

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, 1,800 kilometers (1,100 miles) away.

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

Dass, who has a young son of his own, seemed satisfied and resealed 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. Chenappa in the Drass Brigade Headquarters.

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

As well as incoming mail, Chenappa 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," Chenappa 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 missive 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 Chenappa.

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

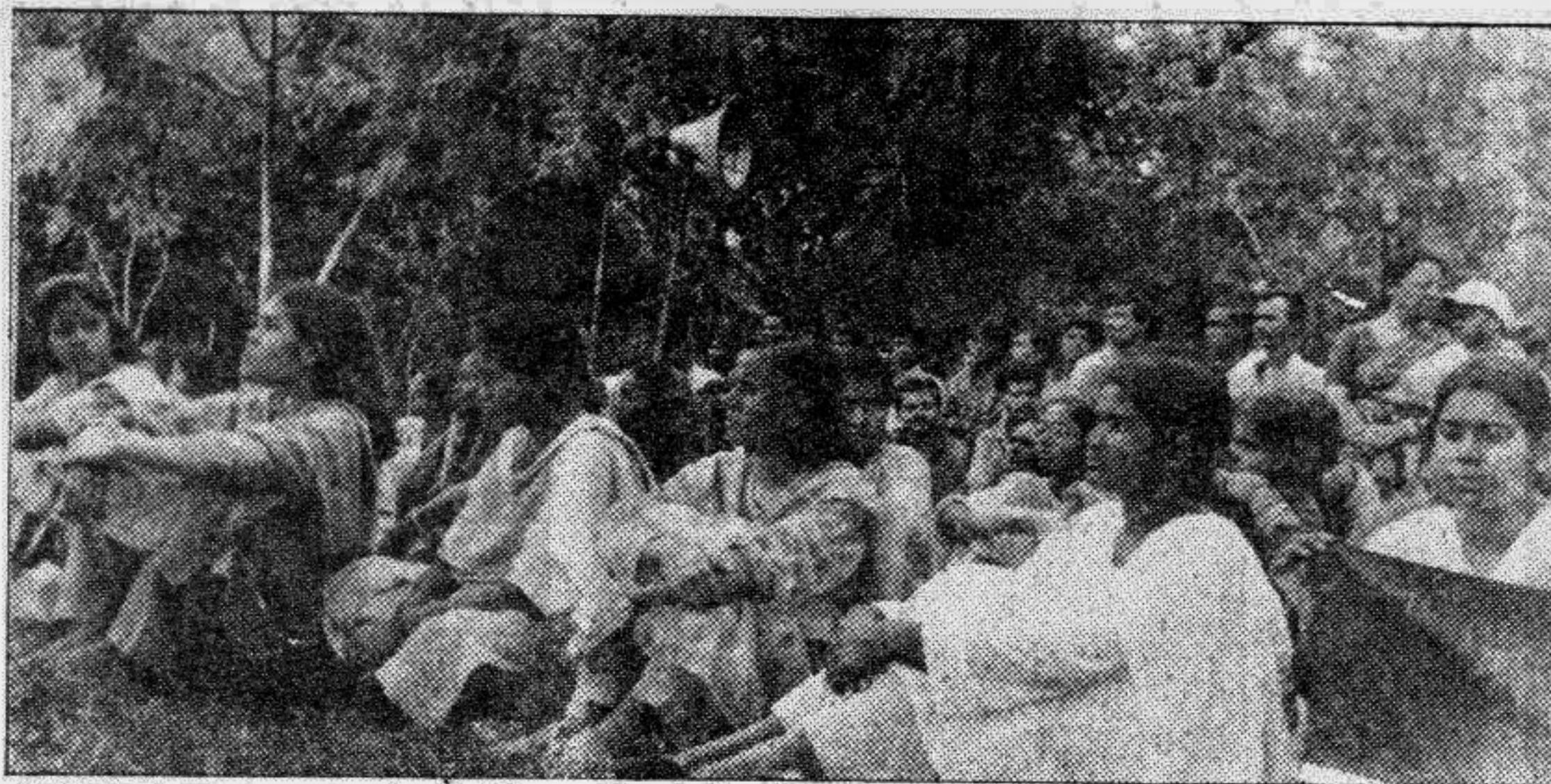
"First we sort the letters and then we try and sort out where the men are. The mail is then delivered by helicopters on mountain tops, or through mules or given to troops moving in the general direction."

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



Jatiyatobadi 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 Khaleda 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 Lebanon's 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 Israel aggression.

The 1996 understanding bans Israel and the anti-Israel Lebanese 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 government.

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 Serb 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, 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 all of us. 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 buried in the village of Velika Krusa.

DRPK 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 Yashushi Akashi as saying, reports AFP.

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 NHK 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 "countermeasure," Kyodo quoted Akashi as saying.

No dependence on India for spares

From Page 1

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 Defense Purchases (DGDP) which customarily buys defence materials was by-passed.

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 on behalf of the whole committee is 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.

He said 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-29s 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, Bangladeshi 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.

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 the BAF."

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.

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

Noor Uddin Khan calls on UNESCO to implement WSC outcome

Lt Gen (retd) 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 said UNESCO Radio Correspondent Thomas Bouyer to 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.

Replies 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.

Later the same team from Bangladesh also went to China.

The Air Chief said: "After detailed study, we prepared our requirements in terms of specifications in Bangladesh's security requirements. We submitted our report in July 1996 to the Armed Forces Division (AFD). In October 1996, we were asked in a meeting for a few types of aircraft against two roles which is to be obtained by tender through DGDP. In May 97, two months after tender, evaluation report was completed. A total of 16 types of aircraft participated in the budgetary tender. Tenders were received for several types of Chinese and Russian, two types of British aircraft (Hawk 100 and Hawk 200). One

Si Mike Group offered some old versions of F-16 which were induced in the Netherlands Air Force in 1980 and others in 1993. Also other was made about old versions of French Mirage 3 and 5. Finally government gave approval to purchase two squadrons of aircraft. These are 16 Russian F-7 MGs and another 16 MiG-29s. It should be mentioned that policy approval was given in January 97 but by type of aircraft approval was given in October 97. However eight MGs and eight F-7 MGs were approved for procurement."

Second Hand Offer

In 1994, an offer for second hand used Russian MiG 29 manufactured in mid eighties and used by the Russian air force was made at around eight million dollars apiece. But it was not accepted because of the fact the aircraft had less flying life and were second hand.

Terms of the Financial Deal

According to the terms of the MiG-29 B purchase, Ahmed said, the payment period is spread over nine years. Thirty per cent of the cost is being paid in advance and the remaining 70 per cent would be paid in seven financial years beginning from fiscal 2001. Of the 30 per cent, 10 per cent was 'transferred' on June 30 and another 20 per cent will be paid within 90 days from the date of the first payment.

Aircraft Delivery

According to the laid down delivery schedule, four aircraft are due for delivery in the sixth month after receipt of advance payment. That means four would arrive in December, two more in January and the last two in February, 2000. Ten Pilots and 70 technicians will leave for Russia around September for a 3-month training programme which will include academic training for all, simulator and flying training for the pilots and practical and on-the-job training for technicians. Those pilots who have a flying record of 1000 hours including 300 hours of supersonic flying would be selected.

Aircraft Life of MiG

The operational life of the MiG-29 Bs is 2,500 flight hours or 20 years from the date of manufacture.

Spares parts Supply

Spare parts would be supplied as per agreement for one and a half years. Asked from where the spares would be purchased after that, Ahmed replied that from the manufacturers as they have already given a certificate that they are the only manufacturers of all equipment of MiG-29 B.

When reminded that in the past it was difficult to obtain spares from Moscow, he said, "That is a thing of the past. They are cash hungry now. All spares now will be gladly supplied on payment."

On Our Air Force

We can proudly claim that our air force pilots are the best by international standard. BAF pilots are evaluated frequently by the British Royal Air Force Central Flying School. We have 'sufficient' training facilities at Jessore. We also have some foreigners training at our Academy. Pilots from Singapore Air Force also use our air space for training.

Radar coverage is not adequate although we can cover the vital areas of our country. We need more radars.

Do we need a modern Air Force?

There is no doubt that Air Force fighters and equipment are very expensive. It definitely entails 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 has now twice the strength of the Bangladesh Air Force.

"Small nations never think of offensive strategy, they think of defensive actions. If we are given a blow we should be able to return it."