

Winter, war and refugee camps: December 1971

JULIAN FRANCIS

“SO, WHAT were you doing in December, 1971?” asked a friend the other day. Every year at this time, as well as in the month of March, I remember vividly the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. In charge of OXFAM’s refugee relief programme covering 600,000 refugees, I was very

choked with Indian military supplies in November and early December. Sometimes we used old aircraft and flew supplies from Kolkata to air strips in Cooch Behar and West Dinajpur, but that was quite expensive. At the beginning of December 1971, we were expecting a chartered aircraft from OXFAM-America full of medical sup-

plies worth about US\$ 900,000 which were difficult to obtain in India, but at the last moment it was diverted to Madras because of the outbreak of war and we had to clear the supplies through Customs and transport them to Kolkata.

one of the refugee camps supported by OXFAM. Have they told their stories? It is very important to write all these memories down for the sake of having a true and accurate historical account of the events in 1971.

To help jog the memories of those who may have stayed in these camps, I list below the locations where Oxfam supported refugee relief work in 1971. Eventually, there were, approximately, 120,000 men, 120,000 women and 360,000 children who lived in the camps supported by Oxfam. The locations of some of the refugee camps were:

Agartala

Oxfam supported the work of the 'Relief Coordinating Council' convened by Gandhian Kshirode Sen.

Jalpaiguri

Over 50 volunteers from Gandhi Veddchi, Gujarat and 5 doctors of the Bombay University Medical Team working at Dangi and Sakati camps

Balurghat

Gandhi Smarak Nidhi social workers and 2 locally recruited doctors worked at Hilli block in West Dinajpur; and at Potiram, Kumarganj and two other areas in Raiganj subdivision.

Bongaon

Through the Gandhian Abhoy Ashram at Railway Station Camp, Thakurnagar camp, Baghchoro camp, Railgate camp and Chandpara camp.

Also supported the work of Catholic Church, Bongaon under Father Joe D'Souza at 14 different camps.

Barasat

Through Social Welfare Society, Gobardanga, 9 camps: Barasat, Banipur, Puragachi, Maslandapur, Gobardanga, Gaigata, Jaleswar, Hanspur and Kalarsemar.

Also, managed by the Kolkata medi-

cal students and 6 Bombay doctors at 4 camps: Amdanga, Jail Compound, Digberia and Sazirhat (New Barrackpore)

While the Government of India supplied the basic rations and shelter, Oxfam supplemented this to a considerable extent. Oxfam supported personnel were involved with medical and sanitation relief work, and supplementary feeding programmes for malnourished children and running make-shift schools and games for the children.

To support all our work we had two warehouses in Kolkata, one for medicines and the other for non-medical items like bleaching powder, clothing, blankets and supplementary foods. We also used the services of a 'buying agent' who was able to arrive at 'value for money' purchases. Our preference was to purchase locally but we accepted donated foreign medicines, clothing and blankets where appropriate and cost effective.

During the Bihar Famine of 1966/7, Oxfam had purchased a high protein food supplement made in Sitapur in Uttar Pradesh in India. In 1971, we contacted the supplier again and purchased the total output of the factory every month. We actually needed more than that and, to our great surprise, we discovered that the Kolkata Municipal Corporation had the equipment to produce the same high protein food. Oxfam then purchased the total output of that facility as well!

Procuring, initially, 120,000 saris, 120,000 lungis and gunjis, 360,000 sets of different size clothes for different age children was a huge challenge and a bit of a nightmare.

Supplying everything to the camps was a big logistical challenge. During

the monsoon, the roads were often flooded and at other times were full of military convoys. Sometimes it took trucks over 10 days to reach the Tripura refugee camps. Sometimes we transported urgently needed supplies by chartered ex-World War II Dakota DC-3 and DC-6 planes.

To administer and supervise all the work, I had a most dedicated staff of 36. Many of them had come to India as refugees and therefore were particularly dedicated. We had a fleet of 13 vehicles made up of landrovers, jeeps and a mobile clinic. These were driven by a remarkable group of drivers who regarded their vehicles as though they were bars of gold on wheels, so well did they care for them!

After a few days of war, I remember sitting one evening on the lawn of the New Kenilworth Hotel, trying to relax after a long day's work and get the Pakistan Radio's English News. The propaganda machine said that the Pakistan Air Force had scored a direct hit on the Kolkata telephone exchange and that the Howrah Bridge was floating down the Hooghly! I remember it was on 7th December, 1971 that we learnt with horror that President Nixon had ordered the US 7th Fleet to the Bay of Bengal in an effort to prevent the Indian and Mukti Bahini forces from defeating the Pakistanis. Officially, this super flotilla 'the most powerful force in the world' was said to be going to evacuate a few American citizens from Dhaka, but the intention was clear. I remember how a well-known American doctor, working closely with us in the refugee camps, Dr Jon Rohde, broke down in tears when he heard the reports about the 7th Fleet coming to the Bay of Bengal.

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worried about the onset of winter as many of the camps in which we were working were in very cold areas of North Bengal as well as Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura. We were having great difficulty in getting supplies of warm clothes and blankets through to the refugee camps because the roads in the border areas had been

plies worth about US\$ 900,000 which were difficult to obtain in India, but at the last moment it was diverted to Madras because of the outbreak of war and we had to clear the supplies through Customs and transport them to Kolkata.

I am sure that there are many Bangladeshis reading this who lived in

Requiem for the Falcon

LT. COL. (RETD.) QUAZI SAJJAD ALI ZAHIR BIR PROTIK

ON 18 October 2012, Ekka arrived in Dhaka. The first thing Balamdini Ekka asked me was if they would be able to visit Gangasagar for a prayer where her husband was martyred during the Liberation War. I assured her that the authorities had made plans for the visit. She made a request to me if I could accompany her during the visit. Throughout the ceremony for honouring the foreign nationals who had made great contribution in our liberation war, whenever she saw me, she repeated the same request. Time was fixed by the authorities for her, her son Vincent Ekka along with Col. Ashok Tara Vir Chakra and his wife to visit Gangasagar on 22 October at 7 o'clock in the morning. Incidentally Col. Ashok Tara also had taken part in the battle of Gangasagar as a Company Commander.

Lance Naik Albert Ekka of Indian Army was posthumously awarded the highest military honour Param Vir Chakra for his gallantry in the Bangladesh liberation war. Ekka was a man of humble means, born in the village of Jari in the district of Gumla in Jharkhand. He was a member of the Oraon tribe, meaning falcon. He was a soldier of the traditional 14 Guard Regiment of Indian Army.

As part of my research, I wanted to know more about Ekka and his family and had visited them in their village. During my discussion the elderly widow, Balamdini had said she always wanted to visit Gangasagar to say prayers in the place of her husband's death but her own poverty would never make that possible. Living on the five acres of land given to her family by the government, which is now on litigation, she makes ends

meet with the monthly pension. Vincent's auto-rickshaw is out-of-order. She felt she would never be able to visit Gangasagar for the desired prayer. I could only assure her it would be my honour to put in maximum effort to arrange for her visit to Gangasagar so that she could perform a requiem for her departed husband.

After I returned to Dhaka, I thought to myself that Albert Ekka who had fought and died for a cause greater than his own was also a father and a husband, and while the memory of his sacrifice has dimmed with the passage of time, his absence is still felt every day and grieved by the ones who loved him the most. I could still hear Balamdini weeping bitterly and saying, "I wish I could go to Gangasagar to say prayers for him." Her sorrow was something which did not evaporate with time.

Forty one years have passed since Ekka's death, yet so few of us know of him and others like him. Death in the line of their duty brought blessedness to them. For their untimely deaths, each of their families has asked for so little. I thought I should undertake this task with humility, urgency and a profound sense of honour and gratitude for a human who has sacrificed his life for my country. It is our duty as a nation to honour Albert Ekka and also ensure that his wife, Balamdini, is able to visit Gangasagar for saying her much desired prayers.

As a member of the national committee for honouring foreign nationals who had made outstanding contribution to our liberation war, I submitted the citation on Albert Ekka and recommended to the committee that he should be given the "Friends of Liberation War Honour". I also

requested the committee that if my recommendation was accepted, Ekka's wife Balamdini and son Vincent should be invited to Bangladesh to receive the honour. I also recommended an arrangement should be made for their visit to Gangasagar. My recommendations were accepted by the committee and the cabinet.

Throughout the five hours journey to Gangasagar, Brahmanbaria, Balamdini was saying silent prayers. At 12 o'clock we reached Gangasagar, the brutal battle site in 1971 where Ekka's blood mingled with the mud. Stepping out from the vehicle,

Balamdini touched my hand and said, "Please take me to the place where he died." I took her and Vincent to the place where Albert had fallen dead. There she bent and started her long silent prayers with trembling hands; she was crying. The crowd started growing fast and the prayer lasted for long. After the prayer we boarded the vehicle and all the way back she did not utter a single word.

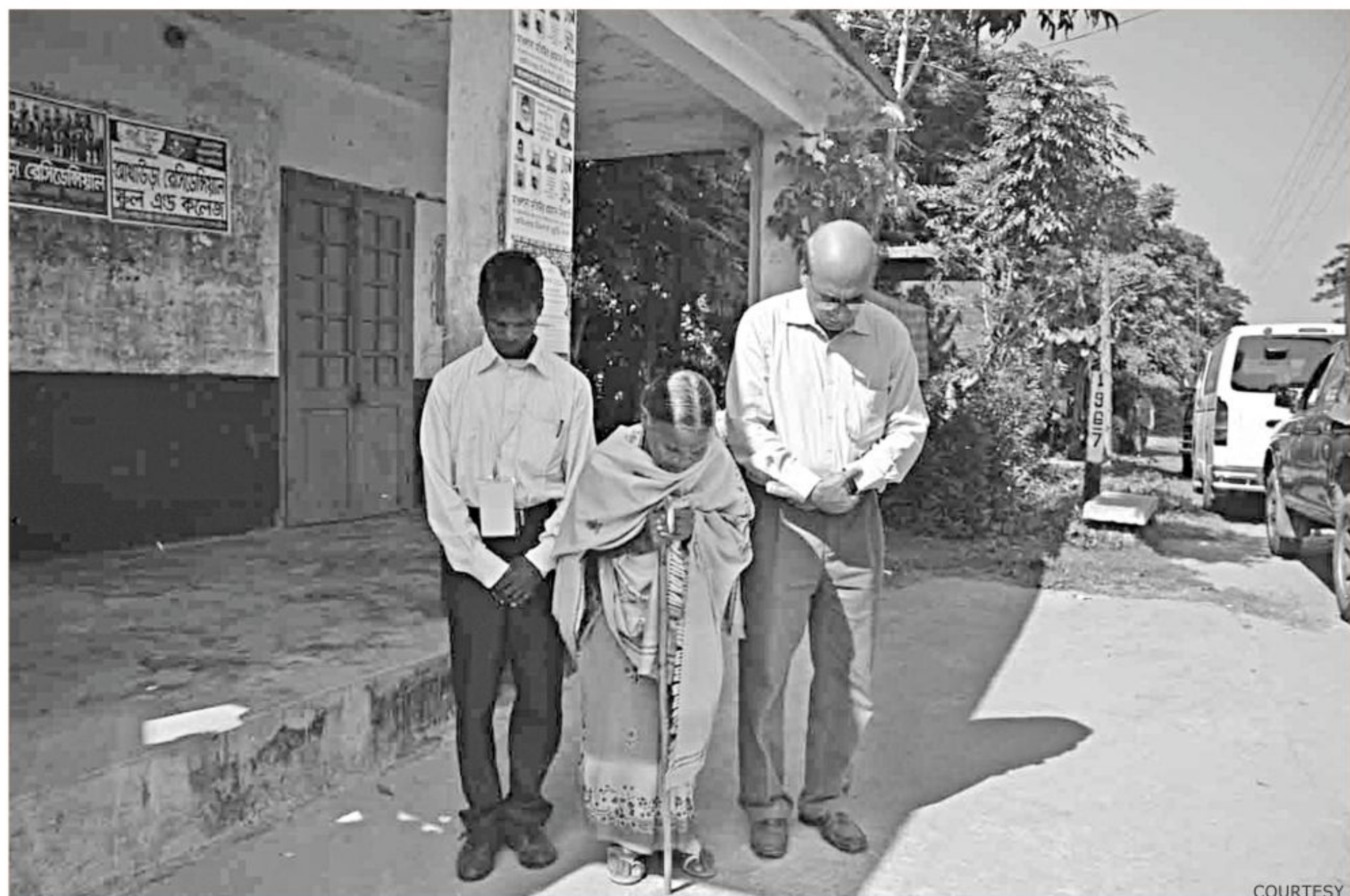
Next morning, before leaving Bangladesh, she looked cheerful and happy. She told me that deep down in her heart she had the desire to go to Gangasagar for a prayer and God

finally gave her the opportunity. She thanked everyone around for giving her that comfort.

The sacrifice of Ekka, his unflinching sense of ultimate duty, will always be a glorious part of the history of our independence and I was happy to be of some service to his family.

Bangladesh is the result of selfless sacrifice of many Ekkas. Let them not be ignored or forgotten. Time is now; time is always to remember such heroes.

The writer, a retired army officer and himself a gallantry award holder freedom fighter, is a liberation war researcher.



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