

In remembrance of the Benin tragedy

A tribute to our nation's finest souls

BRIGADIER GENERAL SHARIF AZIZ, psc (retd)

ONE year ago last week marked the first anniversary of the death of 15 valiant Bangladesh armed forces officers who had been working as sentinels of peace in the war-torn West African countries of Liberia and Sierra Leone, and returned home as martyrs in the sombre wintry evening of the last day of 2003.

The whole nation mourned the tragedy that marked the biggest ever military loss in a single incident since our independence in 1971. I recall the day when the news of the death of the armed forces officers killed in a tragic plane crash in Benin on December 25, 2003 came out the whole nation was dumb-founded. It was totally unbelievable and inconceivable for a nation that holds its defence forces in high esteem. We vividly remember when the bodies of the officers draped in the national and United Nations flags were being brought down from a special UN aircraft. The whole nation came to a standstill amidst the tears of every Bangladeshi.

The grieving families sobbed and held each other in inconsolable tears. All those who were present at the airport and those who witnessed the heartbreaking scene over television were emotionally shocked, grief-stricken, and broken. On behalf of the nation, the honourable Prime Minister placed a floral wreath on each of the coffins when the bugle played the last post. This was an unbearable, heart-breaking scene viewed by millions from every nook and corner of Bangladesh.

After the Benin tragedy, the whole nation was united to pay their solemn respects to the departed souls. We saw the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, all political parties irrespective of their ideology, and people of all walks of life flocking together to offer their love, sympathy, and respect to the lost souls. This perhaps was the most monumental achievement of these great souls. By embracing death they united a nation at least for a moment.

Our armed forces have a glorious past. Thousand of its members sacrificed their lives in the war of liberation. Even during the turbulent years between 1975 and 1990, the army was able to play a significant role. Everyone recalls the fall of the regime in December 1990. Showing great respect to democracy, the armed forces did not intervene in any kind of political development. Over the years, the armed forces never hesitated to come forward in aid of the nation whenever required, be it for disaster relief, management of national catastrophe, or in aid of civil power in deteriorating law and order situation.

In the massive floods of 1987-88 and in the terrible cyclone of 1991, the role of the armed forces was so significant that the people put their complete trust in them.

When the law and order situation of the country went almost out of control the armed forces were again called in. Operation Clean Heart commenced. Leaving aside certain accidental casualties, the armed forces were in a position to create complete peace and tranquility.

It is mainly for the patriotism and dedication of the armed forces that the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) continues to exist as an integral part of sovereign Bangladesh. One cannot imagine

the type of hardship that the members of the Armed Forces undergo in operating in the remotest and impassable terrain of the CHT in extreme weather and minimal living conditions. Indeed, anyone who has not experienced the extreme stress and strain of CHT operations would never be able to realise the hardship.

The life of an armed forces officer is an arduous journey. A young men of 18 to 19 years of age who has just passed the Higher Secondary Examination joins the Military Academy and undertakes two years of extreme rigorous physical and mental training. Here he undergoes a personality change, learns to be responsible towards his comrades, the military institution, and to the nation, develops his knowledge base intellectually, and prepares himself to lead men under his command. This training moulds the young man into a professional soldier who accepts hardship, stress, and sacrifice as a matter of daily life.

At the age of 20 years when most of our young men remain under the shadow and care of their parents, a young army officer works for unlimited hours a day to sharpen his military skill and prepares himself and his men for greater sacrifice for the

nation. These young professionals gradually undergo varied military training throughout their career both from within and outside the country. Besides specialising in military operations of war, his domain of study includes social science, economics, strategic and security studies, information technology, management and leadership, disaster management, peacekeeping, national security etc. Armed forces officers have to keep themselves updated about the new military developments around the globe. They never stop learning.

Truly speaking, after independence in 1971 we could not make much progress as a free country or nation. After 33 years of liberation as a nation we do not have many things to be really proud of. We have rather been branded as a corrupt nation with minimum respect for rules of law. Internationally, we are often identified as a disaster-prone, over populated, illiterate, and poor country endowed with domestic mismanagement and corruption. Amidst so many negatives, our armed forces globally hold an image, perhaps unique among many third world nations, of a professional military significantly contributing to the cause of international peace and security. This is something for which Bangladesh is named with respect and for which we should all be proud of both at home and abroad. Indeed our armed forces service as international peacekeepers symbolises the better side of the nation.

Bangladesh armed forces entry into international peace effort began in 1989. Since then there has been no looking back. Today Bangladesh armed forces are the largest contributor in the United Nations peacekeeping operations. Our peacekeepers have won over the hearts of millions from Africa to Europe, from Asia to the Americas. By sheer profes-

sionalism, competency, hard work, and sacrifice they could attain this feat. With a blend of professional competency and humanitarian outlook Bangladeshi peacekeepers are very popular in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Congo, and in a host of other war-ravaged countries of the world. Being soldiers of a third world peace-loving nation they are outstanding in their dealing with the warring factions and their ability to pacify the sufferings of humanity in the war zones. That is possibly why the Sierra Leone people learn and speak Bangla with our soldiers.

In quest of global peace, fifteen of our officers made the supreme sacrifice. This is an irreparable loss not only for the families of these martyrs but also for the nation. These heroes sacrificed their lives in search of building peace for countries which are not even their own. They have proved that Bangladesh is committed to the establishment of global peace and security even it has to make grim sacrifices. We mourn the sad demise of our valued sons. We tried to give them National Honour, which they so richly deserved. No consolation is big enough for the inconsolable family members of these fallen soldiers. Even so we express our deepest sorrows and highest grief to their families. These heroes have paid the highest price for earning honour and dignity for a nation that they so intimately loved.

After the Benin tragedy, the whole nation was united to pay their solemn respects to the departed souls. We saw the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, all political parties irrespective of their ideology, and people of all walks of life flocking together to offer their love, sympathy, and respect to the lost souls. This perhaps was the most monumental achievement of these great souls. By embracing death they united a nation at least for a moment. If lasting peace, tranquility, and unity if could be achieved by the impoverished Bangladeshi nation after this great tragedy, then that would have given the greatest satisfaction to these brave men in their eternal sleep.

The author is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.



7x3



MUHAMMAD HABIBUR RAHMAN

Death in Crossfire

The specially trained law and order force  
Got the information from their source  
That some violent miscreants were hiding out  
And that with efforts they could be smoked out.

After keeping a continuous watch  
On the malcontents and the cross patch  
One of the miscreants was arrested.  
And in the follow-up action no time was wasted.

On being hard pressed on an interrogation  
The miscreant made a clean confession  
Of concealing arms and ammunition  
In an abandoned near-by spot,  
A junkyard by the graveyard, not  
Far from the place where he was caught.  
Law and order men were led to that spot  
And before they reached there,  
There was a gunshot from nowhere.  
Law and order men, fired upon, fired back in self-defence

And the ensued crossfire was murderously dense  
And the miscreant was fatally hit.  
Don't you think it as a story well-knit?

Who did first fire?  
Who did next fire?  
To make it a case of crossfire?

Was it case of mindless brushfire?  
In every case of death in crossfire  
Does the death report inspire  
Any conviction or credence?  
That law and order men fired in self-defence?

Each report raises more questions than answers  
And it appears  
To have been written on dotted lines of a form  
Filled up casually, dull and uniform.

Each of the reports needed a grinning skull  
And crossbones on the top to mull  
Over the death in crossfire  
That hardly does inspire  
Any conviction or credence  
And there were exactly similar antecedents.

After the death reports' monotonous tedium  
*Laudamus, Te Deum.*  
Let us have a short requiem:  
Peace be on all those men  
Who died in crossfire. Amen! And Amen!

Muhammad Habibur Rahman is a former Chief Justice and former Chief Advisor to the Caretaker Government.



All health information to keep you up to date

Have a Nice Year!

Road Map to a Healthy 2005

1. Always get up from your table and take a ten-minute walk. Those who walk at least four times a week, scientists have found, feel less stressed and sleep better. Also train yourself to become a "Non Exercise Activity Thermo Genesis" or NEAT. It's something you do unconsciously, like picking up newspapers, ironing clothes, dusting bookshelves, etc.
2. When you exercise, even a little, your heart rate increases, and you then take in more oxygen. You can divide your exercise time in factions. If you are a very busy person try 10 minutes, three times a day). Your metabolism will speed up and level of serotonin (a feel-good brain chemical) will rise.
3. Find (and keep) a caring "Family Doctor" as your personal friend. This could be the most important friend in your family. He or she will monitor you and your family and children and kids for a healthy living and profile. It is also important to choose a good doctor outside Bangladesh (if necessary) especially in India and Thailand and Singapore. There are places outside BD not up to the mark and people can get cheated
4. Your best defence against diseases is washing your hands properly. The right way is to remove rings and sometimes bracelets. Depending on nail size, you need to scrub nails with a nailbrush. Finally wash your hands together at least 20 seconds under running water with soap. Last but not least do NOT use "cloth towels" in public places to dry your hands.
5. If you are a mum or dad, you are the King and Queen in your child's world. Each and every action of your life is being recorded by your children. You are the role model. It's not only courtesy but also discourtesy that begins at home! So behave nicely at home and watch your family grow in a courteous way. Your behaviour is your responsibility. It's easy to just become a mother and father. The great challenge is to be a to be a "mum" or "dad." Between the ages of 3 to 13, a child's psychological development is very important.
6. Sleep at lease six hours. A scientific study suggests that key repair work may happen in the brain between the sixth and eighth hours of sleep. During this time, electrical activity activates waves of calcium to enter brain cells. These calcium waves instruct neurons to reorganise their connections with each other and generate new ones.
7. While it is generally agreed that children provide the glue that keeps couples together, the opposite can also be true. Organise your time constructively. It is true that children come first, but also try to spend some time exclusively for your spouse. In the long run, children will be benefited. Create a buffer zone by spending at least 10 minutes alone after you get home. Spend sometime in the wash room where you can keep a small radio/cassette player and couple of weekly magazines. This will get the work distress out of your system before it gets directed at your partner or children. We all, especially after decades, take each other for granted, which is not correct.
8. Try to work smartly rather than very hard. It's not time but output which should be counted. List things you enjoyed doing. Commit to do at least one of them everyday. Try to see the positive side of everything. In fact most people appear awful if you are awful within yourself
9. Don't get influenced quickly. Have patience. A little patience can be more powerful than a bucketful of brains. If possible, take at least 36 hours before making a big decision.
10. It's true that doing good makes you feel good. Behave nicely with your subordinates, including housemaids. It's the little things that count. Specially be sympathetic to young workers who are working at your home. Try to share some of their works and get yourself fit. To burn your fat, move yourself as much as possible, from ordering a cup of tea to getting it yourself. Use stairs instead of lifts. If you think you are better then you will feel better. And always remember: heroes never complain.

8x3

6x3