

# The Battle of Kamalpur-31 July 1971

Not known to many is the fact that the Mukti Bahini had started engaging the occupation forces at the very early stages of the War of Liberation in conventional battles. One of the many such significant battles was the "Battle of Kamalpur" launched against the Pakistani forces by troops of Z Force, commanded by the then Major Ziaur Rahman, on 31 July 1971. On the eve of the Victory Day we publish a brief account of the battle, excerpted from the book "Bangladesh at War" by Maj Gen K M Safiullah BU, psc (Retd)

KAMALPUR was a strong Pakistani border outpost situated on the mouth of the old Brahmaputra and on the road link with Mymensingh via Jamalpur. It contained concrete bunkers with shell-proof roofs. Communication trenches were dug in to provide communication between bunkers. The defence had in its perimeter booby traps and minefield. The Pakistani troops used to fall back on the inner line of defence in hours of darkness.

Captain Salahuddin Momtaz was in Quetta. He was a soldier with a lion's heart full of patriotic zeal. It was rather impossible for him to remain a silent spectator when Bangladesh was bleeding. In a desperate attempt he was successful in escaping to his motherland during early July and reported to 'Z' Force. Salahuddin Momtaz joined 1 East Bengal.

The battalion at that time was contemplating to launch a big offensive. In order, therefore, to undertake such an operation, information about the enemy was vital. Salahuddin Momtaz was one of those who were sent on reconnaissance missions to collect information about the enemy. He at times conducted some very daring reconnaissance missions at Kamalpur border outpost.

During one such mission he ran across an enemy patrol which indicated to the enemy our aggressive posture. Enemy strength at Kamalpur was immediately raised to two companies of 31 Baluch excluding Razakars.

The information was thus obtained and a plan was made.

The attack was to be launched from the north-east of the enemy post with two companies. Delta on the left and Bravo on the right, commanded respectively by Salahuddin Momtaz and Hafiz.

From the assembly area they moved. Delta Company leading followed by Bravo Company. Next in order was the battalion

came under a very heavy fire and started sustaining casualties. Their movement became slow. Since the bulk of the troops did not have previous war experience they began to go to ground more frequently than the enemy shelling. Salahuddin played a heroic role at this stage in reviving the morale of his troops. They then moved on.

The outer perimeter was being vacated by the enemy,

self, fearless Salahuddin Momtaz snubbed one of his faithful soldiers saying, "Yahya Khan has not yet been able to manufacture the bullet that would kill me."

Those were not the last words. Two shells dropped in front of Salahuddin Momtaz. Twice he shook and then all was over.

Salahuddin Momtaz murmured, "If you have to die, die

incidents left the two attacking companies in a state of chaos and confusion. The community centre situated behind the forming up place was getting filled with battle casualties. Ultimately at 7-30 am Moin ordered the battalion to withdraw.

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Both enemy and own troops died in a great number in this action. The Pakistanis for the first time realised that Bengalees knew how to fight fearlessly. The Senior Tigers evoked fear in the mind of the enemy at Kamalpur. The concrete bunkers saved them from bullets and artillery shells but not from fear. This battle was most significant in the sense that it taught the first lesson of attack to the new recruits of the Bengal Regiments. Lessons learned at Kamalpur were never lost sight of by us. Subsequently, when the series of attacks continued, the spirit of Kamalpur came back every time.

orders group (O group) where in addition to Moin, the battalion commander, Zia, was also present. At H-hour own artillery was programmed to provide covering fire.

The attacking troops were absolutely raw. There was a bit of confusion at the forming up place resulting in delay in the move. It was all due to the officers' personal example and motivation that the troops started moving on to the objective.

As they moved towards the objective the enemy artillery also opened up. Our troops

Our troops entered the outer perimeter and began to cross the minefield. The enemy was bringing in effective fire on us from the shell-proof bunkers of the inner defence.

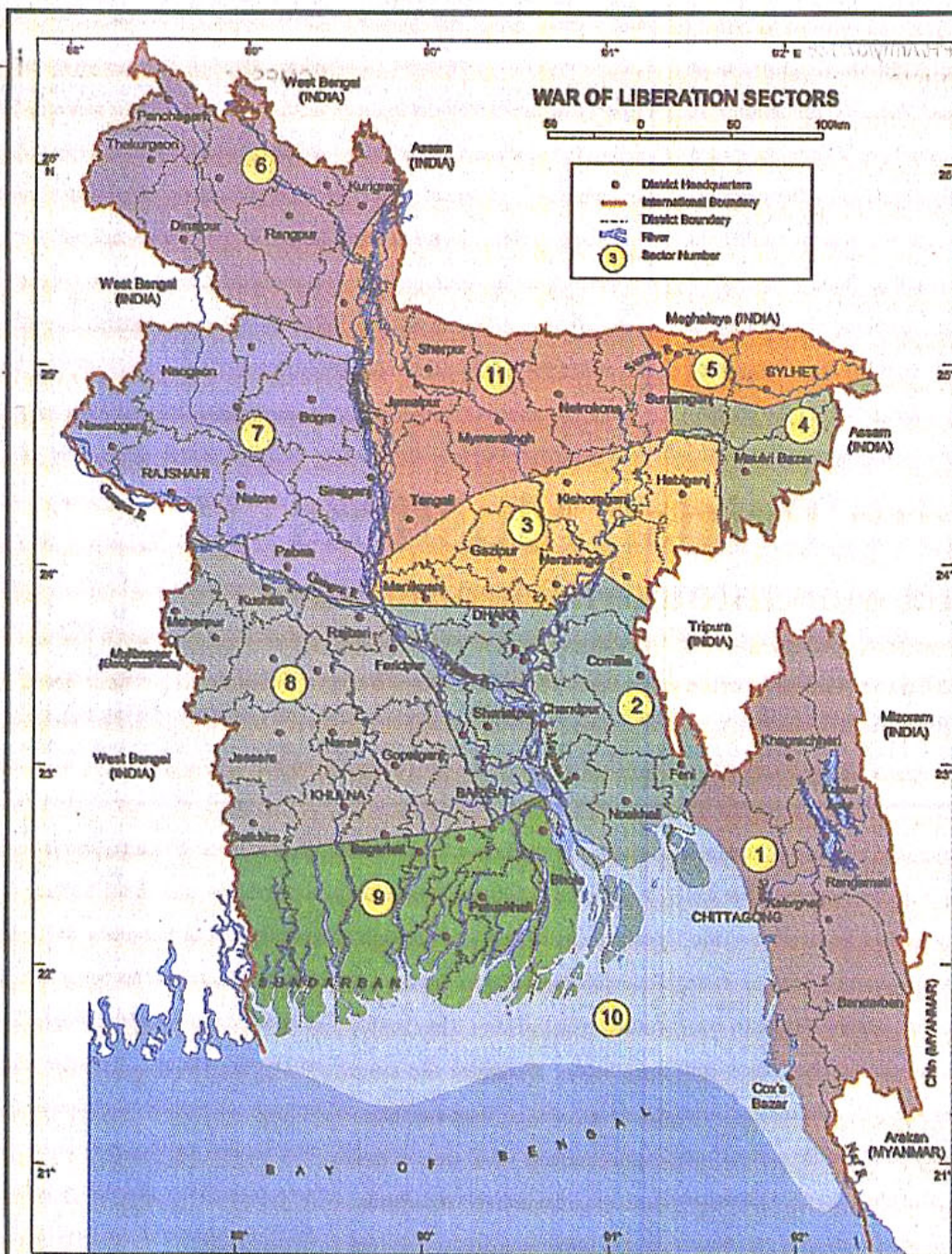
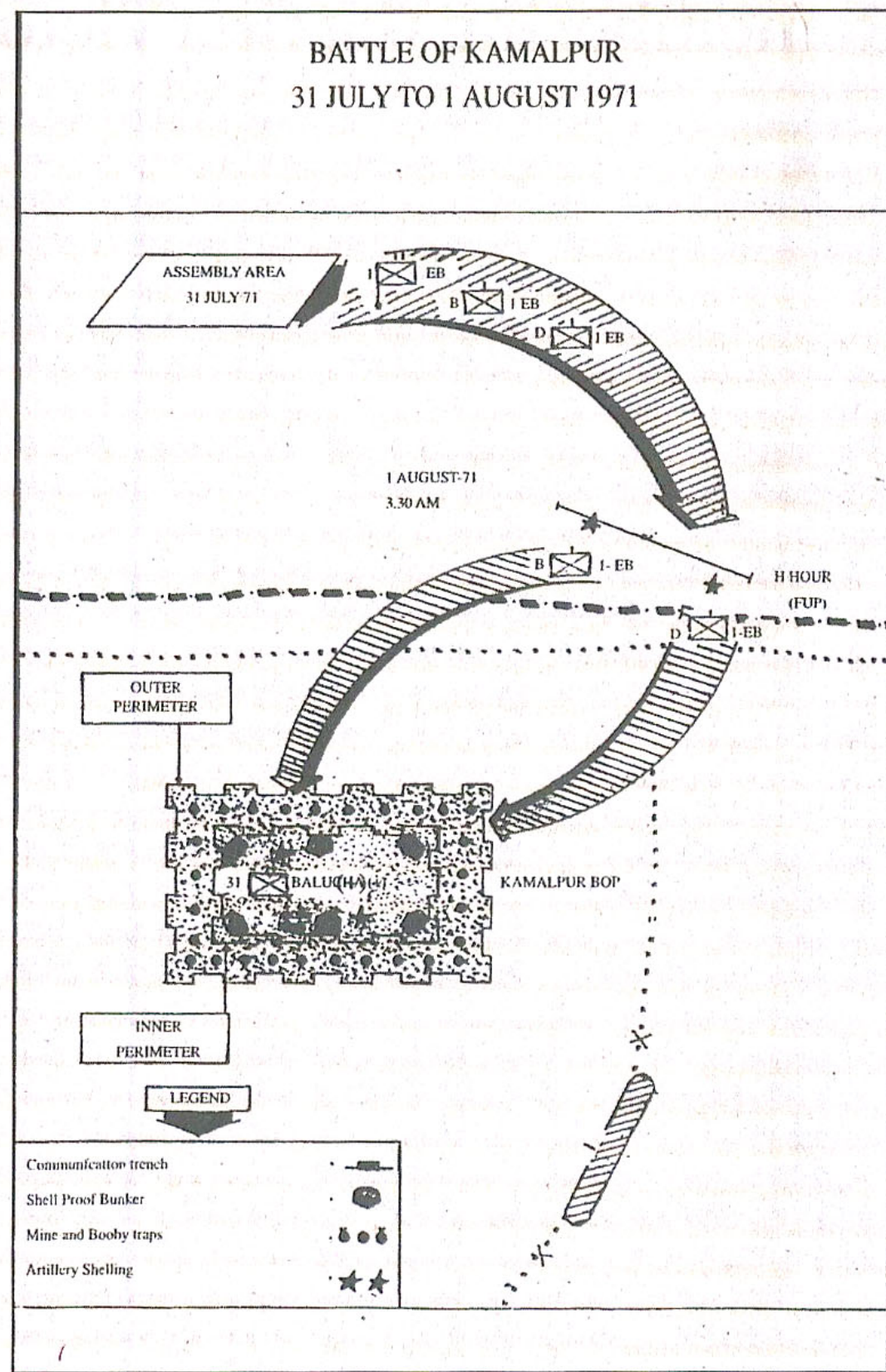
The battle started gaining momentum. Casualties were piling up. But there was no going back, Salahuddin Momtaz, who had dynamic leadership quality, was leading the troops into the inner defence. Shouting at the top of his voice, he was directing his men and chanting words of encouragement to them. An embodiment of courage him-

after killing the enemy. Die on the soil of Bangladesh." Salahuddin's body could not be retrieved. Three soldiers died in their attempt to retrieve the dead body of their beloved leader. However, his watch, sten gun and some papers were retrieved.

Hafiz miraculously escaped death. His sten gun blew off by an enemy artillery shell splinter. He got injured. Naik Rabiul ran in the face of enemy fire to evacuate Hafiz to safety. But he was mortally injured there.

Salahuddin Momtaz and died Hafiz was injured. These

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## SECTOR COMMANDERS

- S1 - Major Ziaur Rahman, later replaced by Major Rafiqul Islam.
- S2 - Major Khaled Mosharraf.
- S3 - Major KM Shafiullah, later replaced by Major ANM Nuruzzaman.
- S4 - Major Chittarajan Datta.
- S5 - Major Mir Shawkat Ali.
- S6 - Wing Commander M Khdemul Bashar.
- S7 - Major Nazmul Haq, later replaced by Major Qazi Nuruzzaman.
- S8 - Major Abu Osman Chowdhury, later replaced by Major MA Manzur.
- S9 - Major MA Jalil.
- S10 - This sector was directly under the C-in-C. It included the eastern part of CHT upto Teknaf. This sector was not made operative. Later special Naval Commando operation area were re-designated into this sector.
- S11 - Major M Abu Taher.

Source: Bangladesh at War" by Maj Gen K M Safiullah BU, psc (Retd).

## The unsettled scores of Liberation War

BILLY I AHMED

EACH year when the month of December descends, it reminds us of the massacre at the fag end of the Liberation War.

The horror of December 14, 1971, when Jamaat, Al-Badr and Al-Shams brutally killed renowned academics, litterateurs, doctors, engineers, journalists and other eminent personalities with a view to leave the nation intellectually crippled on December 14, 2007, still rings the bell.

This story of impunity over last 35 years and the political movement in Bangladesh to bring alleged war criminals to justice remains an enigmatic conclusion.

One of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's first political promises as leader of the nation was to bring to justice those who had committed war crimes during the nine months of Liberation War, in which over a million Bengalis were killed. The genocide, perpetrated by the Pakistan army, began in March '71, and ended last few days before the surrender of the Pakistan army with an attempt to eliminate the Bengali intellectual elite.

The Bangladesh state has never been able to deliver on this pledge. Initially, international pressure coupled with Sheikh Mujib's desire for "national reconciliation" contributed to its failure. Later the imposition of military rule (following Sheikh Mujib's assassination in 1975) and the re-emergence of forces in Bangladesh, which had collaborated with the Pakistan military, paralyzed any possibility of accountability for war crimes.

Is it that the blanket amnesty issued by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in January, 1972 due to the pressure from Islamic countries (including the OIC), chaotic internal situation, or the necessity to encourage peace and development steps to be considered for recognition and International Aid without which Bangladesh had the famine of 1973-74? Whatever may be the cause, the general amnesty was the first among many political mistakes which opened the door for rehabilitation of the war criminals of 1971.

Thirty-six years on, the unsettled scores of the Liberation war continue to haunt politics in Bangladesh. One legacy of this history of impunity is the success of many alleged war criminals in acquiring positions of leadership and influence, both inside Bangladesh and within

Bangladeshi communities abroad.

In 1990, with return to democracy, the nation demanded prosecution of local 'Bengali' collaborators for war crimes resurfaced. This chimed with a new national mood that sought to recover the histories of the Liberation struggle.

The main local collaborators of Pakistan military were the followers of the Islamist group Jamaat-e-Islami. The party's support was based in part on its total antagonism to avowedly secular politics of the Awami League. During the war, the Jamaat turned its youth into armed militia, Al Badr, which hunted down supporters of the independence movement whom it identified as enemies of Islam. The slaughter of the Bengali intellectuals in the week before the surrender of the Pakistan military was its work.

The new state of Bangladesh faced demands for war crime trials of both the Pakistan army officers who were then held in India as well as their local collaborators who had failed to escape from Bangladesh. In the meantime, many of the leaders of Jamaat and Al Badr had already fled the country fearing retribution.

The few trials that did take place in Bangladesh faced international criticism for their failure to distinguish clearly between political collaboration and war crimes. In addition, two years later, Mujib issued a general amnesty for those who had committed 'political crimes'. Although this specifically excluded those involved in serious violence, in effect the whole process of accountability came to a halt.

In 1973, the government instituted new legislation in order to be able to proceed against Pakistan military officers still held in India. It allowed for war crime trials within Bangladesh and provided the Indian government with the names of the 195 officers whom Bangladesh wished to stand trial.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had declared only 195 Pakistani soldiers as war criminals in the liberation war of Bangladesh. However, by 1974, under pressure from the Indian government, which was by then seeking some sort of peace with Pakistan, and concerned about the thousands of Bangladeshis held in West Pakistan since the beginning of the war, Sheikh Mujib signed an

agreement that pardoned and repatriated the 195 Pakistani soldiers through Bhutto-Indira Simla pact.

Jamaat had been constitutionally banned in Bangladesh up until 1976 since the independence of the country, until late president Ziaur Rahman, who was the chief martial law administrator at the time, reinstated it in mainstream politics despite their fundamentalist ideology. It has steadily rebuilt itself into a strong political force, and was often courted by other parties for support in elections and first came to share state power with BNP in 2001 as part of the immediate past ruling alliance.

The government ban on the Jamaat and other fundamentalist parties had made legitimate political activity impossible. Many escaped to Pakistan, some to England, others to the USA and Canada.

Any further moves by the Awami League were abruptly curtailed by the assassination of Mujib in August 1975. This led to 15 years of military dictatorship that depended for support on 'collaborationist' political forces. In 1977, General Ziaur Rahman, ironically, a celebrated freedom fighter in 1971 war, allowed the

Jamat to return to active politics in Bangladesh; many of its members returned to Bangladesh, including its leader Gholam Azam, who had lived the intervening years in Britain. In their interest, the true history of the liberation war was suppressed and distorted.

Although the leader of Jamaat-e-Islami, Gholam Azam's citizenship was revoked, the whole political scenario was changed after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. General Ziaur Rahman granted Gholam Azam Bangladeshi citizenship, released all the war criminals imprisoned on various criminal charges and by amending the constitution allowed them to be involved in politics. Many of them were also awarded and posted with high designation both nationally and internationally.

In the meantime, Al Badr leaders who lived abroad established sister Jamaat organizations in their respective countries. In Britain, for instance, at least two of the leaders of Dawatul Islam were senior members of the Al Badr accused of many killings. By the early 1980s, Dawatul Islam had gained total control of the biggest mosque

serving the Bangladesh community in Britain.

In an interview with a Dhaka based Bengali daily newspaper on August 8, 2007, Matiur Rahman Nizami, chief of Jamaat-e-Islami and former Industrial Minister, blasted how could they be called or accused as war criminals when none has even filed a general diary with the police against them.

When a person or a group is involved against national, racial or religious groups to destroy their political and social institutions, culture, language, national feelings, religion, economic existence, and the destruction of personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups, what is left to mark them as war criminals?

The impunity the Jamaat has enjoyed may, however, be coming to an end. The government has initiated the trial - now in progress - of the alleged murderers of Sheikh Mujib. There is also growing support within the country for trial of Jamaat leaders who have been involved in the atrocities of 1971 and still resident in Bangladesh.

The author is a columnist and researcher.



Niaz being led to the surrender ceremony

PHOTO: COURTESY MAJ GEN K M SAFIULLAH BU, PSC