

Fall of 'Dacca'

How a Paksitani military official saw the events leading to the surrender

SIDDIQ SALIK, who was a PRO of Eastern Command, Pakistan Army witnessed the communications between the military in East Pakistan and the West Pakistan in the early days of December 1971 and wrote the accounts in a book called 'Witness to Surrender'. We publish excerpts from the last chapter called of his book.

MAJOR-General Rahim, who sustained minor injuries while fleeing from Chandpur, was convalescing at General Farman's residence after initial medical treatment. He lay in a secluded part of the house. Farman was with him. It was 12 December, the ninth day of all-out war. Their minds naturally turned to the most crucial subject of the day. Is Dacca defensible? They had a frank exchange of opinion. Rahim was convinced that cease-fire alone was the answer. Farman was surprised to hear this suggestion from Rahim, who had always advocated a prolonged and decisive war against India. He said with a tinge of irony, 'Bus daneey moock gaye -- itni jaldi'. (Have you lost your nerve -- so soon!) Rahim insisted that it was already too late.

During the discussion, Lieutenant-General Niazi and Major-General Jamshed entered the room to see the 'wounded General'. Rahim repeated the suggestion to Niazi, who showed no reaction. Till then the expectation of foreign help had not finally been extinguished. Avoiding the subject, Farman slipped into the adjoining room.

After spending some time with Rahim, General Niazi walked into Farman's room and said, 'Then send the signal to Rawalpindi.' It appeared that he had accepted General Rahim's advice, as he had always done in peace-time. General Niazi wanted Governor House to send the cease-fire proposal to the President. Farman politely said that the requisite signal should go from Headquarters, Eastern Command but General Niazi insisted, 'No, it makes little difference whether the signal goes from here or from there. I have, in fact, some important work elsewhere, you send it from here.' Before Farman could say 'no' again, Chief Secretary Muzaffar Husain entered the room and, overhearing the conversation, said to Niazi, 'You are right. The signal can be sent from here.' That resolved the conflict.

What General Farman opposed was not the cease-fire proposal itself, but the authority to sponsor it. His earlier signal on the same subject had been rejected by Rawalpindi -- once bitten, twice shy. General Niazi disappeared to attend to his 'urgent work' while Muzaffar Husain drafted the historic note. It was seen by

Farman and submitted to the Governor who approved the idea and sent it to the President the same evening (12 December). The note urged Yahya Khan 'to do everything possible to save the innocent lives.'

Next day the Governor and his principal aides waited for order from Rawalpindi, but the President seemed too busy to take a decision. The following day (14 December), for which a high level meeting was fixed, three Indian MIGs attacked Governor House at 11.15 a.m. and ripped the massive roof of the main hall. The Governor rushed to the air-raid shelter and scribbled out his resignation. Almost all the inmates of this seat of power survived the raid, except for some fishes in a decorative glass case. They restlessly tossed on the hot rubble and breathed their last.

The Governor, his cabinet and West Pakistani civil servants moved, on 14 December, to the Hotel Intercontinental, which had been converted into a 'Neutral Zone' by the International Red Cross. The West Pakistani VIPs included the Chief Secretary, the Inspector-General of Police, the Commissioner, Dacca Division, Provincial Secretaries and a few others. They 'dissociated' themselves in writing from the Government of Pakistan in order to gain admittance to the neutral zone, because anybody belonging to a belligerent state was not entitled to Red Cross protection.

14 December was the last day of the East Pakistan Government. The debris of the Government and Governor House were scattered. The enemy had only to neutralize General Niazi and his disorganized forces to complete the Caesarian birth of Bangladesh. By now General Niazi, too, had lost all hope of foreign help. He slumped back into his earlier mood of despondency and hardly came out of his fortified cabin. He rode the chariot of time without controlling its speed or direction.

He therefore conveyed the factual position to the President (who was also Commander-in-Chief) and keenly waited for instructions. In my presence he rang up General Hamid at night (13/14 December) and said, 'Sir, I have sent certain proposals to the President. Could you kindly see that some action is taken on them soon.' The President of Pakistan and Chief Martial Law Administrator found time from his multifarious engagements and ordered the Governor and General Niazi on the following day 'to take all necessary measures to stop the fighting and preserve lives.' His unclassified signal to General Niazi said:

'Governor's flash message to me refers. You have fought a heroic battle against overwhelming odds. The nation is proud of

you and the world full of admiration. I have done all that is humanly possible to find an acceptable solution to the problem. You have now reached a stage where further resistance is no longer humanly possible nor will it serve any useful purpose. It will only lead to further loss of lives and destruction. You should now take all necessary measures to stop the fighting and preserve the lives to armed forces personnel, all those from West Pakistan and all loyal elements. Meanwhile I have moved UN to urge India to stop hostilities in East Pakistan forthwith and to guarantee the safety of armed forces and all

ing were guaranteed: the safety of Pakistan Armed Forces and of paramilitary forces; the protection of the loyal civilian population against reprisals by Mukti Bahini; and the safety and medical care of the sick and wounded.

As soon as the draft was finalized, Mr. Spivack said, 'It will be transmitted in twenty minutes'. General Niazi and Farman returned to Eastern Command leaving Captain Niazi, the aide-de-camp to wait for the reply. He sat there till 10 pm but nothing happened. He was asked to check later, 'before going to bed' No reply was received during the night.

December, to allow more time to finalize cease-fire arrangements. While General Hamid 'suggested' to Niazi that he accept the cease-fire terms, the latter took it as 'approval' and asked his Chief of Staff, Brigadier Baqar, to issue the necessary orders to the formations. A full-page signal commended the 'heroic fight' by the troops and asked the local commanders to contact their Indian counterparts to arrange the cease-fire. It did not say 'surrender' except in the following sentence, 'Unfortunately, it also involves the laying down of arms'.

It was already midnight (15/16 December) when the signal was

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other people who may be the likely target of miscreants.'

This important telegram originated from Rawalpindi at 1330 hours on 14 December and arrived in Dacca at 1530 hours (East Pakistan Standard Time).

General Niazi, the same evening, decided to initiate the necessary steps to obtain a cease-fire. As an intermediary, he first thought of Soviet and Chinese diplomats but finally chose Mr. Spivack, the US Consul-General in Dacca. General Niazi asked Major-General Farman Ali to accompany him to Mr. Spivack because, he, as Adviser to the Governor, had been dealing with foreign diplomats. When they reached Mr. Spivack's office Farman waited in the ante-room while Niazi went in. Farman could overhear General Niazi's loud unsuitable overtures to win Spivack's sympathies. When he thought that the 'friendship' had been established, he asked the American Consul to negotiate cease-fire terms with the Indians for him. Mr. Spivack, spurning all sentimentality, said in a matter of fact fashion, 'I cannot negotiate a cease-fire on your behalf. I can only send a message if you like.'

General Farman was called in to draft the message to the Indian Chief of Staff (Army), General Sam Manekshaw. He dictated a full-page note calling for an immediate cease-fire, provided the follow-

In fact, Mr. Spivack did not transmit the message to General (later Field-Marshal) Manekshaw. He sent it to Washington, where the US Government tried to consult Yahya Khan before taking any action. But Yahya Khan was not available. He was drowning his sorrows somewhere. I learnt later that he had lost interest in the war as early as 3 December and never came to his office.

Manekshaw replied to the note on 15 December saying that the cease fire would be acceptable and the safety of the personnel mentioned in the note would be guaranteed provided the Pakistan Army 'surrenders to my advancing troops'. He also gave the radio frequency on which Calcutta, the seat of Indian Eastern Command, could be contacted for co-ordination of details.

Manekshaw's message was sent to Rawalpindi. The Chief of Staff of the Pakistan Army replied by the evening of 15 December saying, inter alia, 'Suggest you accept the cease-fire on these terms as they meet your requirements.... However, it will be a local arrangement between two commanders. If it conflicts with the solution being sought at the United Nations, it will be held null and void.'

The temporary cease-fire was agreed from 5 pm on 15 December till 9 am the following day. It was later extended to 3 pm, 16

sent out. About the same time, Lieutenant-Colonel Liaquat Bokhari, Officer Commanding, 4 Aviation Squadron, was summoned for his last briefing. He was told to fly out eight West Pakistani nurses and twenty-eight families, the same night, to Akyab (Burma) across the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Lieutenant-Colonel Liaquat received the orders with his usual calm, so often seen during the war. His helicopters, throughout the twelve days of all-out war, were the only means available to Eastern Command for the transport of men, ammunition and weapons to the worst hit areas. Their odyssey of valour is so inspiring that it cannot be summed up here.

Two helicopters left in the small hours of 16 December while the third flew in broad daylight. They carried Major-General Rahim Khan and a few others, but the nurses were left behind because they 'could not be collected in time' from their hostel. All the helicopters landed safely in Burma and the passengers eventually reached Karachi.

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PHOTO COURTESY: MUKTI BAHINI

Colonel Fazle Hamid had retreated in haste as he had from Khulna on 6 December. The absence of Fazle Hamid's troops allowed the enemy free access to Dacca city from the north-west.

Brigadier Bashir, who was responsible for the defence of the Provincial Capital (excluding the cantonment), learnt on the evening of 15 December that the Manekganj-Dacca road was totally unprotected. He spent the first half of the night in gathering scattered elements of EPCAF, about a company strength, and pushed them under Major Salammat to Mirpur bridge, just outside the city. The commando troops of the Indian Army, who were told by the Mukti Bahini that the bridge was unguarded, drove to the city in the small hours of 16 December. By then Major Salammat's boys were in position and they blindly fired towards the approaching column. They

claimed to have killed a few enemy troops and captured two Indian jeeps.

Major-General Nagra of 101 Communication Zone, who was following the advance commando troops, held back on the far side of the bridge and wrote a chit for Lieutenant-General Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi. It said: 'Dear Abdullah, I am at Mirpur Bridge. Send your representative.'

Major-General Jamshed, Major-General Farman and Rear-Admiral Shariff were with General Niazi when he received the note at about 9 am Farman, who still stuck to the message for 'cease-fire negotiations', said 'Is he (Nagra) the negotiating team?' General Niazi did not comment. The obvious question was whether he was to be received or resisted. He was already on the threshold of Dacca.

Major-General Farman asked

General Niazi, 'Have you any reserves?' Niazi again said nothing. Rear-Admiral Shariff, translating it in Punjabi, said: 'Kuj palley hai?' (Have you anything in the kitty?) Niazi looked to Jamshed, the defender of Dacca, who shook his head sideways to signify 'nothing'. 'If that is the case, then go and do what he (Nagra) asks,' Farman and Shariff said almost simultaneously.

General Niazi sent Major-General Jamshed to receive Nagra. He asked our troops at Mirpur Bridge to respect the cease-fire and allow Nagra a peaceful passage. The Indian General entered Dacca with a handful of soldiers and a lot of pride. That was the virtual fall of Dacca. It fell quietly like a heart patient. Neither were its limbs chopped nor its body hacked. It just ceased to exist as an independent city. Stories about the fall of Singapore, Paris or Berlin were not repeated here.

Towards nation's prosperity

ASHRAF AL DEEN

16TH December is our victory day. In 1971 this day marked the victory of the Bengali nationalism, victory of the people of Bangladesh and also the victory of our friends around the world who actively helped and supported us in times of our needs. Apart from the geo-political war-game and real-time ground situations, it was the victory of liberty and freedom in true sense of the term.

Unlike many countries of the world, the day the defeated enemy surrendered was not the day of our independence; it was the day of our victory. Because our independence was declared on 26th March 1971 long before 16 Dec 1971. As such, with the signing of the instrument of surrender between Gen Niazi of Pakistan and Gen Arora of India, not that we became independent, rather this occasion resulted into our victory. No one can say that our independence was a gift from

anybody or, for that matter, any country. We were already an independent nation with distinct borders and national esteem, but under the forceful occupation of the enemy. Of course we recognise with earnest gratefulness that others did help us in attaining victory much earlier than it was expected to fight-out alone. In fact, nine months seem to be a considerably short period to defeat Pakistani occupation forces, which enjoyed the support of number of major powers of the world, to name China and America. May be, without an extensive and close support from our big neighbour our struggle to be free from the occupation forces could have taken longer. The moment we achieved victory an extra responsibility befell us: to stand up as an independent nation, with dignity, honour and respect. This responsibility lies even today on every individual citizen of this country, Bangladesh. To render our humble service to that end we must

first stand united. On the question of national interest we should leave our minor political differences under the carpet and display a united force internally. In present-day world, technological and economic advantage has taken over the past position of egocentric ignorance, and hence the backwardness. For us the national motto should be 'unity'. In 1969-70 we stood against the repressive regime of President Ayub Khan united. We stood united to repair the damages of devastating cyclone of 12th November 1970 in the southern part of our country. Once again we need to display the force of unity to develop the quality of life in today's Bangladesh.

Externally we shouldn't fail to identify our friends and well-wishers in the world arena, in view of the geo-political environment and individual state-interest. However, our own national security and national interest must be at the top of the agenda. Towards that goal two of the best sons of

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our country proved their prudence, on the points and policies the country faced at their time. Of course, today a few may question those actions, whereas at large they proved to be correct. Let me cite very sketchy examples.

It's on record that our first president Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman wasted no time in declaring general amnesty towards those who opposed our independence and liberation

struggle, almost all the Islamic and most of the leftist parties. He wanted joint-hands and undivided human resources to indulge in the reconstruction of the new-born nation. Then, on the external front he joined the OIC conference at Lahore in 1973 at the invitation of the eminent leaders of the Islamic world. But what many don't know is that, long before the conference, he took the initiative to dispatch his personal envoys to

the leading Muslim countries to create a pressure on Pakistan to recognise Bangladesh, making it possible for Bangabandhu to visit Pakistan to attend the OIC conference. In an almost similar way we found President Ziaur Rahman accommodating people in his cabinet and party, who had clear controversial role during the War of Liberation, he being a valiant freedom fighter and a war-leader himself. He wanted to forgive and forget the past for the sake of organising an efficient team to work aiming at the nation's prosperity. On the other front, with an effective and useful foreign policy he established a much closer relationship with the OIC countries (particularly the middle-east states) and big powers (China and USA) that mostly sided with our enemy during the liberation struggle. Indeed, these policies of the two great leaders proved to be enormously beneficial for our nation, in the long run. It was indeed the question of setting the priorities: present national inter-

est and future prospect over the internal politics and difference of the past. We can still follow such examples and forget minor differences of internal politics for the sake of greater national interest.

It is true that we have a large population with a comparatively small landmass, having no natural resources like oil, gold, diamond or minerals. We have a backward agro-based economy and enough potential for recurrent natural disasters. We are helpless prey to artificially created floods and droughts directly contributed by our big neighbour. We have other problems too. We are burdened with poverty complemented with social hazards of multidirectional and deep-rooted corruption. In addition there are spills and spoils of regional illegal trades (of drugs, small-arms etc) and cross-border corruption. We are in the transit route of the notorious 'golden triangle', it is said. We can't get rid of them in a single swift move. We need to contain, reduce and finally eradicate them to allow our

nation to prosper.

We have problems of illiteracy, insufficient health-care, inefficient governing machinery and immoral leaders in the society. Our united efforts should now be directed against these factors. It's not the blame-game that will rescue us from the ditch that we are in. It's the co-operation and understanding and relentless effort towards tending democracy to give it sustenance. The only viable way to get relief from all the negative situations is to expand and strengthen our educational and technological base and thrive for a stronger economy. The vast manpower that we have needs to be turned into 'useful people', through useful education, IT training and quality development, instead of 'hungry millions'. We should be able to export people useful for the rest of the world and in turn increase the country's size virtually, when the real one is so overcrowded and small for one hundred and forty million.