

The military commanders of the Liberation War had to perform the enormously difficult and challenging job of organising and leading the Mukti Bahini. On their success depended the future of the nation... Today, after 36 years, they look back to the events and episodes of 1971.



Air Vice Marshal AK Khondkar BU, Deputy Chief of Staff, Bangladesh Liberation Forces, focuses on the demand for bringing the 1971 war criminals to justice in a conversation with Shahnoor Wahid, Senior Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

Q. When you engaged yourself in the Liberation War did you have any information about the paramilitary forces like Al-Badr or Al-Shams and Razakars operating inside Bangladesh?

Ans: Initially we did not have any clear idea about them but we heard something about Shanti Committees and Razakars. But later on during the war we got reports from our freedom fighters about the inhuman atrocities that they carried out on the innocent civilian population.

Q. The resurgence of the 1971 war criminals in the recent months has come into focus. What is your comment on this?

Ans: For committing the barbaric genocide in Bangladesh, everyone expected the war criminals to be tried and sentenced but it is most unfortunate that it didn't happen. Today, everyone carries that pain in his or her heart. Here it should be mentioned clearly that all

those who have taken part in the killings directly or indirectly are equally guilty. As far as we know, about 36,000 people were accused of committing crimes and were arrested. But later, about 25,000 were set free and trial of about 11,000 people was going on. After the brutal murder of Bangabandhu, the government of Ziaur Rahman on 31 December 1975, cancelled the collaborator law and as a result, all the trials came to a stop. The Governments that came to power later did not take any initiative regarding the trial of the war criminals.

The recent comments of the Jamaat leaders generated profound anger in the minds of the people. We wonder where did they get the audacity to say that there was no such thing as Liberation War or that there were no collaborators; there were no war criminals or that it was a civil war and not a Liberation War. They also said that freedom fighters actually crossed the borders to enjoy their life there. That is why we the sector commanders got together and took the decision that we must organise our people and raise a demand to make sure that they are tried for their crimes.

Q: What do you think you

have to do to give an impetus to this movement so that you can reach the ultimate goal?

Ans: We have decided to involve people from every walk of life; in fact, the entire nation has to be mobilised to attain the common goal. To this effect, we the sector commanders took the decision to contact the deputy sector commanders, unit commanders, freedom fighters and local level politicians.

Q: There was a mass uprising in 1990 against the autocratic regime. Are you planning to see an uprising on that scale with the participation of the people at all levels?

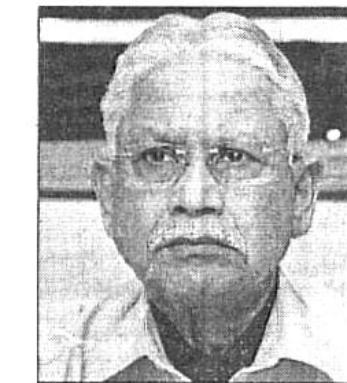
Ans: We have already established useful contacts with the cultural organisations, media, professional and civil society groups. Recently we have had a meeting with the editors of a number of newspapers and electronic media personalities. The exchange of ideas and opinions was very encouraging.

Q: How are the existing laws going to help you in attaining your goal?

Ans: The Pakistani troops and officials were taken as war prisoners to India after the liberation of the country. Then in the Simla Pact in 1972 India and Pakistan talked about war prisoners but not a word was said about the war criminals.

Then in 1974 a tripartite agreement took place in which 219 war criminals were identified but later it was reduced to 118. But these 118 war criminals were later released on the assurance that the Pakistan government would put them on the dock for trial. But it was never done.

Their trial can still be held under the International Crimes (Tribunal) Act 1973. I don't think there is any legal obstacle in trying the war criminals.



General KM Saifullah BU, psc (Commander Sector-3) reminisces about the 1971 events in a chat with Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan ndc, psc(retd), Editor, Defence and Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

Punjabi officers of the rank of major in 2 EB attended the meetings when there was the Bengali commanding officer present at the unit.

TDS: So they had exposed their attitude as early as that?

KMS: Yes. And it got worse after the 7th Mar speech of Bangabandhu. We were told by the brigade headquarters that the Indians might launch an attack and move inside our territory exploiting the political situation in the country. So we were to move to our battle locations. But of course we saw through their plans.

TDS: What was the state of the other East Bengal battalions?

KMS: All were moved out from peace locations. Khaled's company was

that the Pakistani battalion had orders to destroy his troops. He stooped short of Shamsher Nagar.

TDS: When exactly did you decide to revolt?

KMS: On 19 Mar. And there was a prelude to that.

TDS: The Joydebpur rail gate incident?

KMS: Exactly! On 17 March there were rumours among the public that 2 East Bengal was going to be disbanded anytime soon. So they had put up barricades all along the road from Tongi to the Joydebpur rail gate to prevent movement of Pakistani troops.

On 19 March the 57 brigade commander himself along with a contingent of heavily armed troops came down to our regiment. His pretext was to have lunch with us but actually wanted to take a stock of the situation personally. While there, he was informed that some people had barricaded the rail crossing by moving some rail wagons and the engines were de-linked and dispatched to Tongi. 2 EB was ordered to remove the barricade by force and if need be we were to open fire for effect. We managed to remove the barricade but the troops were told in Bangla that they were to fire over the heads of the public. But nonetheless two people died while several were injured. But what was held against us was that while we had fired 62 rounds there were only two dead. The brigade commander wanted more dead bodies. We had not obliged and he got the idea of things to come.

TDS: Do you think the freedom fighters have got their due?

KMS: We did not go to war to get anything in return. No amount of money can compensate the sacrifices of the freedom fighters. But they must be given due recognition and respect.

TDS: You are calling for trial of razakars...

KMS: Yes. It is the state that must try them and that too in a special tribunal. We will also call upon the political parties to declare in their manifesto that they will not enter into electoral alliances or agreement with any party involved in war crimes.

TDS: What about the values of the Liberation War?

KMS: It is not all lost yet. It is for everybody to see that it is spread to the future generation.

TDS: Thank you sir.

KMS: Thanks to The Daily Star too.



Sector Commander KM Saifullah (middle) with Pakistani General Niazi (left) and General Jacob of the Indian Eastern Command at the surrender ceremony on Dec. 16, 1971.



Lt Gen Mir Shawkat Ali BU, psc (Commander Sector-5) shares his experiences and views in a tête-à-tête with Brig Gen Shahedul Anam Khan (retd), Editor, Defence and Strategic Affairs, The Daily Star.

TDS: Thank you Sir for affording us the time to share some of your thoughts in this very auspicious month of Dec.

TDS: Did you get to listen to the 7 March speech?

MSA: Yes. But he did not say, "Fight from today." That he did not ask. In fact what Sheikh Mujib did was prepare the whole country for war. Someone had to say it so that the whole country gets together. If Zia had not declared independence, there would have been fight but those would have been scattered. They would have been wondering whether other parts of the country had revolted or not. So Zia's announcement was also very important because it clearly told the whole nation that everyone everywhere had joined the revolt.

TDS: And that happens to be the only directive?

MSA: Yes. But if you say that Zia's announcement brought Bangladesh, you would be very wrong. No one in his or her right mind would say that a major's announcement has brought Bangladesh together. And if you say that Sheikh Mujib gave the announcement of the independence of the country that would also be wrong. He said he would, and he said if he couldn't give orders we should revolt. But that was a political speech; suppose he was made the prime minister of Pakistan, then what would have happened?

TDS: And this without any political direction or instruction of sorts?

MSA: Well, we were in fact waiting for some sort of political directive, which never came. But we had a Bangabandhu and his 7 Mar speech to go by, in which he

had laid out what was to be done, should such a situation arise when we might have to resort to arms, and should he not be in a position to give orders. His call to create fortress of every house was clear enough a directive, which motivated us to de-link from the Pak army and take up arms. We took up arms, first as way to defend ourselves from the onslaught of a rapacious Pak military machine, and then subsequently to organise resistance and eventually defeat the enemy.

TDS: Did you get to listen to the 7 March speech?

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TDS: Some of your reflections of those days?

MSA: The profundity of the experience is that we as Mukti Bahini would not have survived without the support of the people inside Bangladesh. Their help, the hardship they endured on account of us was tremendous. I remember an entire village was burned to ashes by the occupation Pakistan army for giving us shelter. In fact we had stopped over that village for a breather after an operation, very briefly.

TDS: Do you think our Liberation War should have continued longer for us to internalise its significance?

We could have defeated the Pakis without any outside help eventually. It might have taken a few months longer but we would have done it on our own.

TDS: And do many people share your views?

MSA: Oh yes, many freedom fighters would agree that if the war went on for two more months, the Pak army would not have lasted. They continue to be neglected.

TDS: Why do you say so... were they running out of supplies?

MSA: Absolutely... they were

running out of ammunition.

TDS: In any case if not 16 December, then maybe 72 July or August may have seen victory?

MSA: Of course. And the mistake that was made was that we did not establish a Revolutionary Council.

TDS: It should have been done during the war?

MSA: No, after the war... to run the country.

TDS: Then why was a separate force created?

MSA: Because they were afraid that we would not hand over the heads of the public. But they did that.

TDS: Ours was I suppose, the shortest but bloodiest liberation war in history?

MSA: Yes, but that wasn't necessary. We were winning every day.

TDS: Do you think you will be able to force the issue of the war criminals?

MSA: I think that if the people of this country have any self-respect, then definitely the war criminals will be punished.

TDS: Do you think the freedom fighters have got their due after liberation?

MSA: The FFs were not given their due after Independence. On 18 Dec there was an order from the government saying that we cannot provide ration anymore so tell the guerrillas to go back to their homes. So that means we became toothless.

TDS: Why do you say so... were they running out of supplies?

MSA: Absolutely... they were

various ways. For example in the brigade conferences only the non-Bengali officers were asked to attend.

sent to Shamsher Nagar to take over from 31 Punjab. But he got the information before arriving at the spot

I saw that the Pak army was in a very strong position. Perhaps an entire battalion, with air support and mechanized weapons. Their headquarters were at the airport.

At this point we were very disorganized, with no real coordination. But this changed. By May I was in touch with General Osmany.

By this time we had somewhere from 15-20,000 freedom fighters organised.

Mostly students, but with some 500 EPR personnel and 150 or so on-leave soldiers.

Rab and Manik Choudhury collected all the EPR personnel in the area.

I was in charge of Sector 4, Sylhet, from Tamabil all the way to Agartala, some 300 miles. All the tea estates fell within our area. Our military goal was to ensure that there would be no export of tea, to

in fact destroy the machinery for manufacture of tea, and to take Sylhet town.

At this point we had perhaps 150 Bangladeshis under our command, mainly on-leave soldiers, and we advanced to the Surma River, and set up our headquarters in Moulvibazar.

Q. All these years after the War of liberation, do you ever look back and feel you could have maybe done things in a different way?

Ans: We did it the right way. Going to war was the only way we could solve the problems which, in fact, actually started back in 1952. There was no other way, no other path we could possibly have taken but to take up arms.

Q. When did it dawn on you that you needed to leave your position in the Pak armed forces and join the liberation struggle?

Ans: My life in the armed forces was mainly in West Pakistan. As such, I was not

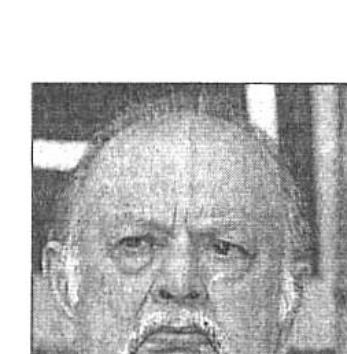
sector commanders are trying to organise against war criminals and other anti-liberation forces. Tell me about this.

Ans: We simply want war criminals brought to justice. They should not be permitted to participate in elections. It makes no difference if this was not done before. It needs to be done now.

Q. As a valiant freedom fighter, what message would you like to convey about the future of Bangladesh?

Ans: We must lift our heads up high and say: "We are independent." We should be proud of what we have achieved. We have fought -- for our language, for our culture, for our values, for our freedom -- and we have won.

The spirit of our Liberation War must live on in all of us and we should never forget or betray the ideals of this war.



Maj. Gen. C. R. Dutta BU (Commander Sector-4) talks with Zafar Sobhan, Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

really aware of how bad things were in Bangladesh. Radio and TV in West Pakistan did not report such things.

I came home for three months' vacation in January 1971. It was then that I became fully aware of how bad things were, and began wondering what I should do.

Then, on March 7, Bangabandhu gave his famous speech. This was my inspiration. I decided that I would do everything I could for the freedom of my people.

But, still, I was not sure what steps to take. I knew no one.

On March 26, General (then Major) Rab, called me at my home in Habiganj. He told me: "Get ready, we are coming for you. Today we are going to liberate Sylhet."

At this point we had perhaps 150 Bangladeshis under our command, mainly on-leave soldiers, and we advanced to the Surma River, and set up our headquarters in Moulvibazar.

Q. At present, the surviving