

BNP's rejoinder and our reply

FROM PAGE 1
We strongly condemn the whole purpose of writing and publishing such a motivated article targeting a valiant freedom fighter, proclaimer of our independence, a President elected by the people, founder of one of the largest Political Party in the country to defend democracy and sovereignty, who saved the country from lawlessness and hunger, withdrew martial law imposed by Awami League leader Khondoker Mushtaq Ahmed and re-introduced multi-party democracy which was also taken away by Awami League in January, 1975, introduced politics of productivity for sustainable economic development, succeeded to involve people in nation building efforts and hold elections including the election of the Parliament with participation of all political parties.

We are providing below the observations of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party -- BNP on the said article with a request to publish those in an appropriate place of your esteemed newspaper so that the right to your readers to know the truth is established.

"Mr. Sakhawat Liton has mentioned the name of some books by local and foreign authors and comments by army officers who had either watched the political development or worked to develop the conspiracy leading to Sheikh Mujib's killing without proper referencing.

It is true, the time was highly chaotic and leftist outfits such as JSD leaders and workers were at work including army factions to bring about a change.

The then 46 Brigade Commander, a valiant freedom fighter Col. Ziauddin in an article in the Weekly Holiday as early as 1972 titled 'Hidden Price' demanding the scrapping of India-Bangladesh Friendship treaty wrote "We fought without him and won. If need be we will fight again without him." (The Silent Witness of A General: First Decade of Independence, page 45 by Major General Moinul Hossain Chowdhury, also a valiant freedom fighter).

It showed that anger at different levels of army was at work and Sheikh Mujib was himself concerned about such tensions which were on spread at various levels.

Lt. Col. Faruk, Col. Rasid and other officers may have visited Gen. Zia as the Deputy Chief of Staff and it is an usual practice for junior officers to meet senior officers occasionally. Mere meeting of such kind can't be an evidence of his involvement in the conspiracy as Mr Sakhawat Liton tried desperately to portray.

Those officers about whom Mr Liton mentioned also met Col. Shafayet Jamil, Col. Amin Ahmed Choudhury, Maj. Gen. Moinul Hossain Chowdhury and even many Awami League leaders at that time. Then why Maj. Gen. Zia alone should be blamed for conspiracy for the reason that the two men had met him at his place.

It appears that the writer of the article has attempted to frame the story picking suitable materials and quotations from books that only suits his purpose to malign the Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman.

The story has never questioned the position and role of the then army Chief of Staff Gen. K M Shafiullah, Chief of General Staff Brig. Khaled Mosharraf, Director General of the BDR, Major General Khalilur Rahman, DG of the DGFI Brigadier Rauf, Brigade commander of Dhaka, Col. Shafayet Jamil, Col. (Rtd) Abu Taher and politicians who appeared to have been exonerated targeting the then Deputy Chief of Staff Maj. Gen. Zia to be blamed for the August massacre.

Mr Sakhawat Liton preferred some selected printed materials of his choice to frame his story which suits his purpose to defame Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman involving him in the plot of assassination of Sheikh Mujib Rahman. This is absolutely baseless, motivated and not corroborated by facts.

When everybody knows Awami League leader Khandaker Mostaque Ahmed was involved in Sheikh Mujib Rahman killing, Mr Sakhawat Liton like other political opponents of BNP accuses Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman, Bir Uttam who is regarded not only a great hero but also the proclaimer of our independence, to malign him with an ill motive intending to divert people's attention to other direction.

An incoherent story

The writer of the article seemed to have considered some bias writers' write-ups as their Bible! In the lead story titled "Fatal deaf ear", it said that, Major Faruk and Major Rashid gathered at the residence of Major General Ziaur Rahman, in June of 1974 and there was a discussion held centering a coup to thwart the presidency of Sheikh Mujib Rahman. In the same article it was further stated that, on March 20 of 1975 Major Faruk was very cautious at his meetings with Major General Zia. He was apprehensive that if he bluntly told the deputy chief of Army that he wanted to overthrow the President there was a very good scope Zia would arrest him. So Faruk decided to be cautious.

According to Rashid, Shafaat Jamil said that there was too much talk about the possibility of a coup and the leader is none but Rashid. Faruk and Rashid were officers of units under the command of 46 Brigade and Col. Shafayet Jamil was its commander. Rashid in desperation said that if Shafaat Jamil took any action against him, he would involve him with the coup and there were evidences in this regard. This made Shafayet Jamil signal Rashid to go ahead with his plan.

Surprisingly, it was Colonel Shafaat

Jamil to whom Rashid reported after the death of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. (Page 62)

Moreover, according to an article written by Waresat Hossain Belal, who is currently an Awami League MP, and also the brother of Colonel Taher Bir Uttam, on January 15 of 1992 in now defunct Daily Ajker Kagoj (owned by Kazi Shahed Ahmed, the father of ruling Awami League MP Kazi Nabil Ahmed), "In 1974 when Faruk was given the charge of disarming the crooks in Narayanganj and Taher was the director of Dredger Organization of Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) of the same place, Faruk used to visit Taher. One day, Faruk came to visit Taher in a Volkswagen and opened the dashboard of the car to show Taher of Chinese pistol and said, 'Sir, I would shoot Sheikh Mujib with this pistol. You and Colonel Ziauddin will be leading the country.'

This article was also referred to in the book "Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib: Landmarks of the life of a leader" by Abdul Matin from Radical Asia Publication.

Many such evidences can be placed that suggest that even many of the people around Sheikh Mujib Rahman clearly knew that a coup was in the offing and who were plotting it. They did nothing to resist it to save their leader. Mr Sakhawat Liton in his report did not raise these points not by mistake but to fulfill his motivated intention to establish late President Ziaur Rahman as a villain.

Late Lieutenant Colonel M. A. Hamid, who was the Station Commander in Dhaka Cantonment, gives an account of that crucial moment in his memoirs published in 1993. DGDFI Brigadier Rauf briefed the Chief of Army Staff Major General Saifullah on the situation between 2:00 and 3:00am on August 15. Maj. Gen. Shafayet in a deposition before the Dhaka Session Judge Court on January 20, 1998 in connection with Sheikh Mujib killing case said he had conversation with the President at 5:15 am. He said President sought support from him but in reply he said he would do something while asking the President whether he can come out of his house.

Col. Hamid raised question in his book as to why the Chief of Army Staff did not take action when he knew hours in advance that his President was in danger. Shafayet Jamil's 46 Brigade was located only 500 yards from the Chief of Army Staff's residence. Why Brigade Commander Shafayet Jamil remained idle to move his brigade to save the President. Hamid also wonders why the Chief of Staff didn't bother to go there and mobilise troops to avert the coup, rather he went to the radio station in the early morning to express allegiance to Khondker Mostaque who took over as the new President. Interestingly Mostaque indicted Ministers in his cabinet, most of whom were Ministers in Sheikh Mujib's cabinet. It gave an impression that it was an intra-party infighting aimed at removing Sheikh Mujib from the government leadership. Mostaque proclaimed martial law and indemnified the coup leaders with the support and approval of the new cabinet which essentially looked like the old cabinet of Sheikh Mujib Rahman, except few.

Many wonder how Mr. Sakhawat Liton came to the conclusion that Maj. Gen. Zia was a beneficiary of August 15 incident. Logically question can be countered to this propaganda that how Maj. Gen. Ziaur Rahman became beneficiary when he was made the Chief of Army Staff after nine days of the changeover of the government, Mostaque made Gen. MAG Osmany, as Defense Adviser who was also a Minister in Sheikh Mujib's cabinet (who resigned to protest one party rule) to establish control over the armed forces and Major Gen. Khalilur Rahman, DG, BDR was elevated to the newly created post of Chief of Defense Staff, a position above to the rank of Chief of Army Staff only to lessen the influence of Maj. Gen. Zia in the army, as he was very popular amongst rank and file of the army.

Interestingly, Awami League quarters had never raised question on the role of Gen. Osmany, Maj. Gen. Shafayet, or Maj. Gen. Khalilur Rahman in Mostaque government. Rather Awami League nominated Mostaque's Adviser Gen. Osmany as Presidential candidate against Ziaur Rahman while Shafayet and Khalilur Rahman were picked up as Awami League candidates in parliamentary elections. Who is unaware of the fact that Speaker of the Parliament, Abdul Malek Ukil sided with Mostaque and accepted the offer for representing as special emissary of President Mostaque to justify the changeover through August 15 coup. Surprisingly, Mr. Ukil was also rewarded with the highest position of the Awami League in late seventies.

In 3rd November 1975, Chief of General Staff (CGS) Brig. Khaled Mosharraf known as an ally to Maj. General Shafayet (Silent Witness of a General, page 41-42) staged another

coup, declared himself as new Chief of Army Staff arresting Maj. Gen. Zia and putting him under confinement. He also installed Chief Justice ASM Sayem as the President and Chief Martial law Administrator.

Chaos in the army spread sharply at that time and on November 7 patriotic soldiers revolted against Maj. Gen. Khaled Mosharraf and rescued Maj. Gen. Ziaur Rahman from confinement and put him back to the leadership of the army in a tumultuous revolution jointly by the people and the patriotic soldiers.

It was a spectacular circumstance which brought Maj. Gen. Ziaur Rahman Bir Uttam at the helm of the affairs to restore peace and discipline in the country.

A prejudiced exercise

There were immense attempts noticed in the report to make the readers realize that Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman was responsible for the assassination of Sheikh Mujib Rahman. For example the uses of some fantasy scenarios like, "Faruk's initial fears about Zia were unfounded" or "Zia did not react negatively at his plan to overthrow the President" seemed to be used to portray Zia as an associate of the killers of Sheikh Mujib Rahman.

The whole thing seemed to a one-sided pre conceived fantasy from the beginning. There was no public interview of Shaheed Zia that suggest that he had endorsed this conversation. Maj. Gen. Ziaur Rahman bluntly refused to take the leadership of the coup according to Faruk. In page 54 of "Bangladesh: The Legacy of Blood", Faruk says that 'his patience broke due to his failure to recruit Zia in the coup'. The word failure may explain a lot.

However, the writer of the article should have had some knowledge about the situation of the country during 1972 to 1975 and should have gone through once again what Faruk told to Moshayen about the meeting exactly, since Mr. Liton loves to mention the name of this book.

The writer, after going through all these books, neither took Shafayet Jamil's coolness amid Rashid's threat, nor the conversation of Faruk with Taher as a conspiracy to kill the President, rather took the cooked up story told by Faruk about Maj. Gen. Zia as evidence to tarnish his image and joined the charade of Awami League backed propagandists.

CONCLUSION

What is at the core of the matter is that Ziaur Rahman was elevated to the leadership by the events of history. He was respectful to Sheikh Mujib Rahman and as the army Deputy Chief of Staff he performed his duties keeping himself above politics.

The problem arises when he raised a political party BNP when Awami League was disintegrating and they started to take BNP as their enemy, failing to face it politically on BNP's rising popularity. Awami League wants to destroy Shaheed President Zia's image accusing him for involvement in Sheikh Mujib killing. They want that people must keep away from his image and his party politics and it appears that Mr. Liton's story is part of the plan to serve Awami League's interest using a popular media. Unfortunately, a newspaper like The Daily Star has allowed him to do so.

OUR REPLY

Our report was mainly based on confessional statements of a number of accused in the Bangabandhu murder case and some authoritative books, which we cited in our report.

The confessional statements are part of the Bangabandhu murder trial proceedings and have been in the public domain for a long time. And all those books including the ones written by foreign authors have been available in the city's bookshops.

The confessional statements and the facts of those books were never contested by the BNP.

Take for example one of the books written by a foreign author.

The book titled "Inside R&AW" by Indian journalist Asoka Raina narrated how the R&AW received the information about a meeting held at the residence of Gen. Ziaur Rahman in June 1974 focusing on a coup.

Excerpts of this book about the meeting held at the then army deputy chief Zia's residence was reproduced in a book "Bangladesh: Bloody Chapter: 1975-1981" by Brig Gen (retd) M Sakhawat Hussein, which was published in 2000.

Bangladesh Defence Journal Publishing brought out a Bangla version of "Inside R&AW" in 1993 when BNP was in power. And it published two more editions in 1994 and in February 1996 when the BNP was in power too. Its third edition was published in 2014.

A number of accused in the Bangabandhu murder case in their confessional statements before magistrates suggesting Gen Zia's direct link with the plot to stage the August 15 coup.

Taheruddin Thakur, who was a minister in the Bangabandhu government but a close aide to Mushtaque, had a meeting with Mushtaque on August 14, 1975, a day before the brutal murder of

Bangabandhu, and had updates about the plans.

An accused in Bangabandhu murder case, Thakur in his confessional statement quoted Mushtaque as saying: "Zia came [to me] twice this week. He and his men have become restless to do something fast. They want to bring a change in power by force. They are ready to do anything necessary."

Zia's visit to Mushtaque had not taken place suddenly.

Major Faruk, one of the convicted killers of Bangabandhu, in his confessional statement said: "At the end of 1974, the then deputy chief of army Maj. Gen. Zia along with his family members often came to my residence by walking. He used to discuss about the country's situation ... In discussions, he [Zia], instigating me, said something needs to be done to save the country."

In the discussion, Zia's suggestion was sought and in response, Zia said what could I do? Do something if you [junior officers] can, Faruk had said.

He said Major Rashid had continued communication with Zia and Mushtaque. "Rashid informed [me] that Ziaur Rahman would extend his support to us if we can kill Sheikh Mujib," said Faruk in his confessional statement.

American noted journalist Lawrence Lifschultz in an interview published in The Daily Star on December 16, 2011 said: "He [Gen Zia] assured Rashid that he would make certain that the forces in the Army would not move against him and his men if they succeeded. Zia carefully monitored Rashid's operational plans and assured Rashid that he would protect their backs."

Lifschultz had been extensively writing on the country's political situation in 1975 and later on the Col. Taher trial for more than four decades.

In his interview with The Daily Star, he quoted Major Rashid from a meeting he had with Zia in 1997 in a European city.

"I asked him [Rashid] if before the August coup d'état he had concerns about the position the Americans might take as he moved forward in his planning. Rashid told me that he had discussed the issue with Zia because he, Rashid, had his own worries about this. Rashid told me that Zia had said to him that the Americans were in the picture and there was nothing to worry about from that quarter," said Lifschultz.

Lifschultz said: "I asked Rashid on what basis Zia offered Rashid an assurance that the Americans were not opposed to a coup. Rashid told me it was clear to him that Zia had been in direct contact with an American counterpart but he did not know the name of this person."

In our report, we used some conversations between Gen Zia and Major Faruk from the book styled "Bangladesh: A Legacy of Blood" by Anthony Moshayen. Major Faruk in an interview with Moshayen disclosed the content of his conversation with Zia that took place on March 20, 1975.

In fact, Moshayen has also interviewed Rashid along with Faruk. These interviews for "World in Action" programme were broadcast in England on ITV in 1976, a year after the Bangabandhu murder.

In the interview Rashid also described their meetings with Zia prior to the August coup. Moshayen also included excerpts of these interviews in his book "A Legacy of Blood" published in 1986 in London.

In his meeting with Lifschultz, Rashid confirmed the accuracy of his and Major Faruk's interview taken by Moshayen.

In his interview published in The Daily Star, Lifschultz concluded: "Without Zia's clear support, I do not believe the coup d'état could have moved forward. Zia was the key 'Shadow Man'. Had he been against the coup, as Deputy Chief of the Army, Zia could have stopped it. Of course, it was his constitutional duty to do so."

What the BNP said in its rejoinder, citing Major Gen Moinul Hossain's book "Silent Witness of a General" about Moshayen's taking of 20,000 pound loan from Sonali Bank in London and refusal to pay back and paid by military ruler Ershad to write the book "Bangladesh: A Legacy of Blood" is not relevant to our report as the interviews predate Ershad's coming to power.

Moshayen interviewed Major Faruk and Rashid in 1976 and Gen. Ershad came to power in 1982.

The BNP, in its rejoinder, sees nothing wrong with Major Faruk's visit to Zia's residence on March 20, 1975, and termed his visit a usual practice.

However, the book by Major Gen Moinul Hossain "Silent Witness of a General", which the BNP cited in its rejoinder, said Gen Moinul found Major Faruk in front of Zia's residence and described it as a sign of complicity.

"I would have interrogated Faruk on that day had he been under my command," Gen Moinul wrote on pages 70-71 in his book under a sub-title "Sign of Coup".

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