

Freedom fight by two missionaries

SHAHNOOR WAHID

ALONGSIDE the Bengalis in general, many foreign missionaries who have been living in Bangladesh since the fifties and sixties had joined our War of Liberation in 1971 in their own capacity. We have heard about their heroic contribution and on various occasions paid our tribute that they

sion hospital located deep inside the Modhupur forest. When the Pakistani military came to know about this a contingent led by a senior officer entered the mission one morning and quizzed Father Homerich. Point blank Father Homerich told the officer that the mission was a house of God and he would treat any wounded man,

Notre Dame College) recently and he talked about his contribution to the war. He had written many letters to US senators and important people in the UN Headquarters informing about the ongoing war in Bangladesh and the extent of atrocities by the Pakistani army and Razakars and Al-Badars. He has given a detailed account of his experience in his book titled "Forty Years in Bangladesh: Memoirs of Father Timm," published by CARITAS. Therein he has devoted three long chapters on his experience and these are: Chapter 6: Manpura during the War; Chapter 7: Dhaka during the War and Chapter 8: Independence and Reconstruction. Some excerpts from one of these chapters are given below.

Dhaka during the war

"I returned home to Notre Dame College feeling sick in mind and heart because of the seeming world, and especially American indifference to so many atrocities. The Time and Newsweek cover stories on genocide in East Pakistan came out soon afterwards and, although banned in Pakistan, bootlegged copies were quickly circulated. They probably did more to arouse world opinion than anything else except The Rape of Bangladesh, a book by a West Pakistani journalist, the late Tony Mascarenhas, who was allowed in by the government because they expected him to share the official viewpoint. Instead, he got his family out to London and then published his timely expose.

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Rajshahi University had a majority of its students come back. It was conveniently far enough away so that no one could easily check. One Urdu-speaking (West Pakistan) student of Notre Dame complained that he had a right to have classes, so Fr. Wheeler told him that if his father would pay tutorial fees he would be taught. The Army was coming every day to check on the number of teachers and students, but Fr. Wheeler convinced them that he could not run a college with only 21 students. Intermediate examinations were to be held in the second week of August and our college was to be a centre for our own students and those of some small college as well. But the Mukti Bahini was out to stop the examinations. At nearby T&T College (Telephone and Telegraph) on August 8 a large section of the building was blasted out. The explosion could be heard for five miles. We had good relations with the Mukti Bahini, however, and were not worried about being blasted.

In the third week of August I made a quick trip to Bhola with two CARE people and heard there the encouraging news that the government had done away with discrimination against Hindus in agricultural loans as a result of my intervention. On the way back from Bhola our steamer out of Barisal was fired on by the Mukti Bahini. I heard bullets pinging on tin as we hurriedly dived out of our bunks onto the floor. Lying on the side near the corridor I felt safe, since other bodies were lying between me and the firing. After two or three minutes I got back on my bunk while everyone else yelled "Get down, get down!" I replied: "We're already well

past the firing point." In the morning my confidence of the night before was greatly shaken. Our room was the first one off the lounge and bullets from a previous firing had passed through the corridor at an angle and through the wall right where I had been lying.

In a lengthy report to Rohdes on September 2, after returning from a week's trip in Patuakhali with a Caritas Germany representative, I emphasized that in spite of a VOA (Voice of America) analyst of the situation in Bangladesh, which I had heard the previous night, the big cities were not "fast returning to normal." Eighty per cent were supposed to have turned out for the reopening of schools but the fact was that no schools were running in Dhaka district outside of Dhaka town. For the Intermediate Examination at Notre Dame College there was only 20% attendance, high for Dhaka. For the Matriculation Examination of Dhaka Board of Education only 13,000 out of 72,000 candidates sat for the exams. Most of those sat only because their fathers, government employees, had to fill out a questionnaire asking, among other outrageous items, how many children they had and which exams they were eligible for in 1971. The fathers got the message, but many of their children reported "sick" after a day or two of examinations.

The Mukti Bahini were already enjoying much success in the rural areas but were tightly controlled in the cities. Large numbers of Hindus who had fled joined the Mukti Bahini and came back to fight for the establishment of Bangladesh. Whenever the Mukti Bahini

entered a village they seized the looters of Hindu homes and forced them to restore everything. The Razakars (armed collaborators with the Pakistan Army) were a special target of the freedom fighters.

On September 11, I wrote to my Indiana Senators a resume of some of the important recent developments: There are certain recent developments in East Pakistan which may trick the outside world into thinking that conditions have changed substantially in recent times and that American aid given now would no longer be in support of a fascist militarist regime. These developments are the lifting of press censorship and the proclamation of a general amnesty. However, just the day before lifting of press censorship, Marital Law Order No. 89 was promulgated, which forbids the publication or dissemination of anything, which can in any way be interpreted as prejudicial to the welfare of Pakistan, i.e. of the military regime.

In mid-September the Pakistan government began proclaiming amnesty for those who had gone to India. A few days before, I had gone with Fr. Homrich to the jail at Muktagacha, Mymensingh district, to try to get the release of a tribal boy who was being held because he was alleged to have gone to India. Fr. Homrich had been five times to the jail previously and took four Muslim witnesses to prove that the boy had never left home. He was in a cell with five other men, but it was only big enough for one to lie down at a time. We did not get the boys' release, in spite of the amnesty.

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Father Timm receiving the Abu Sayeed Chowdhury Award for human rights from minister Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury.

deserved. I personally met and heard the story of two missionary doyens who defied the threats of the Pakistani military and continued to help the freedom fighters. They did so for the sheer love for the common people of this country irrespective of their religion, cast or creed.

I met Father Homerich of Jalchhatri Mission some years ago and heard how he and his mission people gave shelter to and dressed the wounds of freedom fighters in the mis-

whether a Mukti or a Pakistani soldier. The answer defused the anger of the officer a little and he left with an warning of dire consequence if he gave shelter to the Mukti. But the mission door was always open for the freedom fighters and for this reason he had to face death threats. The nine-month experience of Father Homerich is worth the content of a book.

Next, I have had a talk with Father Timm (Rev. Richard W. Timm, CSC. Former teacher of

the college had opened a week before my arrival in Dhaka with only 21 students, most of whom had come out of curiosity. Dhaka University had no students at all, while government announced that

How victorious is our Victory Day?

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IT took two hundred years to throw the British out of India. The Vietnamese fought more than fifteen years to win their freedom. The Palestinians have been fighting for sixty-two years. The Jews have got a homeland after 2,520 years. Victory came to us in nine months on 16th December 1971. A relatively short time compared to others.

We don't have an estimate of how many Indians were killed during the two hundred years of British rule. But the Quit India Movement alone cost hundreds of lives, 100,000 people arrested nationwide. Nearly 5.4 million Vietnamese died during the American intervention in Vietnam. About 2 million Palestinians and 1 million Arabs from neighboring countries got killed since the Arab-Israel conflict started in 1948. The exact number of Israelis killed is unknown, but it's said to be insignificant compared to casualties on the Palestinian side.

The official number of lives lost in our liberation war is 3 million, if we go by the density of death in a freedom fight. Our struggle may not have been long considering how many months it was fought. But it was hard counting how many lives were lost within that short span of time. We may have fast-tracked our freedom, but we have paid a usurpation price.

Thomas Paine, the American

Patriot, has said, "The harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph." If we go by his words, then a victory won too easily or too soon doesn't deserve great celebration. That makes victory sound so much like cooked meal. It can be under, over or done just right.

So, how does our hasty but hard-earned victory taste to us? We have been relishing this victory for thirty-nine years. Does it satisfy our appetite for freedom? Does it satisfy our palate for justice? Does it make us think of what it has achieved for us? Do we realize how fortunate we are to have a free homeland? Are we taking it for granted?

For those of us who lived to see 16th December in 1971, it was like second birth. We were born again as citizens of a new country. We were born again as contenders of a new dream. Those of us, who grew up before 1971, should know what those meant to us.

Because who should know if not us what it meant to live in a country, where our mother tongue was relegated to a secondary status. We should know what it meant to be discriminated in the civil service and the army. We should know how it felt to be treated as unequal, harassed in the backyard of an economy that flourished at our expense.

How much of these do we recall? True celebration of victory comes from its calibration.

What if we were defeated? What if we still were ruled from Islamabad? Edmund Spenser is an English poet, who is famous for this line in *Fate of the Butterfly*, "What more felicity can fall to creature than to enjoy delight with liberty?" Could we enjoy delight, if liberty was still mortgaged to West Pakistan?

Can we tell the difference any more? Who amongst us think these thoughts? We fight for promotions. We fight for business deals. We use our connections. We favour our friends and relatives. We feel delighted to do all of these. And, we have the liberty because we no longer have to wait for a nod from any fatcat Punjabi, Pathan or Sindi to do any of these. We have become the master of our own universe. Bangladesh is for the Bangladeshi.

In her poem *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou, the Black American poet, compares free birds with caged birds. The free bird leaps, and floats, and dips, and dares. It dreams of another breeze, fat worms, and claims the sky. The caged bird stalks in its narrow cage ensnared by its own rage, sings fearfully of freedom, stands on the grave of dreams, its shadow shouts, and opens its throat to sing.

The 16th December 1971 was a day of transformation. It turned caged birds into free birds. On a single day, our life changed for the rest of our life. It

was like a knife blade, which severed the past from the future. It forever erased the ignominy of being ruled by others and brought us the resplendent dawn of freedom.

But we should celebrate this transformation not because it has made us victorious. We should rather celebrate it because it has given us hope and scope to connect the song with the sky. It has given us the choice of freedom, and the freedom of choice. It has given us the freedom of joy, and the joy of freedom.

Why is freedom more precious than life? The Palestinians are still bleeding. Kurds have lost 30,000 lives just in last three decades. The Armenians are still deprived of it, 600,000 killed in the First World War only. It's equally true for the Kashmiris, the Basques and the Chechens.

Freedom House published its Freedom in the World Report 2007, which showed that 90 countries representing 46% of the world population are free. Their 3 billion inhabitants enjoy a broad range of rights. Fifty-eight countries representing 17% of the world population were considered partly free. Political rights and civil liberties are more limited in these countries, in which corruption, dominant ruling parties, or, in some cases, ethnic or religious strife is often the norm.

Janis Joplin song *Me & Bobby McGee* has it that "freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose". Nobody should have anything left to lose in a free country. People win freedom so that they don't have to live in the fear of losing. People are afraid to lose their lives, property, rights and dignity. Freedom means nobody will dare taking any of these away from them.

The first half of victory we have clinched: we have won it. But the other half is still remiss. We still live in the fear of losing. Law doesn't protect us. Justice doesn't shelter us. The government is no guarantee. Corruption is rampant. Hatred is hurting. Many small steps of defeat are subsumed within one

giant leap of victory.

"One may know how to gain a victory, and know not how to use it", says Spanish playwright Pedro Calderon de la Barca. That's the message for this Victory Day. It's not enough to win victory, if we don't know how to use it. And, we should be able to harness it better than others, because we have paid heavily compared to them.

The writer is a columnist.

