

# Was the fate of captain of 'BNS Shaheed Farid' inevitable?

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ALL of us felt terribly moved by yet another news of hundreds of fishermen dead/missing along with the captain of BNS Shaheed Farid due to a squally weather on the evening of 19th Sep 06. The print and electronic media flashed the post cyclone scenes of hundreds of bloated bodies washed ashore. Some even commented that it was disgraceful that a foreign commercial airliner could pick up the SOS and not our navy in spite of all the gadgets and outfits it possesses. As for the SAR (search and rescue) mission, why the navy could not send their frigates/OPVS to search for the ship's captain immediately? Masters of some merchant vessels also took a swipe on the navy's capability through the electronic media.

Having commanded the same ship and having faced cyclonic weathers quite often at sea and in all corners of the Sunderbans, one can easily visualise what went wrong aboard the ship, commanded by one of the best officer of his class. Attempts to stay at anchor at Boar Point proved too risky as the sudden raging sea winds forced the captain to weigh anchor and proceed for safety of his ship and crew. The ship might have been rolling more than 30° from side to side, pitching, and doing corkscrews like a toy boat. It was raining heavily and the night was pitch dark, making visibility zero and the captain observed that the ship was taking water over the bow. As the ship headed for the Zulfiqar Channel, the weather might have become more hostile as the channel is infamous for its ability to give one a rough ride.

It was always on the cards that

when the navy blunders into a situation of potential disaster, which requires high professional experience, courage and esprit-de-corps, the decision makers would mishandle the situation. The obvious happened as the best professional decision did not come forth from someone who never experienced high waves bashing the ship in a rainy dark night with zero visibility, and worst of all, never felt the pain and agony of saving the men and the ship under his command. When such individuals are dependent upon the advice of moderate quality on matters of critical importance like this, he will not have the appropriate professional counsel/brief that he should have in such a crisis from the ops and plans. As herein also, it is alleged, that one has not commanded ships long enough to provide such correct counseling while others remained upwardly mobile through sycophancy having not much to show for their professional ability.

It has turned out to be a common feature for such people to remain close to the seats of power and influence since merit these days commands very little weightage in rewarding performance. And that's why even within 12-24 hours the frigates/OPVs could not reach to carry out various prescribed searches. A proposal was made to the Navy by the Mongla Port Authority at one time to carry out dredging of Nilkamal Channel jointly for ease of navigation by ships of both the port and the navy, but the navy declined the proposal citing fund shortage although it was reportedly returning unspent budget in crores. If the Navy would have listened, then the ship could easily take shelter in the jetty of the Forward Base and shelter station at Hiron Point and Shaheed Farid

would not have met this fate.

From the various other comments, it has been observed with great concern that not many in Bangladesh appreciate that these smaller gunboats of about 115 tons in displacement has been the best work horse of the Bangladesh Navy for the last 35 years. These boats are keeping our 2,07,000 sq.km EEZ and Continental Shelf, full of various living and non living resources, free from being plundered by other countries even though from South Talpatty to St Martins, our coastal waters remain very rough almost 8 months a year. Hundreds of fishing trawlers from Thailand and India have been apprehended and crores of taka worth of fish and other resources have been deposited with the government agencies. Not many even know that unlike the Army and Air force, the Navy has to guard the resource full EEZ and Continental Shelf 365 days a year. There is not a single day break in these patrols even during Eid or important national holidays and that's why it has been able to arrest smuggling, piracy and arms transfer to a great extent.

It is difficult to visualise the circumstances Lt Cdr Feroz Kabir had undergone, sitting in an air condition room of the 20,000 ton merchant vessels. In sea-state 4 or 5 such vessels would not roll a single degree whereas these gunboats would roll about 15-20 degrees either side making it difficult for the crew to put cooking utensils in place and thus remain without cooked food for days together. Moreover if you have not operated on a small boat inside the Sunderbans, you would not know how your communication equipment with HF, MF and VHF frequencies behave inside a mangrove forest. Most of the time

the total power output of communication equipment allowed in these crafts are not good enough to allow uninterrupted communication due to environmental conditions and skip distance. So it is nothing surprising that the lone officer had to resort to any frequency for transmitting SOS signal.

What the weathermen from Bangladesh meteorological department (BMD), Dhaka has done this time? Have they told not to go to sea or to remain in the harbour and not to proceed for fishing ? On 19th Sep 06 at 1025 hrs, BMD issued a warning message, which reads as "A monsoon low has formed over the NW Bay and adjoining area. Its associated steep pressure gradient lies over the North Bay. Monsoon is moderate to strong over North Bay, squally weather may affect the port. Maritime ports of Chittagong, Cox's bazar and Mongla had been advised to hoist local cautionary signal 3 repeat 3. All fishing boats and trawlers over North Bay have been advised to come close to the coast and proceed with caution." It issued only cautionary signal, which does not prevent fishermen fishing near the coast and squally weather since it is not supposed to kill people in hundreds. Moreover this type of "LOCAL WARNING" is to be issued 24 hours in advance and in this case the seafarers got only 8 hours time, which is very insufficient for even mechanized boats with speed of 3-4 knots to come close to the shore from 30-40 miles away.

There are 4 WARNING SIGNALS, 3 DANGER (moderate intensity cyclone) and 3 GREAT DANGER SIGNALS (great intensity cyclone) for sea ports.



These signals by no means warn the people living in the coastal areas as they relate to the port areas only and are old, outdated and do not conform to the wind speed classification of cyclonic disturbance at all in force now. For example, if a cyclone is passing near the coast of Hatiya, then in the present signal system DANGER Signal no 5 or DANGER signal no 6 will be issued indicating that the cyclone will pass either east of Mongla port or it will pass west of Chittagong port. This sort of forecast may have some meaning

for the people living near port areas but definitely do not carry any useful meaning for the people of Hatiya/Khepupara and its adjacent areas. The weathermen said that all trawlers and boats should stay near the coastline and even if they did, they would not survive as the BNS Shaheed Farid even staying 15km inside the coast line could not save itself from the fury of the weather, clearly demonstrating that our weathermen got it completely wrong this time as well as in the past. I have strongly recommended in my book "Maritime Challenges of

Bangladesh in the 21st Century" that our cyclone warning system needs complete overhaul. I appeal to them, please read your equipment correctly and if you do not have the appropriate one, ask for it, but for God's sake do not play with lives of the millions who live on the sea day in and day out.

Notwithstanding his watery grave, the manner of the captain's death was courageous and very much in line with the naval traditions. If selflessness and devotion to duty was the naval standard, he was already one. His

bravery deserves a salute and we give these to him in good measure. As he did not need death so early, the brave must be given their due according to the adage:

Unrecognised you put us in your debt  
Unthanked you enter the watery grave  
Whether your land remembers or forgets  
You saved the land or died to try to save.

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# French Special Forces in Afghanistan: Implications of an exit

CONSTANCE ROGER

THE French Foreign Minister, in his January 2006 statement at the London Conference on Afghanistan, justified the presence of NATO in Afghanistan. The current discussion in France about reducing and reshaping French involvement is based, however, on the premise that the future of Afghanistan looks increasingly grim. In October 2006, the eventual

withdrawal of French Special Forces from Afghanistan was hinted; Le Journal du Dimanche announced that while this decision still had to be officially enacted by the French President, the army was seriously considering it. The 200 troops should be sent home by early 2007.

Since their arrival in July 2003, the French Special Forces' presence in Afghanistan has been regularly used to illustrate Franco-American solidarity against

terrorism. To avoid any misinterpretation of this withdrawal, French officials have tried to justify their decision by evoking the changing strategic context of the war. According to them, the nature of the fighting has changed as NATO has gradually taken over the whole country. This recent change in command has left only 8000 American troops outside NATO control, including the French Special Forces.

The French COS

(Commandement des Operations Speciales), whose initial task was to track down Taliban groups and stop them from infiltrating Afghanistan through Pakistani tribal zones, now has to undertake other missions. The training of the Afghan National Army, which now figures among the most important goals of the coalition, is receiving increasing attention and resources. French officials are making clear that this is not the primary aim of the COS, which has received specialized training to deal with extra-conventional situations. Possessing only 2000 trained Special Forces and participating in more than fifteen external operations, France hinted that these elite units could be of better use elsewhere.

Le Monde and Le Figaro confirmed the eventuality of the withdrawal of the Special Forces, and added that this move would certainly be accompanied by a reduction in the number of French troops participating in the ISAF. Following declarations made by various NATO officials calling for additional forces and in a context of escalating violence in Afghanistan, the timing for such cutbacks does not seem to be ideal. So has France lost its enthusiasm for a "better future for the Afghans"?

According to the two newspapers, the 1200 troops will be reduced by March 2007 when Italy will take command of the ISAF.

The French are certainly busy in other external operations (Kosovo, Ivory Coast, Lebanon, Democratic Republic of Congo). With the recent sending of 2000 soldiers to Lebanon as part of the UNIFIL and a total of 16,000 troops abroad, the French defense forces have entered their critical "red zone" in which troops procurement is becoming extremely difficult. Yet this is no reason for France to diminish its engagement in Afghanistan. Despite several losses in the recent months and an undeniably deteriorating situation in southern Afghanistan, the French people remain relatively favourable to the participation of their troops in the war. The French government and armed forces are therefore under no particular domestic pressure to diminish their efforts. It simply seems like France has indeed lost hope for an improvement of the Afghan situation, and prefers to focus on more promising missions elsewhere.

France's attitude is regrettable for Afghanistan and for the Atlantic Alliance's unity. For General James Jones, NATO's top operational commander, there is a need for 2500 more troops to combat Taliban insurgency and reverse the situation before the onset of winter. Germany has approved to extend its contingent's mandate for another year, but skepticism is spreading among the other

members; some of ISAF's main contributors are increasingly doubtful. Several members of the British Army have recently denounced the inefficiency of the fighting in Afghanistan, while the Netherlands and Canada are starting to question the role of their armies there. Apart from Poland and Romania, General Jones's appeal has remained largely unanswered, and the US is hoping to get some of their Afghanistan troops to join their struggle in Iraq.

While France is trying to minimise the gravity of the withdrawal of its Special Forces from Afghanistan, its attitude towards the conflict augurs bad for the approaching winter. This pessimism is spreading to other members of the Atlantic Alliance, which is called on to undertake an increasing number of missions, from building-reconstruction to narcotic-traffic prevention. Recent attacks on civilians and the unfruitful efforts to establish peace in the regions it controls are endangering local support for NATO. All these elements added together can only make one doubtful of General Jones's belief that "Everybody's working very hard to make sure that we have the right amount of forces at the right place at the time. [Thirty-seven nations are] dedicated to a very important mission, one that I personally believe has all of the ingredients for a success".

By arrangement with IPCS, New Delhi

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# EU needs 'common road map' to reach common defense market



BROOKS TIGNER, BRUSSELS

National governments must jettison their protectionist attitudes and strive for uniform rules to support the creation of a common defense market across the European Union, said the head of Europe's largest defense industry lobby group.

"To prosper, the European defense market needs to become less fragmented, with coherent regulatory requirements on national levels," François Gayet, secretary-general of the AeroSpace and Defense Industries Association of Europe (ASD), based here, said Oct. 10 in London. "Only then can we achieve a defense market that is balanced, fair and open."

Addressing a defense industry conference, Gayet said Europe's defense sector demands "first and foremost" a reform of national markets by moving their governments and industries beyond "deep-rooted mentalities where protectionism is the norm within the member states and the supply chain."

He said this requires "a common road map" that links national capitals, EU institutions and Europe's defense supply chain to coordinate work in three areas:

The European defense equipment market.

Defense research and technology.

Europe's defense and industrial base.

Not coincidentally, the European Defense Agency (EDA)

has produced initiatives in each of these areas, based on input from governments and industry groups such as ASD.

Asked if the 25 EU nations could achieve a common defense industrial policy that encourages innovation and efficiency on the supply side, Gayet said yes. But, he added, an industrial strategy for the sector "can only be achieved through a joint, all-encompassing and synchronized top-down and bottom-up effort, including all member states and the supply chain."

Gayet said the EDA's new long-term vision document was "a major step forward" to achieving a single European defense market. Released Oct. 3, the 25-page document analyzes the security challenges Europe will face in 20 years and the defense planning choices that should be implemented today to avoid the risk of undermining Europe's ability to maintain and project military power.

Within the last six months, the agency also has launched a code of conduct for prying open national procurement tenders to cross-border competition, and a code of best practice for industry regarding the fair treatment of second- and third-tier suppliers along Europe's defense supply chain.

Referring to all three policy documents, Gayet said, "We have all the necessary ingredients for a single consolidated, fair and open European defense market."

Courtesy, DefenseNews.com

# ULFA: The deadlocked talks and the road ahead

RANI PATHAK

THE main question in Assam today is whether the Government and the ULFA are actually interested in talking peace to find a solution? This question is relevant as the unprecedented peace initiative was derailed after merely a six-week-long temporary truce on flimsy grounds. When the ULFA handpicked 11 members and formed the People's Consultative Group (PCG) in September 2005, hopes for peace was high in Assam. Since their formation in 1979 with the avowed objective of achieving a 'sovereign, Socialist Assam', this was probably the best option for peace. When, a year and three rounds of PCG-Centre talk later New Delhi announced a 15-day unilateral truce on August 13, such hopes were reinforced. The guns and the ULFA bombs fell silent for a while until the Centre revoked the suspension of military operations on September 24. Assam started bleeding again.

The peace process got off the rails for the following reasons:

The Army publicly expressed doubts (through a press statement issued by the Press Information Bureau's Defence Wing) about the ULFA's intentions to launch an offensive even when the so-called truce was on, suggesting that the Union government was talking in different voices.

The ULFA stuck to its demand for release of five of its detained leaders saying their presence was needed for any decision on the issue of entering into talks with the Government.

The ULFA refused to name its team of negotiators.

The Union government insisted on a written assurance from the ULFA that it was actually interested in talking peace with New Delhi.

The ULFA refused to give such a written assurance saying if it were not interested in peace talks, it would not have formed the PCG in the first place. To that extent, the ULFA had a point. The Government's demand cannot be

From the Government's point of view, intelligence agencies and security forces including the Army, paramilitary and the police, were rattled by evidence of the ULFA stepping up its extortion drive among the trade and business community, including the tea industry, and appearing to regroup itself. The cat-and-mouse game began all over again with the ULFA resuming its grenade and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks, killing and injuring security personnel as well as innocent civilians.

justified as it was holding talks with the PCG, which was accepted as a bridge between New Delhi and the ULFA. The PCG clearly acknowledged that its purpose was to prepare the ground for a direct meeting between the Government and the rebel leaders. The Government's apprehension about the fallout of the release of the five detained ULFA leaders was understandable; in 1992, some ULFA leaders had jumped parole and went underground after a failed meeting with then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao.

From the Government's point of view, intelligence agencies and

security forces including the Army, paramilitary and the police, were rattled by evidence of the ULFA stepping up its extortion drive among the trade and business community, including the tea industry, and appearing to regroup itself. It became serious when ULFA cadres attacked a police patrol and later killed a tea planter in the third week of September. These incidents hastened New Delhi into calling off the suspension of military operations against the ULFA. The cat-and-mouse game began all over again with the ULFA resuming its grenade and improvised explosive device (IED)

attacks, killing and injuring security personnel as well as innocent civilians.

Several questions assume importance: Is the ULFA under pressure from its foreign mentors not to join the peace bandwagon? Is the ULFA really independent enough as an organization to make important decisions on its own? Is there a division within the ULFA over the issue of peace talks? The ULFA has been denying that it was under the influence of any external force.

The tragedy so far is that there is no meaningful contribution from civil society to get things back on

track. The PCG is certainly not a civil society body because its members were handpicked by the ULFA. But, it was seen as a catalyst and, therefore, all pro-peace groups and individuals took its role seriously.

But, the PCG formally announced its withdrawal from the process of negotiations on the matter with New Delhi, thereby exposing its limitations or inability to deal with the issue from a broader perspective. By withdrawing from the peace talks, the PCG had failed as a peacemaker or as a go-between. But, as things stand today, the PCG's relevance is not yet lost and the group, either on its own, or at the Government's initiative, must make a second attempt to work things out and get the peace process back on rails.

By arrangement with IPCS, New Delhi

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