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THE NIGHT AFTER 25 MARCH

he said, "Thank God Pakistan is saved. Allah has secured Pakistan." We did not realize what was happening outside the Observer building. We were counting hours in anxiety and starvation. At about 12 midnight when I was about to rest my tired body on the table I heard somebody from the verandah shouting "Fire, fire". Looking outside the window, I saw flames of fire everywhere. There was burning fire in the east. Somebody said it was Razarbagh Police barrack. There were balls of fire in the distant west. The one storied shed of EPR at Pikhana was set on fire by cannon and howitzer fire. Someone said university halls are also on the western part of the city. When we looked outside, we found that the entire Dhaka city was on fire. From all around we could hear loud cries and shrieks. The slums were razed to the ground and slum dwellers died of arson. Those who could come out of the fire were thrown back to the fire again. The killing spree "Operation search light" continued for the whole night and the following day and the night after. With all communication snapped and news stopped, we were in the grip of an overwhelming restlessness and apprehension.

26 March morning. Somebody said that Yahya would again address a Radio broadcast. From the balcony, I saw tanks at the crossing of Dainik Pakistan (Bangla). Announcement of curfew by mike was coming from a military jeep. Manu Munshi, the photographer of Purbadesh was taking photographs. A bullet went past his ear and hit the wall. I dragged him into the room. The day and night passed in utter panic. I came out of the office in the morning of March 27 after hearing the announcement of withdrawal of curfew by mike from a military transport. After coming out from the captivity of two days and one night's fatigue and starvation I saw heaps of dead bodies on the road. I went past a few dead bodies lying behind Baitul Mukarram,

1 March 1971. I was appearing at MA examination in Political Science as an external candidate of Chittagong University at the inspiration of Professor R I Chowdhury. While I was answering to the last question Professor Anupam Sen whispered into my ears 'Amin Bhai, you leave the examination hall just now.' 'Why?' I asked. He said, 'People around are dreadfully agitated as Yahea Khan suspended the ensuing session of the parliament. Students are preparing to bring out procession right now. You are in the uniform and a military jeep is waiting outside, they may launch an attack any time. Please leave the campus quickly.' I said, 'I am yet to complete the answer.' He replied, 'That can be sorted later, but for now leave the campus quickly.' He accompanied me up to the jeep.

When I returned to the cantonment I found that the 20th Beluch under command of Colonel Fatemi had already gone to the city for IS (internal security) duty. I was asked to take two companies of soldiers from East Bengal Regimental Centre to give added support to 20 Beluch without any further delay. The two companies of East Bengal Regiment took position at Neaz Stadium (now M A Aziz Stadium). I was being harassed while moving here and there with 20 Beluch in the task of mitigating Bengali-Behari riot. On 1 March fires were opened for the first time from Three not Three rifles on the processions in front of the Polo Ground. It was known later that a non-Bengali driver of Port Trust led the shooting on the procession. The incident gravely deteriorated the situation. Bengali-Behari riots erupted at different pockets of the city. Death toll in three days reached 17. Beharis managed to build up a huge stock of Three not Three rifles and ammunitions earlier and they continued to shot fires on processions almost everywhere. On the other hand the city turned into a city of spontaneous processions.

Attitude of Colonel Fatemi, Colonel Sigrih and other Pakistanis made me severely hurt and gradually frustrated. During election Major Meher Kamal woke me up one night and said, 'You have become independent.' I hurriedly got up and said, 'Cutting a joke with me?'. In his grave voice the Major said, 'Don't you know how Bhasani Sahib has straightly bade waliaikum salam to Pakistan?'

On the first day the Bengali soldiers of EPR were sent to duty without arms. When they reacted and raised voice they were however allowed arms to carry. In the EPR headquarters Captain Rafique Islam was on duty as adjutant. He was sending briefs to soldiers skillfully and with absolute sagacity. Colonel Sigrih called all officers to a conference on 2 March. Major Meher Kamal unwarrantedly shouted in the meeting 'Awami League is a party of betrayers and Sheikh Mujib himself is basically a betrayer.' Calm and cool Dr. Major Sirajul Islam instantly reacted and got up to catch Major Meher Kamal by the collar. He was somehow made to cool down again. Meher Kamal said, 'What happened doctor?' He replied 'Seventy-five million people voted for Sheikh Mujib. Do you mean all are traitors? Captain Enam on the other end went to quarter guard and put the soldiers in attention shouting Jai Bangla instead of normal command. What a thrill that was.'

On 4 March Brigadier M R Majumder, PSC talked to Shahebzada Yakub over telephone and on his verbal consent he took over the charge of military administrator of Chittagong region. I was assigned to restore law and order with my Bengali soldiers. I was asked teaming with Captain Mohsin (later Brigadier and hanged relating to a coup in 1981) to establish office of military administration and conduct it round the clock. Total control over the whole city including the riot-stricken areas and other vulnerable areas were established within two days with the support of East Bengal, EPR, Police administration (including Awami League).

On 3 and 4 March the CI of the East Bengal Regiment Lt. Col. M R Chowdhury contacted Captain Oli Ahmed (now LDP leader) and was apprised of the mind of battalion second in command Major Ziaur Rahman (later Lt. General and President, assassinated). Captain Rafique of EPR continued to keep in touch with EBRC, 8th Bengal and Awami League leaders. He told that Captain Delwar (Artillery) stationed at the control room of EPR Headquarters (Peelkhana) was keeping him informed of what was happening in Dhaka. He contacted with Dr. Zafar, Mr. Kaiser, Professor Khaled and others while on the top it on his own initiative he kept contact with Chittagong University. Only after a day Shahebzada Yakub resigned. Governor Admiral Ahsan was removed. After removal of two wise military officers the situation started gravely deteriorating. Lt. General Tikka Khan took over as martial law administrator and Governor. During 1968-70 while I was serving in Lahore General Tikka Khan was our Core Commander. He was known to the masses as butcher Tikka for his perpetrated genocide in Beluchistan. While he found it difficult to identify the Baluch rebel in the vast tract of Beluchistan, he ordered bombing on the Eid congregation in 1965 to annihilate the rebels, causing indiscriminate killing of the masses. Justice B A Siddiqui declined to preside over his oath taking ceremony. We felt immensely proud.

7 March 1971. There prevailed a severely tensed situation everywhere. We gathered at the Circuit House to listen to the address of Bangabandhu. A radio was placed in the middle of dining table made of polished mehagony wood in the dining hall of the Circuit House. His address continued for sometime and then suddenly it was stopped. Everybody was anxious to know what was happening in the Race-Course. It was directed that Bangabandhu's speech cannot be

crossed the road and saw the press club damaged by cannon shells. I walked along the race-course field and saw a reverse wave of people in hundreds moving to the east from the race course field. Two days ago Bangabandhu said 'Leave Dhaka'. People were doing it without delay. When I asked a few persons, I realized that they were going to Zinzira after crossing Buriganga. Later, a few thousand men and women, old and young and children were killed there from attack by the Pakistan Army. After walking for about an hour I reached Dhanmondi. My wife and children were there with my father in law's house. My wife informed me that they passed their night under the bed out of fright of sounds of ammunition fire at the house of Bangabandhu nearby.

After two days and two nights, I took some food. Then I moved out in a car. A particular question and anxiety agitated my mind. As a journalist my curiosity was where is Bangabandhu? The front door of the house at road 32 was closed. I saw a face peeping out of the shutters of Titas confectionary across Mirpur road and 32 road. I recognized him. He was Zahir haji, disciple of Hafez ji Huzur and proprietor of the Bakery. He told me 'They have taken him away. They have taken away Bangabandhu that night two days ago in a car'. I felt reassured and relieved 'at least Bangabandhu is alive'. I drove towards the university area and came across a few people at Nilkhet intersection. I heard that Pakistan army had entered Iqbal Hall, now known as Surjo Sen Hall and Jagannath Hall at night. Nobody knew what happened there. Near the British Council, I heard that cries and groaning came out of the women's student's hall. I came to the deserted and damaged press club building. I met peon Quddus who was trapped inside the building for two days and nights. He burst out in tears. I saw the lounge at the western side on the first floor was blown away by cannon shells. I received a bad news from Quddus. Faez Ahmed took shelter in that room that night. He did not know what

happened to him. Later, I however met Faez at Mujeeb Nagar. I heard from him how he took shelter in the club and how he was injured and remained alive. When I came in front of Gulistan, I was told that shell had struck Ittefaq building. Later I came to know that although the building had been badly damaged, the journalists and workers were safe. Only the doorman was killed. I then moved towards Sadar ghat along the Nawabpur road. I saw the destroyed Sangbad office in front of Manosi cinema hall at the crossing of Bangshal. My friend journalist and poet Shaheed Saber was burnt alive in the Sangbad building set ablaze by the Pakistan army. I have forgotten to mention that I heard at the Shahbagh crossing that 'The People' newspaper was burnt to ashes. I drove towards Sadar ghat and on my way I saw Shakhari Potti wiped out. There were tens of thousands of people on the bank of Buriganga escaping from Dhaka to save their lives. Thus in course of my travel I saw a raped city, innumerable dead bodies of men and women, young and old scattered all over. I returned home in Dhanmondi. After a few hours will begin curfew again and the killing Pakistan army will be on the streets.

The campaign of extermination of Bengalis which began on 25th March night ended on 16th December after eight months and 21 days. Al badr forces, however, killed the intellectuals at Rayer bazaar two days ago. Meanwhile countless lives were sacrificed at the altar of freedom. Countless stories about those events and bravery in the liberation war have been written. I am a direct witness to many of those stories and events. Again and again they flashes up in my memory and erases out. But can anybody of those who are alive today and lived in Dhaka to experience the pain and agony of the nightmare of 25th March night and after can ever forget the dreadful memories of their near and dear ones who perished in the killing and fire let loose by the invading Pakistan army?

Translation: Abdul Hannan

Roaring Days of Blazing March 1971

Amin Ahmed Chowdhury, Bir Bikram

broadcast live while on protest the officials of radio left the station. The address was being recorded but was not on the air. In the evening Captain Aziz (later Colonel, dead) brought the recorded speech and it was played at the stadium before the troops amplified on mikes. After the speech the troops shouted in a chorus 'must we liberate the country'. That 17/18 minutes speech of 7 March rings always in the strings of Bengali hearts. In essence this speech of 7 March is the charter of emancipation of the nation. The aggrieved nation got the sense of direction.

In the great speech of 7 March, the political sagacity of Bangabandhu was much revealed in his restraint in not declaring the independence. As the Pakistanis were buying times, it is equally true that Bengalis also made best use of this time in uniting together to get themselves ready for an armed revolution against them.

Then we increased our internal communications. On his instruction Major Ziaur Rahman and Captain Oli Ahmed met Colonel M R Chowdhury one evening. Col. Chowdhury asked Major Ziaur Rahman staight, 'Zia, only you have trained troops with you and there are more than 2500 recruits in EBRC. About 2500 soldiers can be made ready for war with dress, boots, and small arms at our disposal. There are two companies of trained demo-troops.' In reply Zia said, 'We are ready to implement as you instruct us to do.' It was told that we can consider the vast tract starting from Shuvapur Bridge to Ramgarh and up to Sambrum of the Hill Tracts. 52 trucks were detailed at the stadium under command of Captain Amin so that they could be used at opportune moments to bring 4th Bengal across Shuvapur Bridge for ensuring primary defense and supply of arms and ammunition could be continued up to Sambrum through Koror Hat. The next important task was to bring overnight the 2nd Bengal by train from Mymensing or Joidevpur to Chittagong. Mr. Maqbul was DS of Railway (later he became Chairman of Railway Board) assured us that special train from

Mymensing could be released within a few hours notice. We were yet to think that Indian territories could be used for our purposes. We could not conceive a better plan to bring 3rd Bengal from Rangpur to Shuvapur. 1st Bengal however could be brought from Jessore or Barisal through river routes. We were told on the spot that Colonel M R Chowdhury would be our Commander. Major Zia wanted to know if Brigadier Majumder would be with us? Colonel Chowdhury said that it

did not matter much if he was with us or not. It was decided that on receiving a green signal from Colonel Chowdhury Captain Amin would disarm Navy with EBRC troops and make Chittagong port dysfunctional getting a ship wrecked. Captain Rafique will take defense with his EPR troops cutting trench across the road near Hazi Camp while Major Ziaur Rahman with his 8th Bengal troops launch attack on 20 Beluch at the Cantonment. At the same time EBRC recruits were asked to put fire across the hills and take defense to thwart the advancement of the Beluch towards the city. The idea of putting fire across the hills came from Captain Rafique.

From 4 March Agrabad Radio Station was being guarded by East Bengal under command of Subedar Jalal. Although we received repeated instruction to handover the guard duty to 32 Panjab Regiment that came from Comilla we just ignored it. But we did not know that Agrabad was only a 5 Kilowatt station and depended on Kalurghat relay station. On 9 March Habilder Kabir's son was beaten up by 20 Beluch and the issue led the agitated Bengali troops to take position that caused serious reaction at the cantonment. From 4 March the demo company of EBRC were in guard of Jetty 17 under Captain Aziz. Airport was also under the guard of East Bengal Regiment. On 2 March the Swat with arms ammunition anchored at Chittagong port. Despite repeated instruction we did not take minimum effort to unload the ship. On 12 March Tikka Khan burst into anger and shouted at Brigadier Majumder over telephone, 'I don't care whether Chittagong port is burnt down, food grain is burnt down, let people starve, let them go to hell, let them go to Mujib. Unload the Swat, no lame excuse-go yourself with your Bengali troops and unload.'

We got to sense on 10 March evening. Brigadier Majumder came to stadium in the evening and said, 'Go and meet M R Siddiqui and tell him that we want to sink the ship at the estuary to the Karnaphuli. Mr. Idris has small ship, see him also.' Meanwhile Brigadier Majumder asked the non-Bengali Subedar Clerk Nasir to prepare a list of all retired soldiers with full address on the plea of organizing a reunion at EBRC. I went to M R Siddiqui's house at Lalkhan Bazar on 11 March at 12 midnight. I told him that at that moment we came with the proposal of sinking two ships at the estuary of Karnaphuli to make Chittagong jety inoperative provisionally. Among the Bengalis only M R Siddiqui and Mr. Idris own ships. Is Mr. Siddiqui agreeable to let his ship sink? He was calm for sometime and then said, 'Well, sink it.' Then we went to Mr. Idris' house on the hilltop at Zhauntali. A trusty of Chittagong Port Mr. Idris is full of zeal. He gave the maps showing water-flow of the port. He

also suggested where to sink it to make it most effective and where recovery would be most difficult. Mr. Shamsuddin, Port Engineer showed us the layout of underground cables for crane movement. He suggested that explosion at the right place would make the whole port inoperative for sometime. In later days the Pakistani Army picked him up and killed.

To remain alert not to be caught by the Punjabis and getting fully prepared to begin the war instantly was the fundamental motto. Captain Rafique was the first among us to follow it. The moment he got the message that at around 8-30 to 9 at night on 25 March that the Pakistani military forcibly entered into EPR Headquarters at Peelkhana he arrested the non-Bengali officers of EPR at Hazi Camp and revolted.

On 13 March Brigadier Majumder came to stadium and asked me to go to Dhaka on 14 March to meet Colonel Osmani to brief him our operational plan. Brigadier Majumder established an indirect linkage with Awami League leadership through his elder brother who was a retired Divisional Commissioner. It was almost evening when I reached Dhaka on 14 March. I met Colonel Osmani and gave him a brief on our total plan. I told him to shift High Command to Chittagong and declare independence at an opportune moment from Chittagong Radio which was under our guard. Colonel Osmani gave a patient hearing of my briefing and said that solution should be sought through discussion. Armed war could only begin if the dialogue failed. That was a terrible frustration for me. Yet I continued, 'Sir, at least you and 2nd or 3rd important member of the high command should come and take a place in Chittagong. He said, 'Continue to keep in touch. M R Siddiqui, Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury, Hannan and other are in Chittagong.' On my return to Chittagong I went to Brigadier Majumder's house with Colonel Chowdhury. I said, 'You better declare independence from Chittagong Radio.' He said 'Unless it is Sheikh Mujib's declaration the world will not accept it.'

On 24 March Brigadier Majumder would be made Martial Law Administrator and there would be a darbar at Joidevpur to pacify the troops of 2nd Bengal Regiment. 17 officers came to Chittagong at 9 o'clock in the morning in two helicopters to take Brigadier Majumder. Colonel Taj (G-1) from Eastern Headquarters telephoned to inform that Captain Amin should also come with Brigadier Majumder to Dhaka as he had been selected for Army Aviation and be sent to Karachi. Nayek Clerk Mizan and others were waiting outside the mess. In tears they appealed, Please, sir, don't go. They cannot be trusted. We have taken position in the hills taking arms from the armory of the troops. We can blow up helicopters in a moment.' We were passing time under a spell.

We were taken to Brigadier Jahanzeb's house (in Staff Road, now house no 56 of Bashar Road, and I stayed in this house for three years as AG). Underneath tent in the lawn I found many non-Bengali civilians. Meanwhile my uncle Engineer Shahalam came with his car and I almost unceremoniously came out with



him.

On 25 March, prior to his departure at around 8-30 in the morning for Joidevpur 2nd East Bengal, Brigadier Majumder told me, 'Go back to Chittagong and ask Colonel Chowdhury to hoist the red ribbon.' It means we could start our armed revolution. I came to Haq Mansion at Motijheel to my uncle's office and dialed Mrs. Mokbul and said 'When Colonel Chowdhury comes please tell him to hoist the red ribbon.' She could not understand what I told. In a louder voice I asked her to write what I exactly say-'hoist the red ribbon'. Shahalam Chowdhury, busy in another table gave me a surprise look.

Then I went to Colonel Osmani's house- number 60 in road 7 near Dhanmondi Lake. I said 'I have the right vehicle with me. You have to shift to Chittagong.' He said that Yahea Khan would make an announcement by 8 o'clock tonight or 1 pm tomorrow. Then it was 10-30 in the morning. He asked me to take patience and suggested that it would be wiser to take a decision after we rightly know Yeahia's mind. Aggrieved at his statement, I went to Dhaka University. ASM Abdur Rob and others were there. I told them why Brigadier Majumder was taken to Dhaka, why Pakistani Army was desperate to unload the Swat ignoring the barricade of the masses. I enquired of the results of the dialogues and many other things.

Around 4 o'clock in the afternoon I met Brigadier Majumder at his elder brother's residence. He was very angry as I did not go to Chittagong. I told him that Colonel Chowdhury wanted to get the instruction straight from him. In the afternoon although he could talk to his wife from Colonel Muid's house, he could not talk to Colonel Chowdhury (phone number 33) as it was told that lines were down. Firings at the night of 25 March awake me. I got up. My uncle, aunt and others also got up. The night passed in panic. The sky outside got dazzled with balls of fire. It was evident that a military operation was going on. While walking inside the room I felt like uprooting my own hair.

Bengali Captain Latif was on duty at control room at Peelkhana. At 8-30 under command of Captain Neaz, Beluch Regiment force-entered and took control over armory, quarter guard and others. They disarmed Captain Latif, Nayek Kutubuddin (now retired Subedar of Signals) and Lance Nayek Ratan Mia (now retired Subedar Major).

Earlier at around 7 pm Wing Commander Aminul Islam (working with ISI) came. Latif asked 'Do we have to flee?' He did not tell anything, rather left hastily. Latif told that after 8-30 they were giving running commentary through wireless to inform all members of BDR as to how army occupied the headquarters. Latif also told that those bastards arrested Sheikh Mujib. Meanwhile wireless broadcast the news that captured Sheikh Mujib had been taken to cantonment. Brigadier Majumder dropped me near Adamjee Court and asked me to know the attitude of America and India. He also asked me to know if supply of arms support was possible. Consul General Mr. Blood was a very kind man. He wanted to know what happened in Chittagong and elsewhere. He also told that Bengalis would get the support of the American citizen, but it was impossible to assure of the support of American government.

I came near Balaka in New Market from Adamjee Court and found Pakistani army firing in a disorderly manner. I reached a building for a shelter. There was a horrible death scenario at the university area. Corpses of students were scattered in the street near Iqbal Hall. The residential area of teachers in Fuller Road is even worse. Elder brother of Brigadier Majumder said 'Zia has declared independence in his own name, and he heard it himself.' Right at that moment I got highly invigorated. My cousin Jashim of Bashiruddin Road arranged a motorbike. We rushed to Indian deputy high commissioner's house in Gulshan. I found him restless and anxious. His wife (both were originally from Comilla) was a courageous lady. I asked Mr. Sengupta, 'Will India ensure supply of arms to us?' He replied, 'On any indication from the High Command Indian army could be deployed alongside the frontiers.' He assured me that if I cross the border Indian army was not going to arrest me. Meanwhile when I met the First Secretary he gave me a piece of paper with an encrypted symbol. I was told that once I show it to Border security Force they would take to Indian army. On 28 March I heard time and again Zia's declaration of independence on behalf of Bangabandhu. In the morning on 29 March I left Dhaka for Feni.

The writer is a retired military officer and Ex Ambassador.

Translation: M A Momen

Friend, Will You Keep on Sitting?

By Syed Shamsul Haq

It is the month of March; March in English! In Bangla 'parade'. So many years have elapsed; even today that sound resonates in Bangla! Friend, then come to the highway, let us look back once more.

We went to that old race-course of Ramna on the 7th of March. Seven and a half crore people had joined the chorus of Joy Bangla! But the horse that was tipped to win, had lost the bet of blood.

On the seventeenth of March arrived someone in this Bangla. He rattled the doors and opened the bolt of windowpane! His chest got riddled with bullets; the boat was buried beneath the mud.

On 26th we hear the golden word: 'freedom' of the Bangalis. The valiant freedom fighters rose up against a genocide. Now, where is that freedom? The four sided square has become circle!

On the pages of a map built with the sediments of 13 hundred rivers The country which is yours and mine, friend, gets filled up with filth! And inside the head buzzes that bee of eternity.

There was vigour in those free hands, and speed in the feet, There were roses in the garden of chest, and the sun without a cloud. There was also the assurance of Rabi Thakur: you live, I also live.

Suddenly, the neck got entangled in the red handkerchief of a thug. On the roads all around were placed guards of crimson eyes. There was again blood on the green sari! As if an incident of twenty-fifth!

Once upon a time on 25th of March; in that same March even today? Will you become a freedom fighter against misrule? When there is a tide in the sea of people, won't the heart throb again?

This month is March; Twenty-sixth of March, anniversary of independence. Didn't I see you become entwined by the pull of freedom? Won't you turn around again? And hear the call of Bangla!

The blood boils in the body once more; there is resistance on every road. The storm of changing times has touched the year-end's shaft. Friend, will you keep on sitting? Let there be a settlement today!!

Translation: Helal Uddin Ahmed

Soliloquy of A Freedom Fighter

Abdul Mannan Syed

We were walking under some intoxication Myself and Major Showkat. Today it is beyond remembrance - how many miles of road did we walk past

The burning sun of Chaitra stood just above our head Hunger and thirst clouded our vision There lies somewhere a relation between sunshine and blindness.

It appeared we were walking for years together - We could not remember the day or date at that moment. We noticed a pale green hillock standing afar. After along walk when we reached, it turned to be a human being.

He was in his loin cloth - did not utter a word His eyes might have a glimpse of question as to who we were.

Showkat somehow muttered, we are from the forces of freedom fighters, brother. May we have a little water to drink? He did not reply. The man started walking. A door-less bamboo fenced little house was there a little away.

We sat on a torn mat And then we were served with two pieces of thick bread Something like gravy in an earthen pot. And water too in two earthen glasses.

We gulped down in haste whatever was there Beyond the screen a shadow of a woman watched us as We stood up. We could not utter a word. 'Thanks' appeared too artificial that day.

Showkat asked if that was a char - land rising out of a river bed? There was no reply, only a nod of head. Then we were on our way.

Then the country became independent. Showkat was martyred. As a freedom fighter I was given a great gallantry award.

Then I searched for that char for years, I could not get a trace of it. I was served costly food home and abroad. But never did I get that taste of neetar. Never did I find that man or the woman in the shadow. I could not contribute anything and I was no use to them. With this pain in heart - I know someday I will depart.

Translation: M A Momen