

## Dazzling war memories of a valiant freedom fighter

DURDANA GHIAS

Sakhina Begum, a freedom fighter in her seventies now, was plodding on the premises of the Liberation War Museum. Bent with the burden of age her eyes were still shining with memories of the nine-month bloody war.

Anybody talking with this old woman will easily discern the spirit of the Liberation War still burning inside her as she reminisces the hopes and horrors of warfare.

As this correspondent approached her, she said: "In the month of March 1971, I heard about the call of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib. At that time I was living in the village Guroi under Nikli thana of Kishoreganj. The villagers were heading towards the border areas to receive training for participating in the war. Seeing the young men going to the war I also felt like doing something for my motherland," she said.

Despite some discouragements from her neighbours Sakhina went ahead to join the guerrilla freedom fighters known as the Mukti Bahini. "My neighbours discouraged me a lot because of my being a young woman but that did not stop me from joining the war," she said.

"During the nine months I worked as a spy for the Mukti Bahini. Previously I lived in Kolkata for sometime where I worked as an amateur spy to find out lost children. From that practice I got the idea of working as a spy," said Sakhina.

She took a one-month training at the Liluchia camp at Palash



Freedom fighter Sakhina Begum, top, and the famous 'dao' (machete) with which she killed five Razakars. The 'dao' is now preserved at the Liberation War Museum.

under the Basu Bahini. Her company commander was Md Abdul Motaleb. "My fellow fighters were taken aback hearing that I

wanted to be a spy and inquired about the job of spying. I told them about it and then my company commander appointed me," she said.

After her initial training Sakhina started to work with the intelligence section of the freedom fighters' group collecting information on the enemy positions and movements.

"I carried secret information to and from Bargaon, Guroi, Pudda, Gaglai, Denapati, Danabhati, Koirail, Shorachol and many other villages," she said.

Sakhina remembers clearly how in five separate operations

Museum the 'dao' (machete) with which she killed the collaborators.

"While on duty I always carried a 'dao' with me. Several times I was intercepted by the Razakars and in some cases I had to kill them to clear my way," she said.

"Once I was intercepted by the Pakistan Army at Shorachol but they set me free since I was fluent in Urdu. I told them that I was a Bihari and was fond of Gelasi, a local delicacy. Hearing my Urdu and about Gelasi they became convinced," said Sakhina.

After her young nephew Motiur, a freedom fighter, was martyred in the war, she got more determined to fight the occupation forces. "Seeing my nephew die from bleeding in a bullet wound I became determined to avenge his death," she said.

In 1999, Sakhina got state recognition as a freedom fighter and received Tk 50,000 from the then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

"I have a peaceful feeling when I come to the Liberation War Museum. Every year in December the museum invites me to come and participate in their programmes. I feel the spirit of the Liberation War when I come here," she said.

"Now I have grown old and lost the energy I had at my young age. At that time I had the determination to accomplish my missions even if I had to kill my enemies. From today's young generation I want the same kind of spirit, determination and love for their motherland," said Sakhina.



A portion of the Gulshan Lake being 'temporarily' filled up to build a bridge for a link road in the area.

## Earth-filling of Gulshan Lake to build bridge raises outcry

TAWFIQUE ALI

Land filling in the Gulshan Lake to build a bridge will virtually destroy the water body and encourage the land grabbers, worried local residents apprehended.

The project officials however said the land filling is temporary and they will remove the earth from the lake-bed on completion of the construction work.

Environmental experts alleged that the project has been undertaken without obtaining environmental clearance or doing proper impact assessment while transport experts said there has been no detailed engineering analysis for construction of the bridge.

Vice-president of Gulshan Society Delwar Hossain Dulal said that the land filling sand will remain in the lake for the next two years and it will naturally spread all around, resulting in sedimentation and filling of the lake's bed.

"The lake will ultimately go into a process of earth-filling and land grabbing," he said.

Another vice president of the society Fazlur Rahman said that ultimately the land filling would not be removed, as past experiences suggest. "We apprehend this may turn into a step towards further destruction of

the lake," Rahman said.

Director of Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers' Association (Bela) Syeda Rizwana Hasan said Bela on November 26 wrote a letter to the Local Government Engineering Division (LGED), implementing agency of the project, asking whether they have obtained environmental clearance or carried out any environmental impact assessment for construction of the bridge, as required by the Environmental Conservation Act of 1995.

"But the project authorities have not yet responded," she said.

The Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives has undertaken the Tk 12.47 crore project.

But a good number of Gulshan residents, who are likely to be affected, are opposing the proposed bridge across Gulshan-Banani Lake, linking road-11 of Banani with the road-41 of Gulshan, saying it will mess up the residential area with worsening traffic situation.

They apprehend that the traffic rush across the bridge will aggravate congestion in the areas adjoining roads 41, 44, 39 and 35 in Gulshan, once the 60 feet wide commercial road-11 of

Banani is linked with the 40 feet wide road-41 in Gulshan.

They suggest that the 60 feet wide road-11 should be connected with road-34 of similar width, as the road directly leads to Gulshan Avenue.

The residents alleged that no noticeable survey of traffic situation or community consultation was carried out for the project.

Md Haider Ali, director of the project and executive engineer of LGED, said land filling in the lake is just a temporary 'artificial island' for piling of a pier in the middle of the lake. "We have adopted this method as dewatering for piling would have been much expensive. We will remove the earth on completion of the construction work."

The expenditure of both land filling and removal of earth from the lake is included in the project cost, he said.

About environmental clearance and impact assessment, he said that the project was discussed with all concerned including environment secretary and the consulting firms Vitti and DPM have jointly carried out an impact assessment.

But Prof Jamilur Reza Chowdhury, a transport expert and vice-chancellor of Brac

University, said even if consultants have carried out any impact assessment, it must be approved by the authorities concerned.

"In my view, the proposed bridge is not going to serve the purpose for which it is being built," said Prof Chowdhury, who headed a 31-member advisory committee on Strategic Transport Plan (STP). "Traffic in the adjoining residential areas will definitely worsen."

He said the authorities should have carried out a detailed engineering analysis prior to any kind of intervention in the lake. It should have been determined through study whether such an intervention is compatible with the STP, Chowdhury said.

Asked about land filling, he said the bridge could have been designed to build from bank to bank without intermediary pier and intervention in the lake.

According to Haider Ali, primary aim of the bridge is to divert the internal traffic of Gulshan and Banani to offload heavy rush on the Kernal Ataturk Avenue.

Gulshan Society has written to the high level of the government a number of times opposing construction of the bridge in its present position.



Replica of a horse-drawn carriage, popularly known as Tomtom in old Dhaka, has been installed on a road island near Dhaka Sheraton hotel. The sculpture that reminds the period of the Nawab rule was made by Mrinal Haque and inaugurated on the Victory Day.

## Miserable state of 'rare' public toilets

RAHMAN SABUKTAGIN

When the nature calls, anyone badly looking for a public toilet knows how difficult it is to find one in this metropolitan city of around 12 million inhabitants.

To make matters worse, almost half of the 70 existing public toilets have been shut down by Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) due to legal tangles with private lessees of the facilities.

As there is only a few such toilets available for the vast populace on the go all the time, one would be quite lucky to find a public toilet in unusable condition.

These city public toilets are so filthy and slimy that most Dhaka residents, especially women and children who are not from the poorest section of the society, prefer not to even take a peek into these, let alone use them.

Mustafizur Rahman, who runs a shop near the public toilet on Jatrabari intersection, said, "It's too dirty to use. It's so disgusting that it'll make you puke."

"How can you get inside one of these when it stinks so bad?" he said, alleging, "They charge you a fee for using it, but do not spend a single paisa on its maintenance."

The miserable state coupled with unavailability of public toilets is forcing the city dwellers to refrain from responding to the call of nature until they get back to their homes or offices. Unlike women, men are a bit in better situation as they can urinate in public in desperate times.

Holding back urine for an extended period due to the acute shortage of public toilets is taking its toll on the public health and a large number of the city residents, mostly women, are suffering from kidney damage and various diseases in their urinary system including urinary tract infection (UTI) and stones in their bladders.

People who are compelled to hold their urine for a long period on a regular basis are usually diagnosed with UTI or bladder stones, said Mohammad Shahidul Islam, associate profes-

sor of Nephrology Department at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) Hospital.

A human body generally feels the urge to urinate when 300 millilitre of urine is accumulated in the bladder. The bladder can withstand a maximum pressure of 500 millilitre of urine, Dr Shahid explained. "But withstanding the pressure for extended periods causes infection on the bladder wall, leading to complications in the entire urinary system."

Chemical reaction caused by unrelieved urine often results in forming of stones inside the bladder, he added.

Most of the working women in Dhaka suffer from UTI, said Dr Shahid adding that well maintained public toilets located in convenient locations are essential to remedy the situation.

Sanzida Wahid (not her real name) is a working woman and a lawyer by profession. While waiting at a specialist physician's chamber for the treatment of UTI, she told this correspondent,

"Women from all classes encounter this problem [inadequate toilet facilities for women] as soon as they get out of their houses."

It is a very embarrassing for a woman to look for a restroom in the city, she said adding that except for a few waiting lounges of some expensive bus services and a handful of large business farms, most places do not have their toilets open to all.

A source in the DCC however said that the DCC is unable to construct more public toilets because there is no more land space available on the convenient locations of the city for the purpose.

The last time DCC built toilets in the city was in 2005 when 36 new toilets were built under Urban Primary Health Care Project of local government ministry. Although donor agencies funded Tk 6 crore for building 100 public restrooms in the city, the DCC ended up building only 36 claiming that it could not acquire the land space needed for 64 more.

Most of these new ones now remain closed due to DCC's legal conflict with the lessees.

Besides, the constructors of the new public restrooms used substandard construction material and deviated the original plan that had several numbers of high and low commodes, urinals, washbasins, designated breast-feeding area, dressing room and separate entrance for men and women, said the DCC source.

Instead of objecting to this wrongdoing, the DCC engineers issued "No Objection" certificates to the construction firm prior to the handover of the toilets to the DCC, he added.

The public toilet shortage situation could be solved significantly if the government works out an understanding with mosque authorities in the city, said Sirazul Islam, chief town planner of DCC. Since there are mosques all over the city, even at key locations, the government should consider formulating a plan to construct public toilets there, he added.

