

Bangladesh UN Contingent Peacekeeping Mission in Bosnia- Herzegovina



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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE CONFLICT

Bosnia-Herzegovina (BH) was part of the former Balkan state of Yugoslavia. After the Allied victory in World War II, Yugoslavia was set up as a federation of six republics with borders drawn along ethnic and historical lines demarcating republics of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Slovenia and Serbia.

The country had three large ethnic communities: (1) Bosnians- Muslims; (2) Croats- Catholic Christians; and, (3) Serbs- Orthodox Christians. Bosnia, being part of the old Ottoman empire, had a Muslim majority population. After the death of President Josip Broz Tito in 1980, internal political turmoil fueled by the fall of the other communist regimes in Eastern Europe, the state of Yugoslavia started to break up into smaller independent states. Map below shows the breakup and formation of the new republics.

FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLICS

Green - Slovenia

Pink - Croatia

Purple - Serb Republic in Croatia

Grey - Bosnia Herzegovina at the time of declaration of independence

Red - Serbia

Brown- Macedonia

In a 1991 census, population of Bosnia (Grey Portion) of some 4 million comprised of 44 percent Bosnians, 31 percent Serbs, and 17 percent Croats. In April 1992, Bosnia-Herzegovina (Muslims)

declared its independence from Yugoslavia and this started off what we know as the Bosnia war. Over the next several years, Bosnian Serb forces, with the backing of the Serb-dominated Yugoslav army, targeted both Bosnian Muslims and Croatian Catholic Christians resulting in the deaths of some 100,000 people by Dec 1995, when the war ended under 'Dayton Peace Accord'. It was the worst act of genocide in Europe since the Nazi regime's killing of some 6 million European Jews during World War II.

With both the European union and UN efforts failing to stop the killing and the ethnic cleansing, the international community agreed to deploy UN Peacekeepers. What most people do not know even today is that, the UN Peace Keeping mission was launched in Bosnia without UN Security Council Peacekeeping mandate simply because the big powers could not agree on a common agenda. As I understand, the OIC had played an active diplomatic role for making the Europeans accept UN Peacekeepers from non-European nations, especially from the Muslim countries. In addition to a unit from Kenya, non-European countries that contributed peacekeepers were Bangladesh, Malaysia and Pakistan.

The Bangladesh contingent was assigned to an area, called Bihac, on the north-east tip of Drvar, east of Banja Luka, a small Muslim enclave surrounded by Serbs on all sides. The French battalion that had been for some two years in Bihac, did not wish to continue any longer. In 1993, I led a team of officers for the reconnaissance mission to assess the situation and the logistic needs for placement of a contingent of Bangladesh peacekeepers and its sustenance.

Bosnia is known for its freezing and wet winters which appeared to me as a big challenge as none of our soldiers had any experience of living under snow conditions, apart from the fact that Bangladesh army was not equipped for operating in freezing winter conditions, which demand special clothing, special equipment and winter- survival knowledge. On our return, a report was submitted with a long list of specialized equipment for such situations, including winter clothing. Much of these are now on the standard list of Bangladesh UN equipment.

Deployment of peacekeeping units from Muslim countries was put on hold in 1993, as many European nations objected to their deployment in Bosnia- Herzegovina, and later struggled to find locations where these incoming units could be placed. I state this very sensitive aspect of the conflict only after having seen such documents and having come across such comments personally. In Bangladesh, the infantry battalion that was mobilized for Bosnia was later sent for Kuwait mission and I opted not to go for the Kuwait mission to continue my teaching assignment at the Staff College Mirpur.

The situation on the ground was getting worse that demanded additional troops, which NATO countries were unable to commit. As such, I believe, under the OIC initiative, the 1994 decision to insert peacekeepers from outside Europe including the Muslim nations was cleared.

Bangladesh was asked to confirm readiness to insert a mechanized infantry battalion within 45 days and, not surprisingly, Bangladesh agreed. In mid 1994, I was a Colonel and officiating commander of an infantry brigade in the

north. I was called and asked to take charge and start the mobilizing and training effort in order to be able to send the contingent immediately. I took charge of the battalion in Savar and started the work of reorganizing, re-equipping and training. BTRs (APC), which is in such abundance now in the army, was not to be found in 1994. Hence, arrangements were made with UN to provide specialized equipment including APCs, and organize training of the APC crews. Solution came with UN retrieving of surplus equipment, stores and winter uniforms of the East German Army from the stock warehouses of a very large training facility of the old Soviet Union in Slovakia. We assembled the training team of about 100 plus people who were sent about a month ahead to Slovakia to train and take over the equipment. Since I had already arrived with an advanced team in Zagreb, Croatia, I along with a Danish Army officer drove via Hungary to Slovakia. The Danish officer found it hard to understand why Col. Salim, his companion, with a blue beret and UN ID had to undergo visa processes while entering Hungary and again at the Slovakia borders. Since I was carrying a non-European passport, I could well understand the issue! I shared some of that long drives and the experience of driving across the borders, and specially going through Budapest was nice and enjoyable.

Training camp in Slovakia was impressive and gave me a picture of how much the old Soviet Union had stocked and prepared for a war with NATO that never came. We ended up using part of that equipment. By August 1994, the battalion arrived and camped at Zagreb,

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