

The story of six brothers

AKBAR HOSSAIN

It was December 14, just two days ahead of Victory Day.

Abul Halim, a government official of the then East Pakistan, was waiting at his home to receive his six muktiyoddha sons, as the surrender of the Pakistani occupation forces became little more than a matter of time due to the strong resistance of the allied forces.

But on the night of December 14, four sons of Abdul Halim fell into the hands of the Pakistani army and never returned.

Two of them were shot dead in front of their Tejguri Bazar house and two are thought to have been killed inside Dhaka cantonment.

The four martyrs could see ahead of them the independence of the country for which they had fought, but local collaborators informed the Pakistani army of the return of the freedom fighters to their house, leading to their capture and killing.

If you go to 45/F Tejguri Bazar, residence of the late Abdul Halim, you will find a graveyard in front of the house where the dead bodies of Quamrul Hasan Ratan and Iqbal Hasan Shahar lie in eternal peace along with that of their friend and neighbour, Ataur Rahman Nehal.

The dead bodies of Bakhtiar Hasan Makhon and Rakibul Hasan Laki were never found, and it is thought that they were killed inside Dhaka cantonment.

The other two sons of Halim, Akhtiar Hasan Milon and Fakhrul Hasan Khokan, were spared only because they were caught up in the streets on their way home to meet their brothers and did not return to the house until after December 16.

The six brothers had gone to their village home in Brahmanbaria after March 25, and five of them crossed the Bangladesh border at the beginning of April. Before entering into India, the younger five brothers sent Makhon back to Dhaka to look after the family. After returning to Dhaka, he rejoined his working



Two of the four brothers killed on December 14, 1971

place.

Makhon extended financial help to the freedom fighters and informed them about the secret plans of the Pakistani government. He also participated in the State Bank operation along with freedom fighters. By collecting explosives from freedom fighters, Makhon exploded a bomb on the 7th floor of the State Bank. As the news leaked, Makhon was caught by the Pakistani army, who tortured him inhumanly, before he was let go. He ultimately was killed by the Pakistani army on his way home to be reunited with his brothers.

Akhtiar Hasan Milon, the second son of Abdul Halim, did not directly participate in the liberation war, but worked as an organiser under the Mujibnagar government. Milon came to his house after December 16 to find four of his brothers dead.

"I did not cry after losing my four brothers, as they sacrificed their life for the cause of the nation," said Milon, now a businessman.

While talking to The Daily Star in front of the graveyard of his brothers, Milon expressed his disappointment with the current situation of the country.

"We fought for the country not to make a few people rich. We thought the people of the country would live in a happy country after the independence. The desperate hunger of politicians for state

power has brought misery to the common people. After 32 years of independence many people are still struggling to have two square meals a day," he observed with regret.

But although currently there are many limitations in the country, he hopes the country would move to success one day.

As Milon was a vice-president of Tejgaon Awami League, the Pakistani intelligence kept the house under strong watch.

"Our family was involved with politics for a long time, and I also actively participated in the 1969 movement. As soon as the Pakistani forces came to know that we five brothers had joined the liberation war, our house became a prime target," Milon told me.

After receiving special training in intelligence, Ratan, the third brother, came to Bangladesh along with his friend Nehal.

Ratan and Nehal were tasked with gathering information about Tejgaon Airport where Pakistani military forces had set up the camps with warplanes. Ratan and Nehal entered the airport in the guise of day-labourers with the help of one Nur Mohammed, a contractor of the airport. They regularly informed the freedom fighters about the war strategy and place of warplanes through hidden wireless. They also sent a map of the airport to freedom fighters,

identifying the bunkers and installations of the Pakistani military forces.

In the beginning of December, allied forces made several air strikes on the Tejgaon Airport on the basis of information provided by Ratan and Nehal, which was absolutely accurate. This incident made the Pakistani forces suspicious. They engaged spies to unearth how the allied forces successfully made the air strikes. Pakistani forces suspected Ratan and Nehal for the air strikes and arrested them, but Ratan and Nehal managed to escape from their clutches.

Engineer Fakhrul Hasan Khokan was the fourth son of his parents. He played a significant role in setting up Shadin Bangla Betar Kendra and building up of the Bangladesh Air Force. He was directly involved with some operations against the Pakistani army including the Vulta operation in

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Narsingdi and the Farmgate operation in Dhaka.

Laki and Shahar were engaged in guerrilla war in Dhaka city. Both of them participated in a guerrilla operation in Green Road Staff Colony and tried to kill Monem Khan, then governor of the East Pakistan and a collaborator.

Rakibul Hasan Laki, the fifth son, was a guerrilla fighter under the leadership of Mostafa Mohsin Montu. He participated in many courageous operations against the Pakistani army.

At the tail-end of the liberation war, Laki's elder brother Ratan

told him to come to their Tejguri Bazar residence on December 13. It was while coming to meet his brothers that the Pakistani army caught him, and Laki was killed in the graveyard of the Dhaka cantonment.

Iqbal Hasan Shahar, the youngest son of Abdul Halim, was a valiant freedom fighter. He was known as fighter Shahar to his co-freedom fighters. Shahar single-handedly had the ability to sow panic among the Pakistani soldiers in the southern part of Dhaka. He was involved with many daring guerrilla operation

including the Siddirgonj power station operation. He was also killed at the hands of the Pakistani army.

Ratan, Shahar, and Nehal were buried in front of 45/F in Tejguri Bazar. These three freedom fighters were killed by the Pakistani army in the premises of their house in the night of December 14.

After nine months of bloody war, Milon and Khokan came back to their house. Their father was speechless and became emotional upon seeing them.

Abdul Halim is no more in the

world. During the nine months of the liberation war, his Tejguri Bazar residence turned into a meeting place and safe-house for freedom fighters, at great personal risk to himself. He rejoiced in Bangladesh's freedom from his heart even after losing his four sons.

Halim hoped that Bangladesh's independence would bring happiness to the common people.

But after 33 years of independence, the question is whether the dreams of the freedom fighters will ever be realised at all.



The brothers and their friend were buried in front of their house at Kawran Bazar.

As I look back

A.M.M. SHAWKAT ALI

In July 1971, I was posted as Additional Deputy Commissioner (ADC) of Sylhet. There was an uneasy calm that I noticed among the citizens of Sylhet town not to speak of the officials of all departments. Initially, there was a brigade of Pakistani army there. Its headquarters was located in the model school near what was then known as Salutar airport. The brigade was led by brigadier Iftekhar Rana. As the struggle for liberation grew in intensity, another brigade joined the existing one. It was led by brigadier Salimullah. The Deputy Commissioner (DC) then was late Syed Ahmed, popularly known as Jeetu Bhai among his junior colleagues.

On my joining the district, I was put in charge of general administration. The DC introduced me to Brigadier Iftekhar in late July.

One day, the brigadier decided to address all officers of the district administration. The meeting was arranged in the DC's conference room. Prior to his visit to the DC's office for the conference, he sent a typed list of about 20 persons including some from the DC's office. This was a secret hit list because in the view of the brigadier, they were working against the Pakistan army. Neither the DC nor myself had any idea that the list was a hit list. The brigadier verbally told the DC to make sure that the persons in the list were present at the meeting. I asked the DC why at a conference of officials, the brigadier was interested to have these persons in attendance. The DC said to me that we should ignore the list. I got the message.

The brigadier came in time accompanied by Lt. Col. Sarfaraz Khan who was notorious for being a ruthless killer. In course of the usual address to do everything

possible against the war of liberation, the brigadier suddenly asked where "Matin" was? None could readily answer because no further details about "Matin" could be given. The DC asked the brigadier what exactly was the designation or other details about the person he was looking for. Is it a peon, orderly, or an officer? The brigadier was not sure, but said he thought "Matin" was a magistrate.

I got nervous. A magistrate named Molla Mohammad Abdul Matin was very much present. I suggested to the DC that it would be necessary to get further details. The brigadier, perhaps because of his other important operational duties and shortage of time, reluctantly agreed.

I had known Matin since 1968 when he was in Faridpur and I was

in Gopalganj. The DC in Faridpur was then late Abdus Samad, the first Defence Secretary of Bangladesh. He took over as DC Sylhet sometime at the end of 1969. He was well-known for his quiet courage. Matin told me once that in the month of April 1971, along with the Pakistani flag, the then Bangladeshi flag was also flown atop the DC's residence. One day, Lt. Col. Sarfaraz Khan came to the DC's residence and requested the DC to ask someone to pull the Bangladeshi flag down. The DC declined, saying that it was not doing any harm to anyone.

Sarfaraz left in anger but later got information that Matin was a witness to the whole incident. Mr. Samad joined the war of liberation and Jeetu Bhai succeeded him later.

Before the brigadier departed, Sarfaraz spoke aloud to say that he had kept a bullet for Samad and also one for Matin. Immediately after their departure, Matin rushed to my office room trembling in fear for obvious reasons. With tearful eyes, he told me, "Sir, please save my life, I have done nothing wrong." "Please keep quiet," was my reply. Immediately I thought that he must be sent to Dhaka. A plane ticket was arranged. Before his departure, I told him not to return to Sylhet. Matin managed to get appointed as private secretary to a minister of the provincial government and was safe.

The denial plan of the occupation army

As the victory approached, on the 10th or 11th of December, Lt. Col.

Sarfaraz sent a secret letter to the DC asking him for a certificate regarding the destruction of Pakistani currency notes held by the then National Bank of Pakistan (NBP) as part of their treasury functions. This was part

of the denial plan, which essentially meant that all facilities should be denied to the victorious army. The destruction of the physical infrastructure such as roads and bridges could be carried out by the army. It fell to the DC's lot to destroy the currency notes. The DC immediately called me and the Superintendent of Police, then Mr. Solaiman Ali. We found ourselves between the devil and the deep sea. If the DC did not comply with the request, he would be taken to the model school and killed. On the other hand, the DC could not have signed a blank certificate without mentioning the amount of currency destroyed.

We ultimately decided to buy time. We decided to raise two issues. First, there was no instruction to this effect from the government of the day. Second, we could not have opened the vault of NBP as the keys were with the designated personnel of the bank. As this was telephonically communicated to Sarfaraz, he became furious and asked us to blow open

the 14th evening in the form of a cipher message. It was deciphered. We deliberately wasted more time to locate the designated personnel of NBP, who were the custodians of the key for the vault. To our surprise, they were made available by a contingent of the Pakistan army. Sarfaraz also came in a jeep and asked us all to accompany him to NBP.

The "Operation Destruction" started. Some of the personnel of NBP were also present. Suddenly, a wireless message came to Sarfaraz who left in a hurry, leaving a Sindhi deputy superintendent of the auxiliary force called the East Pakistan Civil Armed Forces (EPCAF). As the deputy went out for a while to see Sarfaraz off, I advised the NBP personnel to bring out the currency notes of lower denomination first. They were huge in number. The idea was to buy more time. The bullets and mortar fire could be heard. Sylhet was about to fall. But fighting was going on. The deputy returned and said that he would rather go back to the brigade

headquarters with a truck load of currency notes.

Without waiting for our reply, he asked some of his personnel to load the truck outside the bank. They could hardly load the truck, when firing in the outskirts of the

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town intensified. They all left in a hurry and we closed the vault and took shelter in the officers' quarter of Sheikhgah.

Retribution never pays

It was on the 17th that Sylhet fell. We met General Zia then in command of Z force, Major Shawkat, Major Dutta, and Major Shaffat Jamil. Jamil was then in command of an infantry battalion of the Bengal regiment. We also met two Indian brigadiers, AC Quinn and Wadke. On 18th morning, Ajmal Ali Chowdhury, once a central minister of Pakistan government was killed on the street allegedly by some members of the Mukti Bahini. The civilian Zonal Administrator, then Dewan Farid Ghazi, rang me up to say that it was not the government policy to kill any person. He advised us to take all precautionary measures. I told him that he would be in a much better position to do it and we could only assist.

On the 20th, one Mr. Barua, then Home Secretary of

Arunachal, accompanied by Lt. Col. Jummowal came and met the DC where I was present. They introduced themselves as the civil liaison officers (CLO). Barua told us that General CV Rao of the Eighth Mountain Division would be visiting Sylhet. He had expressed his intention to address the officers of the district administration. This was not something difficult for us to arrange. The only thing was that there was no electricity in Sylhet town. The transmission lines were badly damaged. It would be convenient if we could restore electricity. Besides, it would be a necessity for restoration of normalcy.

I immediately contacted Manzur Murshed, then executive engineer of EPWAPDA. Manzur and the officers and staff under him worked late hours and succeeded in restoring electricity.

General CV Rao came. All senior officers of the Bangladesh army were also present. Rao paid glowing tribute to the heroism of the members of the Mukti Bahini as well as the regular army. In the course of his address, he also said, "I am leaving clear instructions to my officers and staff here that we recognise only one authority in the district, that is the authority of the Deputy Commissioner. I recognise that emotions are likely to run high after the war, but let me remind all of you that retribution never pays."

Immediately after the fall of the occupation forces, I could see how jubilant the people of Sylhet were. They could talk freely, breathe freely, and walk in the streets without any fear except for one or two unfortunate incidents. The civil administration rose like one man to restore normalcy. At that time, all thought that Bangladesh was set for a bright future, politically, economically, and socially. Is that right today?

