

A date with destiny

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in their life -- the grim faced skinny black figures hunched against the wind; their Kalashnikov rifles held high.

Immediately, the captain gave the order and the fire alarm rang. It sent a chill up the spines of the crew.

There was a quick discussion about what to do now. Somewhere they had heard that if the pirates find a lot of people on board, they get deterred. So everyone rushed to the starboard with iron rods and whatever they could find and brandished their "weapons" at the pirates who kept coming closer and closer.

The captain, Farid Ahmed, thought of another trick. He started coursing the ship on a zigzag path at full speed.

This might have worked as high waves were created and the pirate skiff stopped. MV Jahan Moni moved ahead fast, leaving the pirates behind.

Everybody thought the trick had worked. At least they wanted to believe it.

The captain did not slacken the speed. He wanted to get out of this goddamn territory. He had already sent out distress signal that his ship is under pirate attack.

But all hopes shattered an hour later when the pirate skiff reappeared on the horizon. This time it was coming in a more determined way.

It was now clear that the pirates were not repelled by the waves but by their failed engine. They have restarted it.

As they closed in, suddenly the pirates started shooting with their AK47s. Bullets started hitting the ship. Some were hissing around.

"Everybody get to the bridge. Now. Now. Now," the captain ordered.

Quickly all ducts and portholes were locked and the crew gathered on the bridge, which is the highest point of the ship.

Their only hope was that an Indian naval ship that was around the area would reach them before the pirates could capture the ship.

But the pirates were now beside their ship. They brought out a long ladder and tried to hook it to the railing of the ship's deck. But the ladder was too long. It took them a while to adjust the ladder. Within minutes, the six pirates climbed up.

They forced their way through fire channels to the top and started knocking at

the bridge door violently. "Open or we'll fire!" they screamed.

Inside the room, the crewmen were trembling with fear. One of them opened the door and the pirates gushed in with their guns. They were fuming with rage.

"On the floor! Everybody!" orders flowed.

The crew members obliged. They all crammed on the small space. It was now clear that the ship had been taken over and they had been taken hostage.

A little later, the Indian naval ship arrived.

"Ask the ship to go back or we'll shoot you all," the pirate leader ordered.

The captain knew it was too late for the navy to do anything. So he passed the instruction. Slowly the Indian ship disappeared into the vastness of the sea.

It was now only the pirates and the crew. Pirates and despair.

"As if, a black curtain suddenly fell on us. We knew we had started a new life and we did not know what awaited us," Fakhru Islam, a greaser, said.

The Somalis produced a crude Global Positioning System (GPS) and showed a point.

"Go there. Straight," the leader ordered.

Five days later, MV Jahan Moni anchored at a place slightly below Puntland, a heaven for Somali pirates.

Around 2:30pm on December 12, the pirates made the first phone call to MV Jahan Moni's operator, Brave Royal Ship Management (BR) Limited.

"They just called us to say that they have taken MV Jahan in their control, and

hung up," Meherul Karim, general manager of Brave Royal, told The Daily Star.

The chief engineer and his wife were allowed to describe the situation to Mohammed Shahjahan, managing director of SR Shipping, owner of the ship.

The same day they again contacted Chittagong at 7:00pm.

Later in the night, the pirates told the crew members that they could release them in exchange of \$9 million. They also let some crew members to talk with their relatives.

Meherul Karim later stepped in to start negotiation with the pirates for the release of the hijacked ship.

A whole wave of despair and terror had passed. The pirates would keep watchful guards on the crew. They would not even let the crew go out together to perform any emergency duty.

The water purifier had broken down one day. It needed three men to fix. But they would not let more than two to go.

The pirates would also chew a kind of leaves to get intoxicated. One morning, the gang leader, Abdur Rashid, barged into the bridge. He was intoxicated, and was laughing like a mad man.

Suddenly, he raised his AK47, fixed a new magazine and cocked the gun. Then he aimed its muzzle at the hostages. His finger was on the trigger.

The crew were terrified. It was clear that this man wanted to kill them just out of turn. Death was staring at them.

Just at that moment, another pirate appeared. He quickly took in the scene and pushed the barrel of the gun up in a zippy. Then he snatched away the AK47 from Rashid and took him away.

From then on, a strict rule was imposed on the pirates that they cannot drink or chew the leaves.

THE PIRATES' WAY OF LAW
The pirates acted in a very professional manner. Anyone breaking their rule would be punished severely.

The rule breaker would be tied to a pole, beaten up and left in the sun.

One of the crew also faced this punishment when he climbed down to the deck from the bridge without the pirates' permission. His legs and hands were tied, and he

was beaten up.

Most of the pirates had multiple wounds on their bodies. Some of them had their limbs missing. This all showed they had violent pasts.

Yet there seemed to prevail a strange kind of discipline among them. They had very high respect for the only female hostage of the ship, the wife of the chief engineer.

And they never touched any of their possessions, even ornaments. They had taken away their mobiles only.

SURVIVAL
A precarious condition arose when the ship's water tanks went empty after about 15 days of capture.

First, the crew tried to ration it but still there was no water, and the chance of getting it was thin.

So the crew got an innovative idea. They put the vent pipe of the air coolers into small drums and collected the water that was condensed out.

Fuel was also running low and this posed another problem. So they shut down one generator and with it the freezer. But this caused the food to go off, which had to be thrown in the sea.

A severe food rationing began. They were served Ruti and sugar in breakfast and dinner.

Often luck was better for lunch as the pirates brought in lambs and asked the crew to slaughter them.

The chief cook, Moshir Rahman, had to cook curry. After the pirates had their meals, the leftover meat was served to the crew.

Herded in the tiny Bridge Room, the 26 hostages had to use the lone washroom.

When one needed to use the washroom, they had to raise their hands and request the pirates.

"Sometimes, they would force the male hostages to pee in bottles," said Mainuddin, the second engineer.

ANXIOUS WAIT
Farzana Akhter heard from her husband Abu Naser Abdullah Mazumder, the chief officer, on the fourth day.

Gaddafi bases bombed

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Libyan officials to the compound were shown a ruined three or four-storey building. It is not clear whether Col Gaddafi was there at the time of the bombing.

An official from one of the coalition countries, who asked not to be named, told journalists the strike had destroyed Col Gaddafi's "command and control capability".

Earlier at the Pentagon, US Navy Vice Adm William Gortney said the coalition had control of the air space between Tripoli and the main rebel stronghold, Benghazi in the east. "The no-fly zone is effectively in place," he said.

He added that ground forces moving on rebel positions were also open to attack.

In Misrata, a city west of Benghazi that has been under siege by government troops, residents say bombardments by pro-Gaddafi forces are continuing. A nearby air base was targeted in the first night of coalition strikes.

The BBC's Kevin Connolly, in the rebel-held city of Tobruk, says it is not clear if the allies can attack Col Gaddafi's troops operating in the centre of Misrata without harming the very civilians they have come to save.

A rebel spokesman told Reuters news agency that pro-Gaddafi forces were bringing civilians to Misrata from outlying areas to deter further allied strikes.

Yesterday Britain said it had called off an air raid during the night because civilians were spotted near the target area. The UK defence ministry did not say where the planned target had been.

Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa, who supported the UN resolution, on Sunday criticised the severity of the bombardment.

"What is happening in Libya differs from the aim of imposing a no-fly zone, and what we want is the protection of civilians and not the bombardment of more civilians," he said.

But yesterday, in a joint news conference with visiting UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in Cairo, Mr Moussa played down any differences within the coalition. "We are all united on the issue of protecting civilians," he said.

Both he and Mr Ban stressed that Arab League support was a key factor in securing Security Council backing for the UN resolution.

QATAR PLANES
In Benghazi, heavy gunfire and sporadic explosions were heard on Sunday night, a witness told Reuters news agency.

"Benghazi is not completely safe from attack but it is certainly under less threat than it was yesterday," he said.

The US says a Libyan government claim that armed forces were observing a ceasefire "isn't true or has been immediately violated".

39 workers

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Bangladeshis came to Ras Jdir border on March 20, and now 2,037 people are waiting there for returning to Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, the government has arranged Biman flights to fly home 1200 Bangladeshis who have taken shelter in Tunisia from the Libyan uprising.

Biman flights will operate on March 21, 23, 24, and 27 to expedite the repatriation process of the remaining Bangladeshi nationals in Tunisia, said the press release.

It said the overall situation of the camps has improved. IOM is also arranging to bring back Bangladeshis from Djerba of Tunisia.

In Algeria, some 48 Bangladeshis are still awaiting repatriation in Ain-Amenas. They will be sent home tomorrow by IOM on a commercial flight.

Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain, minister for expatriates' welfare and overseas employment, visited the Tunisia camps and met the Bangladeshi nationals.

He explained the steps taken by the Bangladesh government in collaboration with IOM and reassured them that everyone would be taken home soon as more flights will start operating.

He also had a meeting with operational heads of different international organisations stationed at the camps.

Biman flights will arrive in Dhaka on March 22, 24, 25 and 28, and each day they will carry 300 Bangladeshis from Djerba. Today another 264 Bangladeshis will be sent home by IOM.

According to the press release, a total of 30,059 Bangladeshis, who were employed in Libya, have been repatriated to Bangladesh so far. Of them, 3,287 people returned on their employers' arrangement or their own, and 25,335 have been brought back by IOM. And some 1,437 have come home by Bangladesh Biman flights.

Severe radiation in food

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at the No. 3 reactor. Smoke was also seen at the No. 2 reactor.

The March 11 earthquake and tsunami left more than 21,000 people dead or missing and will cost an already beleaguered economy some \$250 billion, making it the world's costliest ever natural disaster.

The head of the UN atomic agency said the nuclear situation remained very serious but it would be resolved.

"I have no doubt that this crisis will be effectively overcome," Yukiya Amano, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), told an emergency board meeting.

"We see a light for getting out of the crisis," a Japanese government official quoted Prime Minister Naoto Kan as saying.

But news of progress at the nuclear plant was overshadowed by mounting concern that radioactive particles already released into the atmosphere have contaminated food and water supplies.

"Quite clearly it's a serious situation," Peter Cordingley, Manila-based spokesman for the World Health Organization's (WHO) regional office for the Western Pacific, told Reuters in a telephone interview.

"It's a lot more serious than anybody thought in the early days when we thought that this kind of problem can be limited to 20 to 30 kilometres ... It's safe to suppose that some contaminated produce got out of the contamination zone."

However, he said there was no evidence of contaminated food from Fukushima reaching other countries.

Fukushima is the world's worst nuclear accident since Chernobyl, but signs are that it is far less severe than the Ukrainian disaster.

"The few measurements of radiation reported in food so far are much lower than around Chernobyl in 1986, but the full picture is still emerging," Malcolm Crick, secretary of the UN Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation, told Reuters.

TAP WATER
Japan's health ministry has urged some residents near the plant to stop drinking tap water after high levels of radioactive iodine were detected.

Cases of contaminated vegetables and milk have already stoked anxiety despite assurances from officials that the levels are not dangerous. The government has prohibited the sale of spinach from all four prefectures near the plant and also banned selling of raw milk from Fukushima prefecture.

There were no major reports of contaminated food in Tokyo, a city of about 13 million people. City officials however said higher-than-standard levels of iodine were found in an edible form of chrysanthemum.

"From reports I have heard so far, it seems that the levels of radioactive iodine and caesium in milk and some foodstuffs are significantly higher than government limits," said Jim Smith, a specialist in earth and environmental sciences at Britain's Portsmouth University.

banking, insurance and non-financial corporate sectors.

Tokyo's markets were closed for a holiday on Monday. The Nikkei index shed 10 percent last week, wiping \$350 billion off market capitalization, and at one point had lost as much as 20 percent in value.

In a much-needed boost for the battered market, billionaire investor Warren Buffett said the earthquake and tsunami were an "enormous blow" but should not prompt the selling of Japanese shares.

Instead, he called events a "buying opportunity".

"It will take some time to rebuild. But it will not change the economic future of Japan. If I owned Japanese stocks, I would certainly not be selling them," Buffett said during a visit to a South Korean factory run by a company that is owned by one of his funds.

Several elections have been held under the caretaker government, and some questions arose at different times over its credibility, he continued.

The SC has to protect the country's charter, not the interest of any political party, said the senior counsel.

The apex court will resume the hearing today. Dr Kamal is expected to continue making submissions.

Upon a writ petition, the HC on August 4, 2004 declared the 13th amendment legal and observed that the changes did not distort the constitution's basic structure.

Advocate M Salimullah, then general secretary of Association for Democratic and Constitutional Advancement of Bangladesh (ADCAB), filed the petition on January 25, 2000 challenging the amendment.

After Salimullah died, advocate Abdul Mannan Khan, acting general secretary of ADCAB, appealed to the Appellate Division against the HC verdict.

Biman
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over the last four weeks. Of them, more than 18,000 Bangladeshi nationals have been repatriated.

If there is no more new arrival, IOM officials are hopeful that all Bangladeshis will be repatriated within this week.

The remaining Bangladeshis at Choucha camp were packing for home yesterday with whatever they managed to save from the Libyan armed forces on their way to Tunisian border.

\$4.62m ransom

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"We haven't paid them [Somali pirates] anything, but I don't know whether our insurance company did," he said.

Back in the ship, the crew knew the negotiation was coming to a final stage as a small aeroplane came and hovered over the ship for a couple of times two days ago. It just came and circled over their ship and left.

The spirit on the bridge of the ship lifted.

"They are coming. They will come with money," said a crew. "We will be free soon."

But all they could do is keeping their fingers crossed. They were dog tired, more mentally than physically. The continuous stress of one hundred days was too much. Their lives hung on the thin string of "civility" of about 40 rag-tag pirates, most in tattered jeans and T-shirts faded by the sun and salt water. All of them had deadly weapons like salt-rusted AK-47s and rocket launchers.

But now, the end seemed to be in view.

The boxes, actually suitcases, were hauled up on the ship and taken to the bridge. In presence of the hostages, the lids were lifted and money counted.

A few pirates took out some Somali currency they were carrying and threw them in the air. Who cares about some worthless Somali currency when you have millions in dollars?

There were a lot of talks among the pirates and hours of tension began again. What would they do now? Would they really let them go? Or would they just betray all promises?

Finally, came the golden hour. The leader of the gang came on to the bridge after lunch and told skipper Farid Ahmed, "We are leaving tomorrow morning. We got what we wanted. Once we leave, you too can go. You are free."

Nothing sounded sweeter to the hostages in the last 100 days.

The night came. It was then the pirates divided the booty among themselves. The crew could hear the excited exchange of words down below on the deck.

Hours would not pass for them. They kept looking at their watches. Finally, a false dawn appeared on the horizon. The dark sea caught the first glint of the sun.

The pirates were also busy. They were collecting their articles. Guns, ammunition and whatever they had.

At 5 in the morning, the pirates came and informed the skipper that they were leaving and asked him to lift the anchor.

"We are going. You also go," pirate leader Rashid told skipper Farid Ahmed.

Ruhul Amin, the man in charge of the anchor, started the motor and the anchor started rolling in. By that time, the pirates had left the ship. Immediately, the ship started moving.

First, there was a sense of nothingness on the bridge. For a few seconds nobody could say anything. They were all blank. It took time to seep in the reality that they were free, at long last. The hostages started hugging each other. Tears found their way out.

On meeting their relatives in Chittagong, the crew members said they had forgotten all those haunting moments. Their endurance laughed after all the miseries.

Wife stabbed
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Abul Kalam, sub-inspector of Gendaria Police Station, said they detained Moina's husband Abu Sajid Ali from his Dinonath Sen Road house.

Moina's younger sister Laboni Akhter told reporters at DMCH that Sajid beat up her sister throughout the night and stabbed her in the morning.

"I tried to rescue my sister but failed, as I could not open the door," said Laboni, aged about 12, who came to visit her sister five days ago.

"I went to my home [in the same area] in the morning and told my brother who rescued my sister," she added.

Ambia Begum, Moina's mother, said ever since her daughter was married to Sajid three years ago, Sajid's family has been torturing her mentally over their poor family condition.

But it was still too much to be true.

"We were happy but at the same time afraid that another group of pirates might attack us," said Farid.

That fear was finally over two hours later when a British naval ship approached. It supplied them with fuel.

Later, a Kenyan tugboat came with food and water.

The ship was now at full speed. Sailing out of the tiger's lair. As fast as possible. As far as possible.

Ah freedom! Sweet freedom! Dear freedom!