

The agony of war

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was arrested; a section of the prominent Awami League leaders escaped capture, crossed the border, and eventually formed the Mujibnagar government in exile.

Inside East Pakistan, a section of the population rebelled, and as soon as the declaration of independence was made, Bengalis were at war!

Within a few days of the onslaught, cross border movement by refugees was noted at the highest level. On 29 March, 1971, in a correspondence to Sadruddin Aga Khan, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), FL Pijnacker Hordijk, the representative in India, warned of an imminent global refugee crisis.

Even such early cautionary responses failed to predict the scale of the mass exodus. The people and the government of India had, from the early days of the conflict, empathised with sufferings of the population of East Pakistan.

Since the start of the conflict, the diplomatic position of India to the exodus was clear; although borders remained open on humanitarian grounds, they would, under no circumstances, allow the refugees to settle in the country.

Samer Sen, Permanent Representative of India at the United Nations, met Secretary General U Thant on 23 April, 1971, and requested international aid. Subsequently, between 26-27 April, Sadruddin Aga Khan of the UNHCR met with Secretary General U Thant at Berne, Switzerland, to discuss the situation.

In order to seek a peaceful, humanitarian solution to the problem, the UNHCR was entrusted with the role of general coordinator.

In May 1971, a team visited several camps

located in the Indian states of West Bengal, Tripura, and Assam — the regions that had experienced the highest insurgence of refugees. It held talks with authorities, other United Nations agencies and non-government organisations in order to prepare a working plan, ensuring that the different agencies provide a coordinated

There are no beds. The patients lie on metal sheets covering a concrete floor. The disease produces uncontrollable diarrhoea and vomiting, the result of which are everywhere.

effort towards a common goal.

The end result, however, failed to yield any significant result.

On 28 October, 1971, Oxfam UK, the renowned humanitarian organisation published the now famous, 'the Testimony of Sixty,' eye-witness accounts of the tragic situation in Bengal (East and West) at that time.

It featured testimonies of world leaders, humanitarians working on the field, and journalists covering events unfolding in the Indian subcontinent.

Gerald Scarfe was a little-known illustrator working in India for the Sunday Times. He was asked to send his testimony for the Oxfam publication, and his reply was, "I am not a man of words" and sent two of his sketches.

The refugee crisis of 1971 was one of the largest humanitarian crises the world had ever seen. As days are passing by, we are seeing more and more information coming to light on that aspect of our struggle for liberation. Yet, in the near 50 years that has passed, what remains most overwhelming are the shocking images of death, and human plight that we see, and the eyewitness accounts we read today.

All souls with a conscience were shaken by the events that began on the fateful night of 25 March, and ended almost a year after victory was finally achieved.

Dignitaries visiting the refugee camps in India sent cables back to their base offices stating, "[they are] depressed by situation and reign of terror which is obvious in faces of people which are stunned and, in some cases, almost expressionless..."

Some wrote — Many of the refugees are suffering from infectious diseases. Some 626 doctors and 60 refugee doctors are trying to cope with this overwhelming situation, aided by some 800 paramedical personnel. Over 2700 beds have been added to the existing 42 hospitals, but what will the situation be tomorrow? On this day, a further 100,000 refugees have arrived in the Nadia district alone.

Death and disease were the words in every mouth, in every words writers penned. "Cholera is a horrible and humiliating

way to die" one wrote. And continued, "The only mercy is that it is comparatively quick. The cholera wards are two buildings behind the main hospital block. There are no beds. The patients lie on metal sheets covering a concrete floor. The disease produces uncontrollable diarrhoea and vomiting, the result of which are everywhere. Those who still can fan themselves quickly; those who are too far gone to do so are black with flies. There are men and women of all ages."

And amidst all this, Scarfe's sketches perhaps narrate a very different version of the plight. They focus on the desensitised look of the refugees. How their suffering can be read from their eyes, more so than through their vocal narratives.

His sketch of patients lying flat on metal beds on concrete floors do not speak of disease, but the lack of hope that victims felt in their last hours, final minutes, and the passing seconds.

Gerald Scarfe is known as a caricaturist. A pop icon known for his illustrations that accompanied Pink Floyd's iconic The Wall tour, or the animation featured in the film that followed the release of the same album. But his illustrations done in 1971 tell a different story, albeit in his chosen medium. Scarfe is a glaring example who has shown that it is not always necessary to be a man of words, and at times, silence speaks more than any uttered speech. Only thing that matters is that our conscience remains the driving force in the language that we have chosen to speak with — in his case, his drawing pen and the paper.

By Mannan Mashhur Zarif

Parts of this article has appeared earlier in The Daily Star. The writer wishes to thank Gerald Scarfe for allowing to publish some of his sketches for this article.

Witness to victory

CONTINUED FROM CENTRE

Later in the evening, we heard that the people had taken with them Santosh Chandra Bhattacharyya, then a professor of History at Dhaka University, and Rashidul Hasan, of the same university's English department, and Anwar Pasha, of the Bangla department. Santosh Bhattacharyya used to live in our building, and I remember their family, especially his wife and daughter, coming to our home in the evening, worried and crying. There was nothing we could do then, regretfully.

The next day, my aunt's (*boro khala's*) house, a few buildings away, was bombed, and my father moved us children to a home in Bakshibazar, and stayed behind himself. Just a day later, I remember walking about the streets, loudly reverberating with victorious slogans and cheerful and relieved outpouring of emotions from people everywhere.

ISRAR AHMAD KHAN

**Businessman
(College student in 1971)**

We arrived in Dhaka sometime in late May, 1971. My father was a government official

posted in Islamabad, West Pakistan. In Dhaka, we lived in the Sobhanbagh colony. After war was officially declared, we would often hear bombs being dropped by the Indian forces. My brother, and a friend, especially, were very adventurous, and would go out to see what was happening. I sometimes went to the roof, and witnessed the bombs being dropped a few times. Honestly, it was quite scary.

One of my most vivid memories is of 6 December, 1971 (Bhutan, and then India had recognised Bangladesh formally on that day). One of my friends from the colony told me that India had finally recognised Bangladesh officially, and out of sheer delight, I yelled out "Joy Bangla," to the horror of the people present, as even then, saying the words out loud was dangerous.

As the war intensified, it was feared that direct fighting could break out in the vicinity of our home, as Sobhanbagh colony was right on the main road, so father sent us to live with relatives in the Science Laboratory quarters. Ironically, the very next day, the Indian forces bombed part of the Dhaka University student halls, so we were much nearer to danger than we had been

at Sobhanbagh!

It was utter relief to hear of the impending surrender. We had been confined to our houses, and the entire city was locked down. Upon hearing of the scheduled surrender, to be held at the then racecourse field, I decided to go and see the ceremony. With that intent, I set out in the afternoon towards the field, only to see people coming back in droves. Upon asking, I learnt that the ceremony was already over, and I had missed my chance to be a witness to that historic moment and worse still, the walk back home was quite uneventful!

BEGUM NAZMUN NAHAR BAZLEE

**Homemaker
(Student of class VII in 1971)**

We lived in the Lalbagh area of the Old Town then, on the day we heard that Pakistan had surrendered and that Bangladesh was now an independent country. Hundreds of people thronged the streets, chanting slogans, but our house was still quiet, worrying for my brother. Through the entire nine months, Abba had refused to bring down the flag on the roof that my brother had hoisted before he left to join the fight.

My two older brothers were very die-hard supporters of Chhatra Union, and so, we heard a lot about the political environment and the on-goings in the country. In March, right after the flag of Bangladesh made its appearance, my two brothers brought home a large piece of green cloth, and painted the red circle and the yellow map on it, in our veranda, and hoisted it on the roof. The paint they used was so strong, it left patches on the floor. My second brother, Mahfuz, left to join the *Mukti Bahini* on 29 March, and since then, we had been waiting to hear from him. Throughout the war, my father refused to take the flag down, saying only Mahfuz would do it, on his return. He finally did come back, on 29 December, and that was when we truly celebrated victory. Sadly, he later left to settle in America, deeply hurt and disillusioned by the state of affairs he saw in Bangladesh, and passed away there.

Interviewed by Sania Aiman

Special thanks to Jayanta Sen, Sharmeen Murshid, Tahsina Shamsunnahar, Israr Ahmad Khan, and Begum Nazmun Nahar Bazlee.