



Army was aware

Ershad told Moriarty

STAR REPORT

About two weeks after the 2009 Pilkhana massacre, former chief of army staff and president HM Ershad told the then US ambassador James F Moriarty that the army was aware of unrest within the border force days before the mutiny, according to a cable released by WikiLeaks.

Ershad, who initially pointed finger at India for the mutiny, changed his stance by March 9, 2009 when he had a meeting with the US ambassador and read to him a text message written by his nephew, an army colonel serving as BDR sector commander in Dinajpur who died in the February carnage.

In a cable dispatched on March 9, 2009, the envoy said Ershad's nephew sent the text message to four battalion commanders in his sector on February 21, four days before the mutiny.

The message urged the battalion commanders to "be vigilant" as "subversive activities" were taking place in Bangladesh Rifles (now Border Guard Bangladesh) and could result in trouble during the BDR Week.

Ershad told the ambassador at a meeting that had Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina called in the army immediately after the start of the mutiny on February 25, the mutineers would have dropped their arms and far fewer people would have died.

Mere presence of the army in the crucial early hours of the mutiny would have been enough to defuse the situation, he added.

In another cable, Moriarty mentioned his meeting with Hasina where she strongly defended her tackling of the incident saying such handling (allowing army action) would have led to more bloodshed.

Hasina showed

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officers were dismissed later for "disrespectful conduct" in front of the PM on March 1. The prime minister reportedly ordered the officers' dismissal after the government received evidence that they continued to agitate against the civilian government in the months after the mutiny, according to the cable made public by anti-secrecy website WikiLeaks on August 30.

Mid- and senior-level army officers shouted at the PM and tore off insignia on their uniforms in protest of her handling of the BDR (now BGB) mutiny on February 25-26 in 2009 and showing anguish at the loss of their comrades.

"Although the meeting was closed to media, several sources said some officers demanded the removal of two senior government officials who led the negotiations with Bangladesh Rifles rebels, Home Minister Sahara Khatun and State Minister for Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives Jahangir Kabir Nanak. Some particularly agitated officers reportedly broke chairs and hit their heads against the wall during the meeting. Others demanded BDR rebels' trial convene immediately and those found guilty of murder be hanged in public," noted another cable.

Hasina was accompanied by her Security Adviser Maj Gen (ret'd) Tarique Ahmed Siddique and Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury during the two-and-a-half hours closed-door meeting.

Tarique said he recognised many diehard anti-Awami League officers among the crowd, many of whom appeared to be drawing from "talking points" in the session with Hasina. After an extremely hot exchange of words, the meeting ended more calmly with recitation of prayers.

The adviser was surprised to see the PM was not harmed.

The premier decided to face the army officers after taking a number of steps including formation of a special tribunal to immediately try murder suspect rebels, formation of a committee to probe the mutiny and cash grants to the families of the slain officers. These steps failed to calm the cantonment, mentioned the cable.

The cabinet urged the PM not to attend the meeting, Tarique told the US envoy in Dhaka.

Another leaked cable said Foreign Minister Dipu Moni admitted during her talks with Ambassador Moriarty that she and a number of her cabinet colleagues had not been comfortable with the decision to meet the army officers and had tried to convince the premier not to go.

"In response, the prime minister had told them she was not only the head of the government and defence minister, but also "daughter of the Father of the Nation," and as such had a duty to know the grievances of her people," reads the cable.

Many officers believed Hasina should have immediately ordered an army attack on the rebels instead of offering a general amnesty and expressing support for their grievances about pay, benefits and alleged corruption among the BDR's army leadership.

Most of the casualties occurred at the beginning of the revolt, and the PM has been credited by local media and the international community for avoiding further bloodshed.

In another cable on March 5 Moriarty noted that the March 1 meeting had appeared to dampen immediate concerns and anger in the army about the mutiny.

The PM's leadership during the crisis received broad public support. Military subservience to civilian control remains tenuous but has prevailed, at least for now, added the envoy.

"Hasina's dramatic appearance before hundreds of irate officers on March 1 appears to have eased at least some of the tension between the civilian government and the military officers shocked by the brutality of the deaths of their colleagues," Moriarty observed.

To assuage military anger, Hasina agreed to several demands including allowing the army to take a leading role in the hunt for the absconding mutineers.

While army chief Gen Moeen U Ahmed appeared to have consulted with the PM and followed her orders during the two-day ordeal, the relationship between her government and the military remained complex.

During a two-hour meeting at the PM's residence, Moeen and his senior colleagues briefed Hasina on complaints from within the army regarding the government response to the crisis.

In the mutiny's aftermath, many in the army also criticised Moeen for following PM's directives in handling the mutiny.

One of Moeen's last acts as the army chief was dismissing the seven officers for disrespectful conduct towards the PM.

Reaction within the army to the officers' dismissal was muted. Even among those who believed the punishment was too harsh, many apparently understood the dismissed officers had crossed the line with their behaviour in the meeting with Hasina.

PM stayed worried about govt's fate

STAR REPORT

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had remained worried about the fate of her government in the wake of the BDR mutiny in 2009, said a secret US embassy dispatch leaked by WikiLeaks.

The cable said during a meeting with US ambassador James F Moriarty on March 12, 2009, Hasina reiterated her belief that the mutiny was the result of a conspiracy to destabilise her government. Hasina, however, admitted that she did not have any concrete evidence for it till then.

She vehemently disputed claims that the bloodshed could have been avoided if only she had sent in the army early on February 25 instead of waiting until the afternoon of February 26, said the cable.

The prime minister said some, including the Leader of the Opposition Khaleda Zia, former president HM Ershad and a number of army officers, claimed that the army could have been in place in less than an hour and could have saved many lives.

Hasina speculated that Khaleda and Ershad were using the tragedy to strengthen themselves and weaken her, said the cable.

The ambassador noted that all indications were that the victims died within the first two hours of the mutiny

that began at the BDR headquarters on February 25 morning, 2009.

"The Prime Minister we met today was solemn and pre-occupied, a far cry from her good spirits in meetings early this year. She clearly remains fearful about her ability to maintain her government," Moriarty wrote in the cable.

According to Hasina, her priority throughout the two-day ordeal was to "pacify the mutineers and convince them to lay down their arms and surrender with as little bloodshed as possible."

It was not until after the mutineers surrendered late on February 26 that Hasina and her advisers learned of the extent of the violence the jawans had inflicted on most of their officers, 43 of whom escaped.

Hasina urged FBI experts to return to Bangladesh soon, and said international expertise was needed to find the truth and establish public confidence in the findings, said the cable.

"She warned of dire consequences if the investigations were not satisfactorily resolved."

The ambassador expressed US support and emphasised the importance of a transparent investigation and highlighted that no evidence of an outside conspiracy had yet come to light.

During her March 12 meeting with

the ambassador, Hasina expressed grief and disbelief at the savagery of the February 25-26 mutiny by BDR soldiers.

According to Hasina, the negotiators she sent to calm the jawans did so at great personal risk.

"I sent them into the tiger's cage," she said. Home Minister Sahara Khatun and other government officials entered the BDR headquarters unarmed and greatly outnumbered by the mutineers. Hasina said her negotiators worked throughout the night of February 25-26 to convince the jawans to lay down arms as well as rescue hostages.

Hasina said she was convinced that such an incident could only be the result of a "deep-seated conspiracy" to destabilise her government and cause a civil war. Questioned by the ambassador, she admitted that there was no proof of this, yet.

Hasina slammed BNP Chief Khaleda and JP leader HM Ershad for criticising rather than supporting her during the crisis.

The ambassador noted that while there was still no evidence to support the conspiracy theory in which she and her advisers continued to believe, there was no question that the mutiny had weakened her authority and the democratic institutions re-established by the December 2008 elections.



The body of a BDR man who died at Pilkhana hospital on March 22, 2009. The photo was taken at Dhaka Medical College Hospital later that day. Many detained border guards died under mysterious circumstances in custody since the mutiny on February 25-26 that year.

PHOTO: STAR

Hostile grilling led to deaths

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met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on April 27, 2009, she had also agreed there was "something fishy" about the deaths and said she had raised the issue with then army chief Gen Moeen U Ahmed.

These were revealed through US embassy cables posted on August 30 this year by whistleblower website WikiLeaks.

Over 70 BDR jawans died, said to be of natural causes or by suicides, but under questionable circumstances during the "Operation Rebel Hunt" launched in March 2009, a week after 74 people including 57 army officials were killed during the February 25-26 mutiny at Pilkhana Headquarters of Bangladesh Rifles (now Bangladesh Border Guard).

According to one leaked cable, the then DGFI chief General Akbar said in an effort to quickly quiz some seven to eight thousand jawans in custody, the government had pulled in dozens of military officers.

The officers did not have any interrogation experience and had exceeded their authority during the interrogations, he added.

"The government now realised its mistake and the Prime Minister had shared with Akbar her concern about the custodial deaths," the cable reads. General Akbar added the government had put the word out that the deaths

must stop.

"Akbar was emphatic on the issues of DGFI's involvement in the interrogations and stated no DGFI officers were involved or present in any of the cases where the BDR jawans died while in custody."

According to a second cable, at the April 27 meeting then US ambassador James F Moriarty expressed concern over the continuing custodial deaths of border guards accused of involvement in the mutiny.

Moriarty said the US government and human rights organisations were concerned that the deaths, officially reported as suicides and heart attacks, were actually extrajudicial killings.

Sheikh Hasina claimed security personnel also were forcing captured border guards to make statements implicating government officials from her Awami League in the mutiny, reads the cable.

Hasina, however, insisted others were behind the mutiny. She believed some members of the outlawed terrorist group Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) were recruited into BDR during the 2001-2006 BNP rule.

"She also noted some of the mutineers wore sandals and had long hair and thus could not have been members of the Bangladesh Rifles, who were required to trim their hair short," the cable adds.

Army probe wanted to quiz Hasina

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website WikiLeaks on August 30 this year.

Following the gruesome murder of 57 army officers and 17 civilians by the BDR rebels at Pilkhana headquarters on February 25, 2009, the army on March 2 formed a 20-member probe committee. Led by Lt Gen Jahangir Alam Chowdhury, the committee acted separately from the government one to probe the two-day mayhem.

"Hasina expressed exasperation at a separate army probe that initially was to be limited to strictly military issues such as accounting for arms and ammunition lost during the mutiny," the cable said

quoting the meeting with the prime minister.

"She related with evident anger how military investigators had sent a letter to the Ministry of Home Affairs demanding to question senior government officials, including the Prime Minister herself. She said she had rejected the request, noting such interviews were the responsibility of the police investigators."

In the same meeting with the US ambassador, Sheikh Hasina claimed that security personnel were also forcing the detained BDR men to make statements "implicating government officials from her Awami League" in the mutiny.

Hasina and Moriarty also spoke on

strengthening civil-military relationship.

The ambassador gave Hasina a read-out of the Pacific Area Special Operations Conference in Hawaii he had attended along with the then Bangladesh state minister for home Tanjim Ahmad Sohel Taj.

Moriarty said they had visited the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, which wanted to facilitate a workshop on civilian-military relations for the Bangladesh government, military and political leaders.

The PM voiced support for the proposal, the cable said.

US role in question

Agencies' inaction left its envoy frustrated

STAR REPORT

The US government agencies appeared unable to look "beyond narrow parochial interests" to provide assistance to Bangladesh for conducting a thorough investigation into the BDR carnage, according to a cable sent to Washington in March 2009.

The cable leaked by WikiLeaks described Bangladesh's urgent need for US assistance in the investigation and the then US ambassador in Dhaka James F Moriarty's consistent efforts to pursue Washington to help Bangladesh to overcome the crisis following the BDR mutiny.

But some US agencies' stance apparently frustrated the ambassador.

"Reportedly, some in the USG [United States Government] have shied away from involvement since they do not see any direct US interests at stake. I have a hard time understanding that logic, since I see this crisis affecting virtually all that we are trying to accomplish in Bangladesh -- from helping to improve democratic governance, to promoting development, to denying space to terrorists," Moriarty said in the cable.

"This crisis has only underscored the importance of US engagement and the need for a 'whole of government' approach to advancing our interests," it reads.

"Yet, ironically, at a time of great need, USG agencies appear unable to look beyond narrow parochial interests. Instead, each looks for some other agency to pick up the tab," added the cable sent from Dhaka on March 11, 2009.

The ambassador said for Bangladeshis, the mutiny at the BDR headquarters was as shattering an experience as 9/11 was for Americans, but with one important difference: The mutiny has not only left Bangladeshis confused, afraid, and angry, it has also left them doubting whether their duly-elected government will continue to exist in the coming months.

"The USG should do all we can to eliminate that doubt. I urge that senior officials from the Departments of State, Justice, and Defense and FBI work together to find a way to fund investigative resources to help Bangladesh in its time of need. If we fail to do so, I fear we will come to regret it in the coming months," the cable said.

Two agents from the FBI office in New Delhi arrived on March 8 to conduct an assessment of what Bangladesh needs to successfully conclude a credible investigation.

This was a welcome first step. Their recommendations have been passed to FBI Headquarters and the two agents were scheduled to depart March 12. Follow up was on hold due to the inability of FBI and other USG agencies to identify the resources needed to implement these recommendations, the cable said.

No substance

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from his earlier suggestions that the GOI [Government of India] was behind the mutiny might reflect a growing recognition among some officers that perhaps there was no external hand behind the mutiny. Still, tension remains," comments Moriarty.

He observed no credible evidence of an external conspiracy has yet surfaced in the ongoing investigations into the mutiny.

Moriarty quoted political counsellor at the Indian high commission in Dhaka M Subbarayudu as telling him that India believed the mutiny would make it more difficult for the Awami League to take bold action to improve bilateral relations.

Following the Pilkhana bloodbath, a planned visit by the Indian Cabinet member with responsibility for the country's states bordering Bangladesh was cancelled. Efforts to improve regional security cooperation and management of the lengthy Indian-Bangladesh border also were likely to be disrupted, the counsellor said.

Mentioning widening rift between the ruling party and the opposition, one of the cables says "BNP has accused Hasina of bungling the response to the mutiny, and Zia [BNP chief Khaleda Zia] has joined some military officers in calling for the resignation of the Minister of Home Affairs, who led Government negotiations with mutineers."

"BNP Member of Parliament Salauddin Quader Chowdhury, who Indian media reported instigated the mutiny, told us privately that Leader of the Opposition Khaleda Zia no longer planned to work with the GOB [Government of Bangladesh] on a response to the mutiny as the Awami League Government had rebuffed her attempts to reach out," the ambassador said.

He adds Hasina's insistence on a broader conspiracy surely will colour the deliberations of the three separate investigations into the rebellion. The eventual findings of those probes -- one by a government-appointed body, another by the military and a third by the Criminal Investigation Department -- could further fuel partisan rancour and still-simmering military anger.

LOYALISTS PUT IN KEY POSITIONS

As investigations and verbal sparring continue, March 8 saw a series of personnel changes, including the replacement of Home Secretary Abdul Karim by Awami League loyalist Abdus Sobhan Sikdar.

This follows changes in army personnel, including the appointment of a new director general (DG) for the Ansar, a new DG for the BDR and a new director for the Military Intelligence.

Tanjim Ahmed Sohel Taj, the state minister for home affairs, who was reportedly sharply criticised by the prime minister for remaining abroad as the mutiny unfolded, has now returned to Dhaka, but has not yet been seen in public. Meanwhile, speculation continues over whether the PM will replace the home minister herself over the latter's handling of the mutiny.

"The Awami League government continues to put loyalists in key positions, and all hopes of politicians rising above partisanship in the wake of this national tragedy have vanished. We continue to urge transparency and moderation in the GOB response to the mutiny," Moriarty commented.