

Unsung heroes of our independence: Gazaria freedom fighters

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ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

As we celebrate the 38th anniversary of our victory over the repressive powers of Pakistan we need to pay homage to those countless souls who laid down their lives in giving us this day. The 1971 War of Liberation was fought on several fronts by people from all walks of life. While the main war is largely known by the battles fought by our brave freedom fighters both inside and outside our borders, much of our success came from the resistance and random acts of bravery by people in all nooks and corners of our country.

The ranks of these unknown and forgotten fighters for the liberation of our country were filled by students, farmers, shop keepers, and housewives. The following is a hardly known story of a band of young people who probably were among the first to take up arms to frustrate the Pakistan army in its murderous thrust toward the countryside.

For several days after the mayhem let loose by the Pakistan army in Dhaka and

neighbouring areas, we in Munshiganj expected the Pakistan Army to descend on the river shores any day. Rumours were rife that the murderous platoons were seen boarding speed boats and motor launches, and were headed toward Munshiganj. People started leaving their homes and headed towards interior villages.

However, after several days of anxious wait, when the feared invasion did not happen, people started to relax and started coming back to their homes. Meanwhile, the exodus of people from Dhaka and Narayanganj to Munshiganj continued unabated, with shocking narratives from the new shelter seekers. There were harrowing stories of wanton killing, burning of houses, and mass arrests of young people.

My parents escaped from Narayanganj with my young siblings when the army goons descended on our neighbourhood and started indiscriminate firing and looting. They were lucky to escape in time, as hours after they left our home was attacked by the army, and incendiary

bombs were lobbed into the house. All our belongings were set on fire.

With the army concentrating on its advance toward the hinterland, Munshiganj was spared its wrath for much of April. That is until the blowing up of Gazaria Bridge by a hastily formed guerilla force comprising a group of students and some ex-military Bengalis of the locality. This was the first major act of insurgency in Munshiganj and thrilled all of us, but also accelerated the Pakistan army action in the subdivision.

Gazaria was then the only thana in Munshiganj sub-division, which was connected by land with Dhaka. The Dhaka-Comilla-Chittagong highway ran through the thana over a bridge (about 400 feet in length) that spanned the river Meghna, which skirted the thana. This was recognised as a vital bridge, a key installation that served as a transportation link for all of the south-eastern part of the then East Pakistan.

On a very early morning in early April 1971 I was roused from bed by a telephone call from the sub-divisional police officer. He told me in a panic stricken voice that the Gazaria Bridge had been blown up by some people, and that we needed to go and visit the area before the authorities from Dhaka called us. Under normal circumstances, an SDO and SDPO to go and visit the place of such accidents, but this was no normal time. We were not sure if the army had already gone to the place and if we would be welcome to them. A great sense of curiosity to see this daring act of suspected

sabotage, however, removed our hesitation, and we proceeded immediately toward Gazaria in my motor launch.

As we approached Gazaria through river Meghna we saw ahead of us the great bridge cut in half, with the middle section missing. It was an incredible sight. The middle span had fallen right into the river, leaving a wide gap in the bridge. It was a clean operation, appearing as though a giant electric saw had run through the bridge and cut it in parts. A small crowd had gathered near the fallen bridge. It melted away as our motor launch approached. The people took us for the military as we had a few policemen on board. However, seeing us from a distance a few returned. I asked the crowd if they knew how this had happened. No one would admit any knowledge, but one young man said this was a way to stop the army from going further into the interior. He was wrong, but that was the belief at that time.

We could not say if we were thrilled or excited in awe, but both of us knew that this was the first brazen act of armed resistance in our area. It was obviously the work of some people trained in explosives. We also realised that whether we reported this to our civilian high up in Dhaka or not, an army retribution would be only days away, if not hours. We reported the incident to our authorities in Dhaka, and fearfully waited to see the machine gun wielding soldiers on our shores.

The army did not come immediately to Munshiganj, as the incident did not take



Brave sons of the soil.

place there. However, they did arrive in Gazaria in speed boats and motor launches the next day, targeting several villages along the river, especially those near the bridge. It was havoc, with the troops spraying machine guns all around and lobbing incendiary bombs to burn houses. Many lives were lost, leaving only those who were fortunate to leave their homes earlier for other villages. The army also rounded up a number of young people for no reason from the adjoining villages, and hauled them up in trucks to take them to make-shift detention cen-

tres in local schools. Some lucky ones would be released, but those not so lucky would be found later floating in the rivers with their bodies riddled by machinegun bullets.

It did not take long, however, for the army to reach the shores of Munshiganj to begin their cleansing operation. We would have to suffer the agonies of army presence for seven more months, along with the rest of the population of our country.

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Sri Lankan presidential election: A complicated race

The lead-up to the polls could be violent for a variety of reasons. Both the candidates are strong and have their support base within the existing power structure, even though one is no more with the government. Consequently, the acrimony and bitterness may increase as the election gets nearer.

ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE presidential election in the South Asian island state of Sri Lanka, scheduled for January 26, is expected to witness tough contest between the two top candidates. Both can legitimately claim credit for the government victory over the Tamil militants, thus bringing an end to the long running civil war.

Incumbent President Mahinda Rajapakse, who is seeking another term, basking in the glory of crushing the three-decade-old insurgency demanding a separate independent Tamil state, is pitted against the former army chief who led the war to a successful finale in the battlefield.

Certainly, President Rajapakse oversaw the war, and his adroit handling in the political, diplomatic and military areas relating to the civil war has been commended, which has put him at a place of honour in the country. But his challenger is the person who led the military side as the only four-star general in the army, and his credit is seen by many as far larger than the president's since the victory came in the battlefields, where the army chief played the key role in military strategy.

Besides, the war cost the lives of many officers and men in the army, and it is the

armed forces that are given more kudos for the hard earned victory than the political or diplomatic strategies of the government. Anyway, both are "heroes" of the splendid victory over the determined Tamil rebels. But the million dollar question is, who will the people pick as president when they go to the ballots on January 26? The choice seems tough and hence a close race is on the cards.

However, the lead-up to the polls could be violent for a variety of reasons. Both the candidates are strong and have their support base within the existing power structure, even though one is no more with the government. Consequently, the acrimony and bitterness may increase as the election gets nearer. As such, clashes among their supporters are not unlikely and some indications in that direction are already discernible.

More importantly, the Tamil rebels have been defeated in the war, along with the killing of their top leader Velupillai Prabhakaran and his key associates. But it will be height of folly to assume that all the rebels, known for their commitment and ruthlessness, have either been killed or caught. If not many, at least a good number of them may have mingled among the general masses or managed to escape the country. Some may have succeeded in still living in the country in various guises

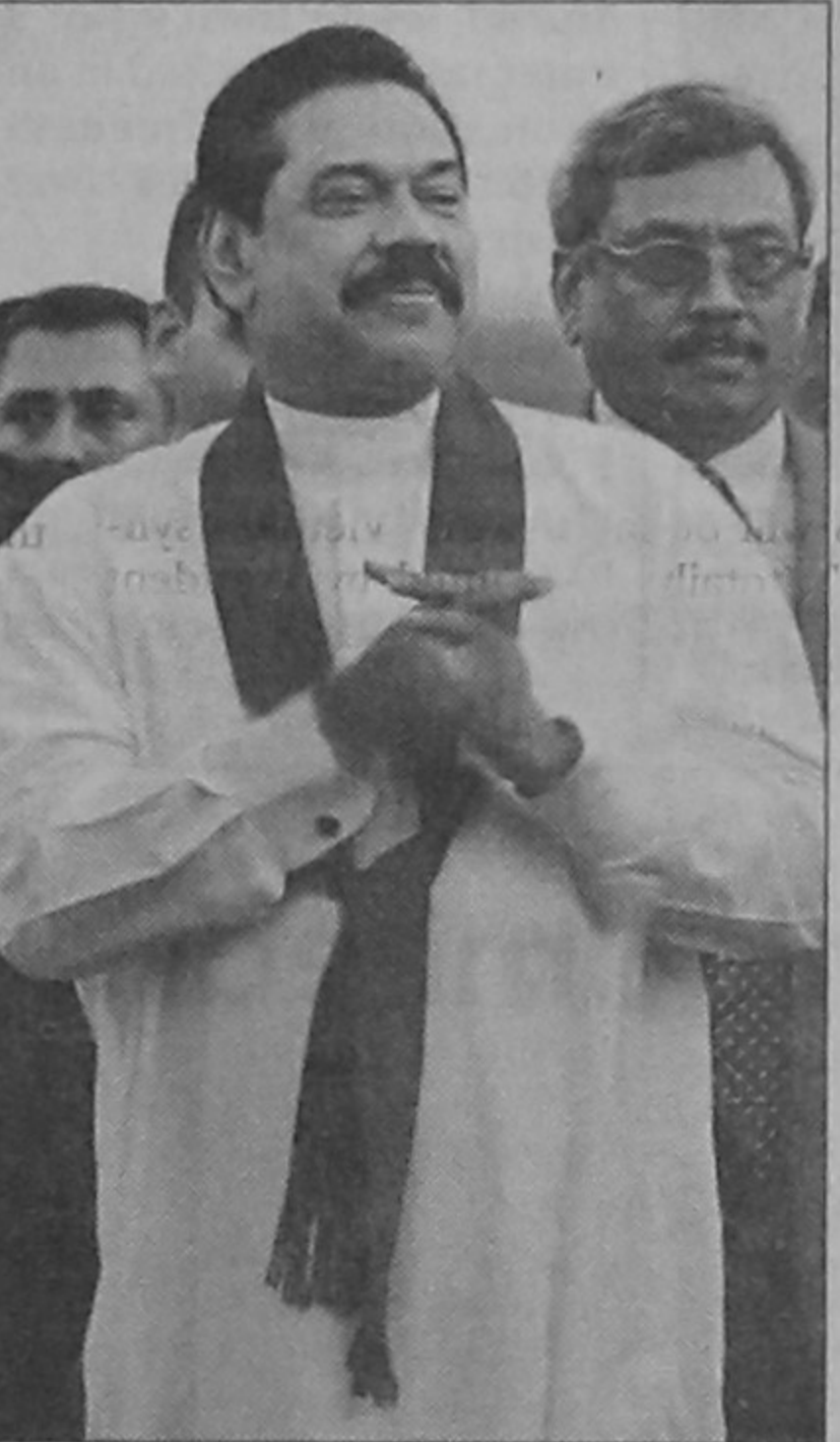
despite the government's claim that all avenues for regrouping or any activity by the remnants of the rebels have been sealed off.

This claim notwithstanding, former militants may act in utter desperation to avenge their defeat by resorting to stray incidents, including attempts to assassinate the two top candidates. The wrath of the rebels against both are understandable and, given the tough background of the rebels like the suicide attacks, the Lankan presidential elections will remain a high security affair till the end of the event -- and probably even beyond.

Gen. Sarath Fonseka expressed his fear when he said that attempts would certainly be made on his life by the Tamil rebels, who are now believed to be only a few in number, during the polls. He said that 1,000 Tamil tigers might have survived the onslaught of the war and could be active whenever they found minimum opportunity. He is no longer in the government and is now at loggerheads with President Rajapakse, who had shifted him to a less important post of defence chief of staff.

Gen. Fonseka was angered when he lost the command position and charged the president with deliberately trying to give an impression that he (the army chief) was planning a military coup after the war was over. When differences between the two important persons bubbled to the surface, most opposition parties seized the opportunity by courting the former army chief to contest the presidential elections as their nominee.

Election for the presidency -- as far as its schedule is concerned -- remained shrouded in uncertainty for sometime when the president gave hints that he could continue at least for a year according to the provisions of the constitution.



Rajapakse and Fosenka: Heading for a fierce fight?

But this position drew sharp reactions from the political parties and, eventually, the government announced the election schedule.

Sarath Fonseka agreed to the opposition parties' request to challenge Mahina Rajapakse, and battles lines are being drawn. The total picture about the rivalry is likely to be clear by the end of the December, when filing of nominations and withdrawals will be completed. However, a contest between Rajapakse and Fonseka appears certain, barring any unexpected change in the scenario.

Most opposition parties picked the ex-army chief as they are convinced that the country's overwhelmingly Sinhalese population are happy with the victory



insist that the victory came militarily and not because of political leadership and that Gen. Fonseka should be elected as president. However, in the international eye, both Rajapakse and Fonseka are guilty of excesses committed against the Tamils, particularly the Tamil civilians, during the last phase of the war.

It is also said in some quarters that Prabhakaran was not killed in fighting, but was captured and then shot -- a crime as it violates the war conventions. However, the government has denied the allegations, saying that the Tamil rebel supremo was killed as he was trying to flee. How the country's around 18 percent Hindu Tamil people, mostly living in the north-east, see the presidential polls and whether they will be able to cast their votes, or at all exercise right of franchise, is also something to for watch with interest.

Sri Lankan presidential elections have a notorious record of assassination or attempts on the candidates. In 1994, Tamil Tigers were accused of killing a top contender while in 1999 incumbent president Chandrika Kumaratunga narrowly escaped an attempt, but not without injuries.

In Sri Lanka, the president is very powerful and political parties, regardless of their differences, have in the past called for curbing of such enormous powers for the country's chief executives. But when in the seat, the sitting presidents turned a blind eye to this demand. Sarath Fonseka has said that he would do it if elected. Only time will say whether he too will fail in this count if elected. In any case, the Lankan election is generating heat, and this heat covers on one hand the contest between two "heroes" of the civil war and, on the other, lingering fears about impending violence in many forms.

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Manpower export: Impact of globalisation

As the process of globalisation has increased the connectivity and interdependence of the world's markets and businesses, it has similarly increased migration of workers from one country to another. This is indeed an opportunity for Bangladesh to systematically promote migration of its surplus workforce.

NADIM RAHMAN

WE all know that in recent years hundreds and thousand of unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled Bangladeshi workers have been working outside the country, and this number is growing each year. But what are the dynamics that have facilitated such a large outflow of migrant workers from Bangladesh to all over the world? In fact, such outward migration is significantly facilitated by the dynamics of globalisation, and has turned into an "invisible export" from Bangladesh that brings billions of dollars to the Bangladesh economy in the form of

remittances.

"Globalisation" commonly refers to economic globalisation where individual states remain politically sovereign but the borders become less rigid in terms of capital flow, spread of technology, production and supply of goods and services according to each country's comparative advantages. As a result, under globalisation the developed countries and multinational companies have been investing in the developing countries, merging with similar local companies or even buying the local companies, especially where there is cheap labour, political stability, or where the countries offer tax holidays and other business

facilities. As a result, those countries require additional manpower for the production of new goods for the overseas multinational companies and when they face shortage of manpower to meet the new demands for manpower they welcome foreign workers.

Bangladesh has a labour force of 70.86 million, and the supply of labour is more than the number of jobs available in the country. Even where jobs are available, the salary is very low and not attractive to the job seekers. Besides, about 45% of the population lives below the poverty line and the country must find a better way to utilise its labour force.

Against this backdrop, during the last 10-15 years millions of skilled and unskilled workers from Bangladesh have migrated to a wide range of countries all over the world. In other words, economic globalisation has opened the door for millions of Bangladeshi workers to migrate outside the country in search of work.

In the context of globalisation, the biggest comparative advantage of Bangladesh is its huge and cheap labour force. As the process of globalisation has

increased the connectivity and interdependence of the world's markets and businesses, it has similarly increased migration of workers from one country to another. This is indeed an opportunity for Bangladesh to systematically promote migration of its surplus workforce.

As Bangladesh has only limited exportable items (garments, jute and jute goods, leather, frozen fish and seafood, tea), the export of unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled manpower from the country, which has been earning a remarkable amount of foreign currency, should be further encouraged by providing skills training to its labour force, procedural simplification of such outward migration, and mobilisation of the Bangladeshi missions abroad.

It is a well known fact that the existence of cheap labour has helped Bangladesh develop a large garments sector that exported goods worth \$9.3 billion in 2007 (UNDP). As compared to this visible export, Bangladesh earned about \$9.02 billion as remittances in 2008, which is indeed from an "invisible export."

There is evidence that besides this

formal remittance, another 4050% of total remittances are channeled informally through various means, including hundi (direct and informal exchange of different currencies between two parties). A recent study shows that almost 54% of the total remittance inflows are transacted through informal channels and are, therefore, unrecorded (World Bank Global Economic Prospects, 2006).

This migration of Bangladeshi skilled and unskilled workers for overseas employment has been significantly influenced by globalisation. Statistical data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Manpower and Training (BMET, 2008) shows that since 1976 until 1990 Bangladesh used to export skilled and unskilled workers only to a limited number of Muslim countries (except Singapore), especially with whom it had good relations, such as Saudi Arabia, U.A.E, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Libya, Malaysia and Singapore. At that time the number of people working outside the country was about 103,000.

But since 1990, when the effect of globalisation started to spread, more and more countries needed additional work-

ers. It opened opportunities for Bangladesh to export more workers to those countries. Globalisation played a key role here because it influenced the investors to invest in growing nations like Singapore, Malaysia, china, Taiwan, etc. Investors poured in billions of dollars into these countries, creating many new jobs. But many countries did not have enough workers to fill in those new jobs and, consequently, the countries that had surplus labour, such as Bangladesh, took the opportunity to export their manpower to those countries.

Currently, Bangladesh has about 6 million of its work force working abroad and sending remittances. In 2007, Bangladesh exported a high percentage of unskilled workers, 57.99%. It has also exported skilled and semi-skilled labour, which accounts for about 19.86% and 22.07%, respectively, of the total labour force outside Bangladesh. Remittances now amount to nearly three-fourths of net export earnings.

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