference.

The freedom fighter said their lives were now at stake as commissioner of ward number 18 Wakhuddin Baul and his gang continued threatening to grab RAJUK plots in Gulshan and the adjoining areas.

"These racketeers are trying to grab some 150 plots in Baridhara J-Block, Joara Sahara and Nikunja, and already obtained 50 to 60 such plots," he said adding that the commissioner, known as the second MP, also continued terrorism in the areas.

Haq said he, his in-laws' family and many others in the J-Block, whose several big houses of lands were acquired in 1961-62, were not provided with compensation or plots. Instead, the legal landowners are being "inhumanly evicted" in this rainy season.

He urged the government not to evict the poor people from the areas in this rainy season and arrange compensation or plots for those whose lands were acquired.

Some other people of the area, who were also present at the press conference, alleged that "hoodlums of the local MP are grabbing their lands."

One of them, cobbler Soman Rishi of Baraid, was crying and tried to touch the legs of journalists urging them to help rescue his lands and home grabbed by what he said the brother-in-law of local MP Rahmatullah immediately after the June 12, 1996 general election.

UNESCO clubs celebrate US Independence Day

Speakers at a discussion in the city yesterday called upon US government to play a more positive role in upholding world peace, reports UNB.

The National Association of UNESCO Clubs in Bangladesh organised the meeting to mark the Independence Day of USA.

The discussants termed US "the best friend of Bangladesh" and appreciated its cooperation in Bangladesh's economic uplift.

"We hope that USA would play a more dynamic role in future in promoting culture and in the trade sector of Bangladesh," the meeting unanimously said.

The speakers commended the role of US government in providing relief and financial assistance during the devastating floods in 1997.

M Enayetur Rahman, Prof M Shamsul Huq, Advocate Muhammad Elyus, Muhammad Sharif and Ferdosh Begum were the speakers while Secretary General of the UNESCO Clubs Mahbubuddin Chowdhury was in the chair.

Badruddoza's remarks condemned

RAJSHAHI, July 4: Mukti-joddha Sanghati Parishad (MSP), Rajshahi city unit, brought out a procession here this afternoon in protest against the alleged remarks of BNP leader Dr Badruddoza Chowdhury in the Jatiya Sangsad against Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (SM), reports BSS.

The processionists paraded different city streets carrying banners. They raised slogans against the alleged remarks of Dr B Chowdhury.

Later a wayside meeting was held at Shahebazar zero point with Iqbal Ahmed, President, Mukti-joddha Sanghati Parishad, Rajshahi city unit, in the chair.

Attur Rahman Mona, coordinator, Rajshahi divisional Mukti-joddha Sanghati Parishad, Jahangir Alam, member secretary, Mukti-joddha Sanghati Parishad, Abdus Sattar Babla, general secretary and Enamul Haque, organising secretary of Mukti-joddha Sanghati Parishad, Mahbubul Alam Bulbul, Nabikul Hasan Nabab, Rakibul Hasan and Badruzzaman among others spoke at the meeting.

The speakers strongly condemned the remarks of Dr Chowdhury at Jatiya Sangsad and demanded his trial.



Protestant demonstrators show hands in favour of Sunday's Orange Order March on the central square of Portadown Saturday. British troops have banned the march and built an "obstacle belt" to keep the Orange men from taking their traditional route down the Catholic Garvaghy Road. —AFPphoto