

TORMENT & TRAGEDY



Clockwise from top right, a woman weeps after learning about her husband's jail term; a convicted BDR man cries; a kid along with his mother waits for the verdict on his father; the wife of a border guard breaks down in tears after her husband is sentenced to hang for the Pilkhana massacre; a convicted jawan sheds tears as he is taken out of court; family members of the accused wait for the judgment; a man pointing at the sky or may be appealing to the Almighty; a BDR man upset after the verdict; and two convicts on a prison van.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ, AMRAN HOSSAIN, PALASH KHAN

Tragedy sowed by Operation Dal-Bhat

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essentials was not fruitful due to absence of specific mechanism to that end.

"Besides, it seems to me that the then BDR did not have that much capacity of supply and management of goods to meet the demands of huge number of low income people," he observed.

"So, it is not justified to involve any disciplined force like army or paramilitary force," said the judge referring to BDR that was established in 1795.

The judge echoed what many officers felt about engaging the border guards in operation Dal-Bhat saying it had destroyed the moral fabric of the disciplined force and led to the 2009 mutiny.

The Dal-Bhat operation was introduced in 2007 when food prices soared too high. Under this operation, the force sold essentials to the public at reasonable rates and kept the profit.

By late 2008, most border guards started to believe that their bosses had deprived them of their right share of the profit. This resentment was blended with their age-old

discontent about being led by army officers on deputation.

A handful of hardcore mutineers had cashed in on this pent-up resentment of the members of Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), now renamed Border Guard Bangladesh, to stage the mutiny.

Their discontent over the programme was clearly evident during the then BDR DG's speech at the Darbar [annual assembly] on February 25, 2009.

The DG briefed the BDR jawans on Operation Dal-Bhat saying it had benefited people immensely and the share of the profit had been given away to everyone with an amount being deposited to bank for the welfare of the force, according to the carnage case charge-sheet.

He then asked, "Are you all happy with the Dal-Bhat programme?"

He however did not get any response from any of the 2,483 jawans present.

Different investigations into the blood-bath and mutiny have revealed that the mentality of not accepting authority of the

army had long been dormant among the border guards. They had long been demanding appointment of their own officers through the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS), rise in border allowances and 100 percent ration facility, sending BDR members to the UN missions and change in their salary structure like that of the army.

Besides, they had discontent over punishment meted out to BDR jawans, lack of transparency in running BDR shops, luxurious lifestyle of high officials, and corruption in running schools.

Officials who investigated the gruesome killings had earlier said the BDR rank and file had those grievances simmering for years. Their resentment over "Operation Dal-Bhat" made matters even worse, and it all boiled over into an orgy of killing on February 25-26.

Following the bloody mutiny that killed 74 people including 57 senior and mid-ranking army officers, the authorities realised that it might have been a wrong step to engage the border troops in business activities.

"I personally believe that it is not right to engage a disciplined force into a commercial operation like Operation Dal-Bhat," BGB Director General Maj General Aziz Ahmed told The Daily Star.

He said the border force would be on guard on the border and if necessary would be deployed in aid of the civil administration, they should not be engaged in commercial activities.

Earlier in February 2010, the then director general of the force Maj Gen Md Mainul Islam also reckoned that a disciplined force should not be involved in commercial ventures. The BDR was given the commercial duty to contain price hike of essentials during the caretaker government rule in 2007.

After around one and a half years of the operation, the BDR wrapped up the programme in September 2008. Under the operation on an average 1 lakh city dwellers were served each day. Around 1.3 lakh tonnes of rice, 2,000 tonnes of pulses and 3,500 tonnes of edible oil worth about Tk 400 crore were sold at the outlets across the

Vegetable prices go up further

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In addition, the supply of other essential commodities like cooking oil and sugar also remained disrupted for the second day, creating a scope for traders and retailers in the towns and suburbs to charge extra.

Prices of seasonal vegetables in Dhaka such as beans shot up by Tk 20, to stand at Tk 80 a kilogram.

The prices of bitter gourd became Tk 70 a kilogram, rising by Tk 10. Eggplants also rose by Tk 10 to stand at Tk 60 a kilogram; radishes became Tk 40 from Tk 30.

Prices of cucumbers, cauliflowers, cabbages, and green chillies also shot up for scanty supplies, said retailers.

"It seems like I have to pay a fine to consume vegetables during the shutdown," said an annoyed Abul Khalque in Wari, after giving in to the retailer's high demand for Tk 80 for a kilogram of beans.

Abdul Quadir, the vegetables retailer, said he in turn had to buy the vegetables at

high prices from the wholesalers. "The supply of cauliflower is even dearer."

However, the excuse of a low supply was not true for all traders. Many traders and retailers hoarded a high quantity of vegetables to make bigger profits during the hartals.

Mohammad Mamun bought cauliflowers early Monday and sold a piece at Tk 40 on Tuesday, which is Tk 30 more than the amount he sold at the day before.

The price of another seasonal vegetable, cabbages, also went up to Tk 40 a piece yesterday, up from Tk 25-Tk 30 on Monday.

"Many customers even get so annoyed at the prices that they go back without buying anything," said Mohammad Alamin, a vegetable retailer in Motijheel.

Ismail Hossain, who sells vegetables at AGB Colony kitchen market in Motijheel, said the shutdown took a toll on his sales because of a low turnout of customers.

Ratan Mia, a Hilsha retailer in the same

market, said he offered reduced prices to attract more customers, but sales still dipped low.

Uttam Kumar Das, a fish retailer in Karwan Bazar, said the supply disruption created a price spiral.

A similar picture of a low turnout of customers and higher prices was also seen at kitchen markets in Palashi and New Market.

"My daily sales figure has been cut by half due to the hartal," said Mohammed Rubel, a trader in the Palashi Kitchen Market.

The wholesale trade for commodities such as rice, cooking oil and sugar also came to a complete stop for a lack of customers.

"Sales are almost nil because of a lack of customers for the shutdown," said Volanath Das, a rice trader in the wholesale market of Babubazar.

Mohammad Abdur Razzaque, president of Moulvibazar Wholesalers Association, also shared the same experience.

India launches

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The country has never before attempted inter-planetary travel and more than half of all missions to Mars across the world have ended in failure, including those of China in 2011 and Japan in 2003. So far, only the US, Russia and European Union have successfully sent missions to Mars.

Applause rippled around the control room after monitoring ships stationed in the South Pacific reported that the spacecraft had successfully completed the first stage of its 300-day journey to Mars.

Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) chairman K Radhakrishnan said he was "extremely happy" to announce that the rocket had placed the probe in an orbit around the Earth.

The 4.5 billion rupees (\$73 million) Mars Orbiter Mission, known as "Mangalyaan" in India, was revealed only 15 months ago by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, soon after China's attempt flopped when it failed to leave the Earth's atmosphere.

Next legal steps to take 3 years

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Then the Supreme Court (SC) authorities will have to prepare more than 1,500 paper books on the appeals for their hearings, the law experts said.

A paper book contains the whole records of the case including relevant documents, evidence, and statements placed before the trial court.

At least 10 copies of paper books have to be prepared for each appeal, and a copy of paper books will be forwarded to the judges and lawyers concerned, they said, adding that the SC authorities prepare the paper books through Bangladesh Government Press.

Both the law experts opined that at least six months time will be needed for preparing the paper books in the BDR carnage case, and then the HC will start hearing on the appeals along with the death reference.

If the state and defence counsels are sincere, the appeals might be disposed of by the HC within a year after the start of the hearing, they said.

The convicts will then move their appeals

before the Appellate Division of the SC if the HC upholds the death sentence, they added.

The next one year might be needed for disposal of the appeals at the Appellate Division, they predicted.

The experts also said if the apex court upholds the death sentences of the convicts, the next six months might be needed for executing the verdict on completion of relevant legal procedures.

Mahbubey Alam said his office will take necessary steps for quick hearing of the appeals at the HC, considering the importance of the case concerned.

Khurshid Alam Khan said the sentences of some convicts might be reduced, and even few of them might be acquitted at the HC and the Appellate Division.

The HC may hold early hearing on the death reference and appeals in the BDR carnage case, if the state and defence counsels are vigilant, he said.

Although this court serially hears and disposes of death reference of previous years, he added.

For an example, Khurshid said the HC started

hearing the death reference and appeals in Saudi Embassy official Khalaf Al Ali murder case.

An HC bench recently concluded hearing on the death reference and the appeals filed by the condemned convicts in the murder case, and fixed November 10 for the verdict in the case.

Khalaf, an official at the consular section of the Saudi Embassy in Dhaka, was shot dead on March 6 last year near his Gulshan house in the capital.

A Dhaka court on December 30 last year sentenced five people to death for killing the Saudi official.

Sources at the SC said a total of 363 death references are now pending with the HC, and it has disposed of 105 death reference cases so far this year.

Four division benches of the HC are hearing and disposing of the death reference cases in sequence. The benches have disposed of the death references which were filed in 2007 and 2008.

Ten or eleven death references of 2008 are still waiting to be disposed of, the sources added.

Virtual death

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government in 2010 passed the Border Guard Bangladesh Act-2010, which set death as the maximum penalty for mutiny.

Six thousand and forty-six BDR jawans were accused of the mutiny at Pilkhana headquarters where the rebellion broke out minutes after the then BDR chief started the Darbar or the annual gathering of the force around 9:00am on February 25, 2009. Within hours, the mutiny spread to 46 other BDR units across the country.

Of them, 5,926 jawans were convicted of mutiny and awarded different jail terms ranging from a month to highest seven years. The rest 115 were acquitted of the charges, and charges against five others were dropped by the BGB special courts.

BDR jawans accused of grave offences like killing are being tried separately in civilian courts under the Penal Code and could face death penalty if convicted.

The summary trial courts of BGB tried 11,265 accused. Of them, exemplary punishments (forced retirement or dismissal) were awarded to 2,978 jawans while the rest 8,287 were handed down punishments like reprimand, demotion and withholding of promotion and increment.

During the trials, the prosecution said the accused conspired to stage the rebellion. They disobeyed orders of the then DG following a gunshot outside and fled the Darbar Hall leaving the officers an easy target of the mutineers.

The convicts either directly took part in the mutiny or helped mutineers execute their plans while some just looked on as mutineers rampaged through the headquarters, killing, burning and looting.

The prosecution brought charges of looting the armoury, disobeying and insulting high-ranking officers, not informing the high-ups of the mutiny plot, provoking the muti-

AL thinks justice

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"It has been proved that no crime can go unpunished," AL Joint General Secretary Mahbubul Alam Hanif told The Daily Star in an immediate reaction to the verdict.

BNP acting secretary general Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir at a press conference in the party's Naya Paltan headquarters yesterday said: "We do not want to comment on the entire verdict. This is not our subject. We want to say that our leader Nasiruddin Pintu has been indicted unlawfully in this case."

"We saw in the newspapers that some ruling party high-ups were involved in the incident, but they [government] did not consider their names. Rather they arrested Pintu, which is politically motivated," the BNP leader alleged.

Hanif said the mutiny was designed to assassinate Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, and create instability in the country.

The BNP is not happy with the verdict, as its men including Pintu were involved in the carnage, he added.



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