

## Non-Fiction

# Ambushed in Congo\*

SHABBIH AHSAN

The FNI militias operated from their hideouts at Datule, located north of Kafe. The militias were causing so much of tension and difficulties for the Bangladeshi camps as well as for the Hema refugees that they had to be stopped. A raid on the FNI camp at Datule was ordered from the Sector HQ at Bunia. Bangladeshi troops carried out the operations on the FNI camps and could capture about thirty militias with their weapons and ammunition. However, most of the militia, about four hundred of them, could escape with their arsenals. They took shelter in the hill of Ndriki, further north.

Immediately after their capture, Ntini Cona, the FNI militia commander, demanded that the Bangladeshi contingent release the detainees along with their arms and ammo. He threatened that if his demands were not met, the Bangladeshi unit would face *third world war*.

Two days later, he fulfilled his promise.

The situation of the refugees around the Bangladeshi camp was beyond words. Hundreds of unfed Hemas lived under the open sky. A loaf of bread was shared by as much as fifty people. Children died incessantly. Without any help from outside, these hapless people would vanish in a matter of days. The rugged terrain made it extremely difficult to arrange the supply of food, clothes and shelter. A helicopter landing site had to be located as soon as was possible. A small recon team was asked to locate suitable high ground for helicopters to land and deliver humanitarian assistance.

So, on February the 25th, very early in the morning, Captain Shahid set out from Kafe, leading a nine-men patrol team. Their destination was the hill of Ndriki. They tagged the local interpreter along, just in case.

The weather was extremely humid that day. The patrol walked their way through

the rugged hilly ground. Their speed was limited--a combined effect of the weather and the terrain. Their vision was limited too, due to the tall elephant grass covering the entire area. Shahid had his radio operator walking beside him. He was asked to contact the base camp in case a backup was needed, the possibility of which didn't even remotely appear in his mind...

Near the top of Ndriki, there was a small, leveled surface. Shahid asked his weary soldiers to rest. He would venture a little ahead and look for some suitable helicopter landing site, he told his mates. He then took his radio operator along and marched forward. Behind, the rest of the team was left to recuperate.

"One four. Message, over," Shahid contacted his base.

"Send your message, over." "One four, location 988089," Shahid read the grid reference from his GPS.

"Roger! Update every thirty minutes." "Wilco! Will take Route A naught (sic) back."

About a hundred yards away, a man in worn-out olive uniform with an AK-47 hanging from his shoulder, saw Shahid and his operator from the adjacent hill. They were Bangladeshi, he was sure. Their bright green camouflage couldn't be mistaken. He slowly departed his observation post. He had to inform his comrades of this fortunate discovery.

Shahid and his radio operator looked around for a while. About twenty yards ahead, they found a plain open land, with no vegetation and trees--a perfect helicopter landing site. A few strokes of the scythe and the tiny undergrowth would be gone. The UN could send supplies for the Hema refugees crowding around the camp.

Unbeknownst to these two men, the reverse slope of the Ndriki hill had already sprung to life--unexpectedly happy, sinistery in a mood for celebration. The news of their enemy in the area, under-strength and spent, had spread in seconds.



Their perpetually loaded weapons were cocked, extra magazines stowed in pouches, grenades hooked to their belts. Hundreds of Lendu militias warmed themselves up for revenge. Mortars were placed strategically. Soldiers gathered for last minute consultation. No less than a river of blood would do.

Shahid sat under a small tree. Beside him sat Private Salaam, his radio operator. Both drank from their canteens of water. They were so thirsty that they could pour the entire Congo River down their throats.

About fifty yards back, the rest of the recon team rested with half-closed eyes.

The militias slowly crept and closed in for the assault. Salaam had just opened his helmet to lighten the load on his head. A sharp hiss in the air and Shahid heard a thump at his back. A bullet had just missed him and hit a tree. Both the men looked at each other for a split second and before they could dash down to the ground, a red hole materialized on Salaam's forehead. He suddenly jerked and fell backwards.

"Down," Shahid yelled at his men resting

behind. The sudden shower of bullets confused the patrol. Everybody lay pasted to the ground as sheets of bullets flew overhead, deafening their ears and senses.

"One four, one four, man down, man down!" Shahid screamed over the radio. His operator had ceased breathing. A trail of blood trickled from his wounds.

"One four, WHAT?" Captain Sharif from the base camp at Kafe was taken aback.

"Salaam's been hit. Need backup. NOW. FNI closing in, FNI."

"One four, repeat and update status!"

"Hell with you! We are surrounded, I repeat SURROUNDED. Location Ndriki 988089. Salaam's gone. Do you read me?"

There was static over the network and the base camp couldn't read the last message clear.

"One four, repeat last message."

"Shahid, are you there? Shahid?" Shahid looked at his operator for a moment. A pool of blood had formed below his head. His mouth--half opened, his face--still bearing the trace of surprise. Shahid closed the parted lids of Salaam's eyes. A loud explosion at his back warned him to take cover. Another mortar shell dropped by him and he felt a splinter tear through this right arm. The rest of the recon patrol had already begun responding. Their arsenal was no match for the automatics and RPGs of the opponent.

"One four, one four," the base camp operator was trying hysterically to contact the patrol under fire. Captain Sharif had by that time led out a backup patrol from the base camp to rescue Shahid's recon team. An attack helicopter, already dispatched from the HQ for Ndriki, would lift them en-

route. Sharif was apprehensive--the spot was a tiring three-hour journey from Kafe and the patrol under fire didn't have enough ammunitions to survive that long.

Back atop the hill of Ndriki, Shahid took the radio and slowly began crawling back to his men. The intensity of the firing had swelled. His own magazines had already gone empty. Halfway through his crawl, he popped his head up. The thick curtains of elephant grass restricted his sight within inches. He wanted to fight back as long as he could, though deep down he knew it probably was too late. A bullet came through the glass blades and hit his shoulders. He was thrown on his back.

"One four, one four, been hit," Shahid mumbled over his radio. The communication was back for the moment.

"Oh God! Hang on, Shahid. Few more minutes. MI-17 on the way," Sharif knew his assurance would be no good for his dying comrades.

The recon patrol's response to the mayhem slowly waned. Their ammunitions and grenades were spent. Half an hour of intense gunfight had eroded their last defense. The Lendus were closing in fast. A few mortar shells and RPG rockets were fired that landed like apocalyptic thunderbolts around them. The promised third world war was unleashed when they least expected it.

Shahid lay on the ground, cringing and moaning in mortal pain. He was losing his strength. Breathing seemed like the most difficult thing in the world. With every intake of air, springs of blood spurted out. In that last moment on earth, he heard the footsteps of the Lendus, slashing through the thick grass covers. His vision slowly blurred, his eyelids struggling to stay open, he choked and grimaced. More footsteps nearby. The grass swaying side to side. His shaking hands lifted the radio transmitter. His blood-filled mouth painfully brought near; his distended lips quivered.

"One four," Shahid called the other end.

## A Bangladesh Army Man Writes a Novel

KHADEMUL ISLAM

In hindsight it seems inevitable that this novel about a Bangladeshi in a United Nations peacekeeping force in Congo would be written. The surprise is, all things considered, how well it has been done.

Over the last two decades Bangladesh has seemingly become indispensable to UN peacekeeping operations. To date about 75,000 Bangladeshi army personnel have taken part in operations ranging from demining in Eritrea to transport of refugees in Somalia to school and hospital rehabilitation efforts in Sierra Leone. At present, it has 9,850 peacekeepers in 14 missions stretching from Liberia to Georgia to Congo. It has not been a hazard-free enterprise: 15 Bangladeshi officers died in a plane crash in Benin in October 2003, while nine more were killed in a ghastly 2005 ambush by militia men in Congo.

Which brings us to the fact that one of the most dangerous regions for peacekeeping is The Democratic Republic of Congo, or DRC, specially its battle-torn, mineral-resource-rich eastern province. A series of civil wars erupted during, and following, Mobutu's rule in which DRC's neighbours also pitched in. The wars bred an astonishing variety of murderous militias that, along with numerous governmental army depredations, has resulted in enormous displacement and murder of local populations.

Shabbir Ahsan's novel *The Peacekeeper* is about a Bangladeshi peacekeeper's--a milob, or military observer--tour of duty in Congo. The back cover of the book (a publication of iUniverse, Nebraska, USA) informs us that he is a "civil engineer and business graduate" presently serving in the Bangladesh Army. The novel admittedly reads like a thinly-disguised fictional account of real-life experiences. It spans a period of roughly over a year, from 25 December 2003 to 28 February 2005, and is also book-ended by a plane crash in 2003 and an ambush in 2005 in which Bangladeshi peacekeeping personnel lose their lives. In between these two events, the author methodically, and for the most part in an entertaining fashion, recounts the life of a Bangladeshi UN peacekeeper in distant, and at times frighteningly strange and savage, Africa. The details are riveting, from African bazaar vendors to food difficulties, from life with peacekeepers from other countries to the haunting view of the African veldt seen from above. Shabbir in the telling does not shy away from writing about the horrific, about still-existent cannibalism. He also does not sidestep narrating the decidedly African temptations posed to a married man suddenly, if temporarily, single again, about African sexual mores and strange going-on in Kinshasa discos. In fact, his frankness widens the novel's ambit, otherwise written in terse military chapters and riven with the army's penchant for acronyms, and lends it an empathic human register.

The author also can tellingly recreate battle scenes, as can be seen in the excerpt published above. Though reportedly the actual ambush of the Bangladeshi troops was carried out by militia men hiding in the tall grass by the roadside, the shock of the event is conveyed well enough in its fictional re-enactment. Various details about the country, such as place, tribal and militia names, conform to real life, and add to the general air of the book's authenticity of felt experience. The author's use of English is surprisingly good (actually much better, I have to confess, than many a 'civvie' author I have had to read in the line of duty as listed, or literary editor), with the vocabulary fitted to intent and action. A closer proof-reading and copy editing, though, would have raised it to a singularly high level (for example, women that the narrator is attracted to tend to be unfailingly 'sweet', and misspellings such as 'phillistines' and mistaken plural endings of words).

If there is one major caveat to be made, I would perhaps point to the American-style jauntiness that at times pervades the writing, and which can be wearying to the older reader. Younger readers may connect with it. This style alone can be reductive, capable of turning a perfectly truthful piece of reportage into colonial pictures of Africa as a dark continent teeming with monsters and ghouls, something which this exuberant first effort at a novelistic portrayal of our difficult peacekeeping missions does not warrant being burdened with.

## Agunpakhi: Chronicle of a Life, Place and Time

MAHMUD RAHMAN

Near the end of Hasan Azizul Huq's novel *Agunpakhi*, the narrator tries to wrap her mind around the concept of Pakistan.

The novel is set in rural Rarh, now in West Bengal. Before Partition, when people around her become excited about a separate homeland for Muslims, the stench of blood is already in the air. They clamour *Lorke lenge Pakistan*. She asks, "What will you do with it once you win it? Do you even know where Pakistan will be?"

After Bengal is split into two, she asks her husband's brother, "You've achieved Pakistan with your *lorke lenge*. Now do you know what that country is like? Won't you now go to that country you won through all that wrangling and killing?" He replies, "What a thought. Why will I go to Pakistan? Why would I leave my own land?"

The narrator remembers her world being consumed by a divisiveness that had nothing to do with their lives. So much bloodshed and for what? At the end of the novel, her children leave for Pakistan, and later they ask their parents to come. Her husband agrees, but she refuses to go.

Partition was a time when madness descended on us. The massacres were followed by the flight of millions. And here in East Pakistan we found ourselves under a new colonial yoke, something we had to undo in 1971.

The question raised by *Agunpakhi's* narrator is an apt one. What was the point of all that agony? Literature cannot easily answer that question, but it can keep it alive in our consciousness. In Bangladesh we have amnesia over 1947. Last year when India and Pakistan marked 60 years since the end of British rule, we acted as if it was an anniversary irrelevant to us.

Across the border, the Partition story has been repeatedly mined in literature and film. Yet, how much is there on this side? Some, but not enough considering the impact that moment had on our history. In 1948, Abu Ishaque completed his novel *Surja-Dighal Bari*, though he had to wait seven years for a publisher. Shahidullah Kaiser brought out *Sangsaptak* in 1965. In the early Bangladesh period, Abu Jafar Shamsuddin published *Padma Meghna Jamuna* in 1974 and Mahmudul Haque wrote *Kalo Borof* in 1977 though this book didn't come out until 1992. More recently Haripada Dutta has written *Ojogor and Mohajer*.

One reason for the difference between the two sides of the border might be that while the migrants who arrived in India had stories of loss and overcoming to tell, here the story had dimensions that we have been unable to come to grips with. There was loss for many, but for more, loss was mixed up with opportunity. For others there was only opportunity, some of it linked to profiting from ethnic cleansing, a process that we have yet to put an end to.

In the literature related to Partition, *Agunpakhi* is a welcome addition. Hasan Azizul Huq is one of our foremost short story writers. This is his first complete novel. Last year it received the Best Book of the Year award from Prothom Alo and this spring the Ananda Puroshkar from Kolkata.

Partition comes up in the final chapters, but the novel opens several decades before. *Agunpakhi* is a chronicle of a village woman's life, and through her eyes, the depiction of that time in the Rarh region. Such a chronicle can easily fall into reportage -- and there are places where this happens -- but what prevents that is the voice the author has created.

Listen to her as she describes how she became a workhorse after being the new bride for only two days. "Once I joined the drudgery, there was to be no end to it. If they said right, I had to go right. If they said left, I had to go left. It seems now that I never did anything on my own. I never knew how to follow my own wishes. Am I a person or a person's shadow? And even then, is that my own shadow?"

At first she mostly speaks of life within the family. Births, deaths, marriages. Their fortunes improve as they become the largest landowner in the area. But as World War II breaks out, they get hit by cholera, shortages, crop failure, and finally the trauma of Hindu-Muslim division. With these big events, the story breaks out of its domestic confines.

She is a keen observer not just of her own life, but also of her husband. She notes his aloofness and harshness, she recognizes his desire for power. And when their fortunes decline, she painfully notes his retreat. The retreat jolts the family but it also creates the conditions for her eventual choice.

That decision, to stay back alone, astonishes her husband. He scornfully asks, "When did you learn so much?" She replies, "All these years I've only learned what you taught me and I've only said what you had me say. Now though, I've learned one or two things on my own."

It is that learning "on her own" that is the core of *Agunpakhi*.

In any chronicle of life, the author selects what to present, what to omit. I was surprised to find, in a narrative written in a woman's voice, not a hint of sexuality. Not about her wedding night as a teen bride, not even when she admits she's tired of being repeatedly pregnant. This could be because the author wanted to keep the focus tightly on time and place. Whatever the reason, skirting the subject thins out an otherwise full-bodied female character.

The voice Hasan Azizul Huq has created in *Agunpakhi* is also extraordinary because the book is written entirely in dialect. Such language is rare in Bangladeshi fiction. The dialect fairly close to standard Bangla, differences mainly show up in pronunciation and spelling. This language enhances the pleasure of reading the book. You can almost hear *Agunpakhi* singing in your ear.

Mahmud Rahman is a writer and translator

## Letter from BOSTON

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

I do not write poetry. At grade school, whenever I've tried my hand at poetry and attempted to pass them off as "*sworochito kobita*," I'd inevitably run into a wall. Later, in high school, I would sometimes struggle for an hour or two over multiple drafts and finish off a few lines thinking they rhymed well, or at least sounded OK to me. Then, when I'd read them aloud to my brothers or a cousin, I would get a reality check. Their silence would signal to me that I needed to work harder on my "*kabhyo*." I remember that one of my early reviewers shared with me the following critique: *Likhitey pari naa kobita ami, Bokita likheychee shudhu, Nai bhab bhasha, gojamiley thashaa Na aachchey taayee modhu.*

Notwithstanding these early setbacks, I frequently associate with poets and have always marveled at their work of magic. Knowing my soft corner for poetry, my near and dear ones, as well as my friends try to humor in various ways. They renew my memberships to literary circles, and occasionally even invite me to perform at social gatherings. So, when Poet Badiuzzaman Nasim asked me to a poetry reading afternoon to celebrate National Poetry Month a few weeks ago, I couldn't turn down his offer. Nasim Bhai is an old friend, a poet, and the founder of *Bhin-Golardho*, a cultural group in New England. His apartment in the Cambridge's Central Square area is a popular spot for Bengali journalists, writers, and artists visiting Boston.

At first, however, I was not too enthusiastic about going to *April-er Poddoo Paath*, which was being co-sponsored by Lekhoni, a writers group, and Bhin-Golardho. When Nasim Bhai sensed my hesitation over the telephone, he reassured me that the gathering was open to "all poets and poetry lovers". He sweetened the deal even further by suggesting that my wife and I could sing a duet in lieu of reading a poem. The tipping point came when Nasim Bhai assured me that the ticket to this gathering was pretty open--all one had to do was to sign up to recite "*sworochito baa nijer priyo kobita*," as he put it. This modification of admission requirements gave me a little ray of hope. Even if I didn't have my own poem/s to recite, I could read one of my favorites, I reasoned.

I got to work immediately. I knew it would be a gathering of people of different mother-tongues. I had always wanted to read an English translation of a Rabindra Sangeet.

Unfortunately, I did not have any in stock that I liked. For a few months, Tagore's "*Jodi Prem Diley Naa Praaney*" was at the top of my list of songs. To my dismay, my Google searches failed to bring up any translation of this song. Out of desperation, I emailed my cousin, Manzoor Bhai, better known as Dr. Syed Manzoorul Islam of English department at DU, and sought his help in translating "*Jodi Prem*". However, when I did not hear back from him for about a week, I became resigned to not being able to perform at *April-er Poddoo Paath* this year.

Then Manzoor Bhai emailed back and graciously offered to translate my requested song. He not only sent it to me on time, but also sent me a "spare" song, just in case. I began to envision myself as the new Amit Ray and rising to

"Shahid, are you there?" Captain Sharif inquired from his patrol. His radio was set in (sic) the same frequency.

An excruciating silence followed.

"One four report?" The last remnant of his strength was slowly fading. "*Inna lillahi wa inna ilaishi rajeun*," Shahid's last words waved through the air and Sharif on the other end stood silent for a moment. The Islamic last rite publicized his friends own obituary. Everything went blank thereafter like the death that betook Shahid's soul.

The Lendus ran towards their awaited prey. Five of the Bangladeshi soldiers had already died. The remaining four were severely wounded. The gang found Shahid's lifeless body on their way. They dragged him by his legs. A couple of feet ahead, the militias found two other wounded Bangladeshi soldiers lying on their backs with their weapons pointed at them--their triggers pulled and the hammer smashing on their rifles' empty chamber incessantly. The only thing that left the muzzle was not bullet but revulsion--not enough to deter the beastly militias from slashing their scimitars through the dying Bangladeshis' throats.

Another man was found behind the cover of a tree. He had been pierced by RPG splinters in the abdomen. Before he could lift his hand, presumably as his last form of defense, a militia put his automatic inside his mouth. His brains splattered over the ground the next moment.

Nine bodies were hauled in the middle of an opening. They were robbed of their uniforms and weapons. Ntini Cona, the FNI commander, donned the blood-soaked jacket of Captain Shahid. He emptied twenty rounds of his magazine on the dead, making their faces difficult to identify. Before he left, he ordered his men to burn them, as if their deaths fell much short of quenching his thirst for revenge...

\*Extract from *The Peacekeeper: A Novel* reviewed below.

## April-er Poddoo Paath

eminence in Boston's literary circles with Manzoor Bhai as my Nibaron Chakroborty of Tagore's "*Shesher Kobita*."

*April-er Poddoo Paath* took place on Sunday, April 27th, at Gouri Datta's house in a leafy neighborhood of Newton, a suburb of Boston. Gouri, a psychiatrist, whom we met for the first time, welcomed us warmly into her home. My wife Rumi and I soon found ourselves in her kitchen with two other couples engaged in making tea and munching on *jhal muri* and *shandesh* that were laid out on the table. Monisha Ray, a well-know writer ("*Amar Char Bari*") and the organizer of the program, arrived soon thereafter and began marshalling her troops.

Within a short time, the living room, and the adjacent rooms filled up and we started the evening with "*Jodi...*" which was followed by my recitation of the English translation, *If you denied me love in my heart Why did you fill the dawn sky with such songs? Why are the stars strung in a garland? Why are flowers strewn on the bed? Why does the southerly wind whisper Its secrets into my ear?*

This was followed by Nasim Bhai reading his own composition, "*Porajito Postmaster*". The mike was then handed over to poet Ubu Ahmed (Obaid Sarder) who captivated the audience with his passionate rendition of Shamsur Rahman's ode to the struggles of the African women, "*Kalo Meyer Jonnyo Panktimala*". After Obaid's recitation, we were all hooked and for more than two and a half hours we sat listening to poems and songs recited and sung in Bengali, English, and Oriya. It was a treat to hear renditions of familiar and new poems of Tagore, Begum Sufia Kamal, Sajed Kamal, Nasim Bhai, Jasmine Ferdous, Bijoy Misra, Gouri Dutta, Sanjeeb Chatterjee, Subroto Sarkar, and other poets.

I floated in the realm of rhyme and rhythm, as each of the devotees of Saraswati, the Goddess of Poetry, took their turn at the altar. The soulful and melodious voices of Amjad Hossain, Obaid, Swapna Roy, Somali Burgess, and Papiya, among others, filled the beautiful afternoon with many colors and flavors. Swapna's rendition of the "*Shadharon Meye*" was anything but ordinary. Rumi, my wife, was so moved at the heart-rending story of Maloti that she whispered in my ears "I want to be born again as '*Shadharon Meye*'". For me, I was just praying that I'd not get too carried away and grab the microphone again to sing from my heart "*Aji E Anando Shondhay*".

The afternoon ended with a very well-appointed round of tea and "*jolkhabar*". We had a delectable choice of snacks, including *patthi shapta*, *samosa*, *nimokora*, *jhal muri*, and *shondesh*. And, not to forget, the "*ghughni*" was just out of the world.

Before we left, many of the poets felt inspired and promised to write more often. So, I was not surprised when before long Swapna Roy sent us the sequel to *Shadharon Meye*, the first two lines of which are: "*Kobi guru, Tomar manosh konya shadharan meye Maloti...*"

Abdullah Shibli is a former journalist who is now based in Boston, USA