

Heroes away from home

FROM PAGE 1

The first of the resistances occurred on the borders and when casualties occurred, the bodies were carted to safer grounds inside the Indian territory. Sometimes, the burials were done on Indian soil without knowing that the land was not Bangladesh, Sajjad explained.

The latest find of 282 graves were first made by Sajjad who had been talking to villagers in Akhaura about the war for a long time. It was then that the villagers had informed him about the graves -- 32 at one place and 250 a little away.

"We wrote three letters to India's external affairs ministry with requests to preserve the 32 graves of our freedom fighters in Indian territory which is very close to the BSF checkpoint in Agartala," Enamul Hoque Chowdhury, minister (press) for Bangladesh High Commission in Delhi, told The Daily Star by phone.

Enamul said Bangladesh High Commission in Delhi wrote the first letter in April, the second in October and the third last month.

India has been requested to preserve the graves and allow Bangladeshis to pay respect to the martyrs, he said.

"Some other historic places in Agartala, such as a hospital where the freedom fighters were treated, and a lichi garden where the fighters had camped should also be preserved for the next generations to visit," said Enamul.

Bangladesh High Commission is also pursuing the Indian government verbally, but has not received any response yet, he said.

Former army chief and freedom fighter Lt Gen (retd) Harun-Ar-Rashid Bir Pratik, who fought at the beginning of the war in Akhaura and Gangasagar of Brahamanbaria still recalls his memories about the graves in the Indian territory.

In 1971, the border was not demarcated and there was a customs checkpoint on Akhaura border, he told The Daily Star.

Many of the freedom fighters who died in Akhaura and Ujanishar battles with Pakistani forces in April 1971 had been buried in the Indian territory.

"At least 31 martyrs of Ujanishar and Gangasagar battle were buried in Indian territory near Akhaura. Besides, many freedom fighters who died in the nine-month war in Kasba, Akhaura and Kharampur of Brahamanbaria were also buried in Indian territory," Harun said.

He said he is aware of the initiative of Lt Col (retd) Sajjad to shift the graves from the Indian territory to Bangladeshi soil.

"If it is not possible to shift the large number of graves to our soil, at least India can allow Bangladeshis to visit the graves in its territory on special occasions," Sajjad said.

GANGASAGAR FLASHPOINT

The freedom fighters now buried in India opposite Sonarbadi village died in the early battles in Gangasagar, Ujanishar and Akhaura.

Just a day after the Pakistan army cracked down on the Bangalees on March 26, the 4 East Bengal Regiment consisting of Bangalee soldiers and officers revolted. To quell the revolt, the Pakistan army sent a strong fighting patrol from Comilla cantonment to Brahamanbaria through Ujanishar, a strategic place, on March 29. But the Pak army had retreated in the face of fierce defence from the 4 Bengal.

This time the Pak army sent its frontier force following the same route to Brahamanbaria. But by this time, EPR Subedar Razzak had laid out a defence line behind Ujanishar bridge between Akhaura and Brahamanbaria road. Civilians of the locality and some policemen joined him with whatever arms they could get hold of.

The Pak army failed to cross the bridge in the face of fierce counter attacks by the resistance force that lasted until April 10. It left a small pocket of soldiers near the bridge to contain Ujanishar and returned to Comilla.

Meantime, Captain ATM Haider (later a colonel) arrived in Ujanishar on the afternoon of April 12 and damaged the pillars of the bridge with bombs so that the Pak army cannot cross heavy vehicles and field guns.

Now the Pak army decided to advance towards Gangasagar, another strategic point close to the bordering Akhaura, following Comilla-Akhaura rail tracks.

From the Battalion Headquarters, Major Shafayet

Jamil (later Lt Col) moved to Brahamanbaria to take over. Lt Harun (later Lt Gen and chief of army staff) was ordered to move forward with his D Company and reinforce defence in Gangasagar and Ujanishar.

The 4 Bengal was split into two: one reached Akhaura checkpoint where battalion commander Major Khaled Mosharraf (later Brig General) had arrived and the other formed a defence line in Gangasagar beside Hawra river.

On April 13, the Pak army launched its offensive on Gangasagar with the help of air attack.

But the 4 Bengal was prepared here across the Hawra river and again the fight began. This time, the Pak army had the air support as Pakistan Sabre jets pounded Bengal positions.

The fight intensified on the morning of April 18 with heavy mortar shelling. The heavily armed Pakistan army planned to trap the 4 Bengal and started to drop troops from Mi-8 helicopters behind the Bengal position.

Sensing the Pakistani plan, the 4 Bengal decided to retreat. Lt Harun ordered the withdrawal and Bangalee soldiers started marching towards Akhaura.

Those who died in the battles were carried across the border and buried. Their graves have now been detected.

MOSTAFA'S HEROIC DEATH

But by that time, the Pakistan army was all around -- in front and also in the rear and firing with full force. The 4 Bengal had a light machinegun group located the railway line on the west giving coverage to the retreating Bengali soldiers.

Suddenly, a Pakistani rocket hit the gunners and both machinegun operators dropped dead. This put the retreating forces at great risk as the Pakistanis were firing from both sides.

A soldier, Sepoy Mohammad Mostafa Kamal was firing from another machinegun group about 75 metres away.

Sensing the great danger the whole platoon was in, he ran to the other machinegun position and started firing.

"You keep retreating. I am giving cover fire for you," he shouted at his co-fighters.

"But you cannot fight alone," someone said. "You won't last long."

"Don't worry about me. If you live you can fight my war later," Mostafa's machinegun roared.

For half an hour, he kept the Pakistan army at bay and by that time the 4 Bengal had managed to reach Akhaura.

But then Mostafa's machinegun ran out of ammunition. As his gun fell silent, the Pak troops surrounded him from all around and bayoneted him to death. Mostafa was awarded Bir Shreshtha, the highest gallantry award, for sacrificing his life to save his fellow fighters.

Today, a neglected, dilapidated brick foundation and an illegible plaque marks the place where Mostafa was killed.

BODIES TAKEN ACROSS BORDER

In about 20 days of a battle, the bodies of the fallen soldiers were taken across the border and buried, said Sajjad.

"That was a high ground and safe from Pakistani bombing and gunfire," Sajjad explains. "That is why the villagers buried the bodies there. The dead were mostly from police and EPR. I don't think any army personnel were buried there."

Liberation War researchers Shahriar Kabir and Muntasir Mamoon said there are no accounts of the graves of Bangladeshi freedom fighters on Indian soil across the border. But it is certain that a countless number of freedom fighters were buried on Indian soil.

"Both Bangladeshi and India must take steps to identify and preserve the graves of freedom fighters in the Indian territory," said Sharif Kabir.

"Two years back I spoke to Tripura Chief Minister Manik Sarker about preserving the graves in Agartala and some other historic places of the 71 war. He made a positive response. Now it's time for Bangladesh to make sure such history is preserved for the future generation," said Prof Mamoon.

THE LONELY GRAVE

Across a ten feet canal sits a lonely grave. No-one visits it, signs of neglect are etched over the once-white walls of the grave. Here lies Prof Wahab Talukdar, a freedom fighter and Islamic history teacher of Kurligram Government College, who ran a youth camp

for recruitment of freedom fighters.

On August 7, as he was briefing guerrillas at a camp the Pakistan army on secret information attacked. Wahab was running along the rail track in search of a safe place when he received bullets and fell down.

The Pakistan army caught him and bayoneted him to death. After the army left the village, the villagers collected his mutilated body from a pond and carried him over to Kalamati village in India. He was buried there.

As long as India did not draw a barbed wire fence, Wahab's relatives could visit the grave, offer prayers and clean it. But since the fence has been put in place, Wahab lies lonely on Indian soil.

It was on a morning in 2007 that Lt Col (Retd) Sajjad went to Bhurungamari and took some villagers to visit the grave. As they reached the canal, the BSF guards became alert. Sajjad raised his hands and showed that they had come to offer prayers.

As they were lining up to offer prayer, an old man came running.

He was crying and running. "Wait for me, please. Wait," he called out.

"Who are you?" Sajjad was surprised.

"I am Wahab's brother. He was my younger brother," the old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man raised his hands and started praying. He was weeping loudly and tears rolled down his cheeks in mourning for his slain brother who had given his life for the country in 1971.

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."

The old man wept. "Since the fence was raised we could not come here. Please let me join you."

"You lead the prayer then. We will follow you."