Getting the Impossible Done

In an exclusive interview with The Star, Major General Md Shafiqul Islam, ndc, psc, Military Secretary of the Bangladesh Army, which has co-managed the Bangladesh Voter Registration Project with the Election Commission, talks about how the dream of a flawless voter list has come true. This year the ID World International Congress has honoured Major General Islam with the ID Outstanding Achievement Award.



Major General Md Shafiqul Islam

AHMEDE HUSSAIN

Can you please tell us about the process in which the national ID card project worked?

Before explaining the process, I would like to touch up on the events that led to this project. The events of 11 January 2007 created a widespread national expectation for an accurate voter list with photographs. Considering the significance of the task, Bangladesh Army, under the direction of the Chief of Army Staff, proposed an integrated task, which would produce not only a voter list, but also National ID cards and a biometric database for the citizens above 18 years of age. The model for the process was deliberated by a national committee and then was put to test through a pilot project at Sreepur Pouroshobha on June 10, 2007.



At the same time, Bangladesh Election Commission (BEC) approved this project for nationwide implementation with the assistance of UNDP and requested Bangladesh Army to provide the necessary technical and logistical support required for implementing the same. Hence, a group of dedicated officers along with local software firms developed a customised software and set-up a control and monitoring network for undertaking the job. An operation, code named 'NOBO JATRA' was launched in late July 2007. A central control cell at Dhaka cantonment and divisional and district control cells were established to coordinate the project, with the aid of BEC and local administrations. The registration form contained all relevant fields required for the voter list and National ID cards. Registration on paper was accomplished through door-to-door visits by data enumerators while the digital registration was done at the registration centre under the direct supervision of the Army. In the coastal areas of the country, Bangladesh Navy supervised the task. Operators and technical managers were recruited and trained throughout the country by Army personnel. After the digital registration and proof checking of the data, the draft voter list and National ID cards were prepared by the Army.

The voter lists were then handed over to the local election offices and the National ID cards were distributed through the local administrations. An ordinance was also enacted by the government under which a new organisation named National Identities Registration Authority (NIRA) had been set up to manage ID card issues in future. For registering and issuing ID cards to approximately 80.11 million voters throughout the entire country, an elaborate time and rotation plan was chalked out considering the topography, communication network, population distribution and socio-cultural sensitivity. To eliminate chances of duplicate registrations by an individual physical and biometrics digital checking were done rigorously. Following all these pro-