

Perfect home for freedom fighters

Sharifunnessa tells how she helped fellow freedom fighters in her secluded house in Keraniganj



MOHAMMAD AL MASUM MOLLA

The tin shack was almost hidden behind a bush. A thick canopy of mango and coconut trees kept it under a blissful shade. Behind its backyard was a wide canal that separated it from the rest of the village.

It was a perfect place to sneak in and out of without being noticed.

In 1971, the shack in Ahadipur area of Dhaka's Keraniganj belonged to Mobarak Hossain, a respected village elder. It was just 15km away from the capital. But 48 years ago, when there was no proper road, the village was quite hard to reach.

During the Liberation War, this shack served as a hideout to many freedom fighters.

"My father was an avid supporter of the Awami League. This wasn't something one would openly brag about at the time. But our family was well respected. That's why we managed to support the freedom fighters almost throughout the war without anyone rattling us out to the Pakistan army," Mobarak's eldest daughter Sharifunnessa told The Daily Star at her home in Keraniganj.

A recognised freedom fighter, she was 19 during the Liberation War. She used to cook and arrange accommodation for the freedom fighters who stayed in their house while on the way to different areas of the country. She also used to hide the arms and ammunition the freedom fighters carried.

"One day, my father told me that some people would drop by and asked me to cook for them. I had no idea who was coming," she said.

The people who came to their house that night were war heroes Abdur Razzaq, Sirajul Alam Khan, Borhanuddin Gagan and Shahjahan Siraj. At the time, they were young politicians fighting for their country.

They slept there that night and left the next day. They were the first of many

travelling freedom fighters who would take refuge in their house.

"Since I had to take care of the arms sometimes, the freedom fighters gave me a basic training on how to use short machineguns, throw cocktails and place landmines. My father also went on guerrilla operations. Some of my cousins joined the war too. I also wanted to go on operations.

"But then I realised that what I was doing at home was no less important. I decided to fight the war from home. I hardly slept at night during those nine months. There were always some freedom fighters at our house."

Their house had five rooms, four of which were used by the freedom fighters. Sharifunnessa and her three younger brothers slept in one room. One of the rooms was used to keep the arms. She always kept the key to that room with her.

One night, a freedom fighter by the name Omar came to their house. It was almost midnight and he looked very pale and feeble because he hadn't eaten anything for 10 days, she said.

The man asked her if she could cook him some rice. Sharifunnessa did and he ate like it was his last meal. Omar was killed in a battle the next day, she said.

"Since then, if anyone asks for food, I never turn them away."

Freedom fighters around Dhaka knew the house very well.

One of them is Mostafa Mohsin Mintu, commander of the Dhaka District Liberation Force in 1971. He said that the contribution of Sharifunnessa's family was crucial.

"They sacrificed everything they had for us, for the country. They gave us their house. They gave us food. They didn't hesitate to risk their lives. Their house was one of the safest places in Dhaka district," said Mintu.

Sharifunnessa now lives with her children and grandchildren at her husband's ancestral home in Keraniganj.



President Abdul Hamid and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina paying tributes at Martyred Intellectuals Memorial in the capital's Mirpur yesterday.

PHOTO: BSS

No strength left to seek justice

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SI Jahid's mother convinced Momtaz to marry Jahid's younger brother. She married the man and left home around three years ago, leaving her two children.

"After this, her [Momtaz's] stance changed dramatically. A few months later, she told the court that SI Jahid was not involved in Sujan's murder but the court did not accept it as we also gave witness statements," said Md Shamim, elder brother of Sujan.

Later, SI Jahid's family filed a writ petition with the High Court seeking a stay on the trial proceedings, family and court sources said.

Of the accused, only Jahid, who was suspended and arrested in the case, is behind bars.

This correspondent did not find any contact number of Momtaz. Her current address also could not be known.

A CASE TOO PUZZLING

On February 2 this year, police raided Shaheda's residence -- House-16, Road-9, Block-E, Mirpur-1.

A DB team received a secret information that some members of a drug syndicate were hiding at the house to sell yaba smuggled in through Teknaf, according to the case filed by DB SI Harun ur Rashid.

When the officers reached the spot, the case statement reads, seven to eight members of the syndicate tried to flee. Police arrested Shaheda along with four alleged yaba dealers -- Lokman Hossain, Md Ranju and two teens aged 13 and 14.

The case documents show that 8,000 pieces of yaba pills were seized from Lokman, Ranju and the teens in front of two local witnesses -- Rafiqul Islam and Naju Mia -- and Assistant Sub-Inspector Jahangir Alam.

SI Md Eshak Ali investigated the case and submitted two separate charge sheets, including one for juvenile crime, before the court on April 28.

The complainant mentioned in the case that in front of the three witnesses he searched the bodies of the accused, recovered the yaba pills and made a seizure list. He then took signatures of the witnesses.

But both the witnesses -- Rafiqul and Naju -- told this correspondent a different story. While talking to The Daily Star on September 18, they opposed what police claimed in the case and charge sheet.

"I did not see anything," said Rafiqul, a local trader.

He said he was having tea at a local stall and noticed a gathering near Shaheda's house.



Shaheda Begum

"As I went there, Siraj Daroga [SI Siraj of Shah Ali Police Station] who was known to me asked me to sign a paper. I could not turn down his request. Actually, I did not see anything at all."

Rafiqul said police picked up Shaheda's son Sabuj from somewhere and brought him handcuffed near their home.

Naju Mia, a guard of a nearby under-construction building opposite Shaheda's house, said, "Police asked me to put my signature and I did it without knowing actually what was that."

He said he was working on the rooftop on February 2 afternoon when he too saw police bring Sabuj handcuffed.

Later, police freed Sabuj but detained his mother, he said.

The one-storey building that Shaheda owns has a steel gate which

usually remains closed. Her family members and tenants need to open the padlock to go in and out.

Naju said he did not see anyone coming out of Shaheda's house in hours before Sabuj was brought handcuffed.

A tenant of Shaheda's house echoed his view, saying they did not see anyone going out before the police raided the house in the afternoon.

SI Siraj was recently transferred to the railway police, according to the duty officer of Shah Ali Police Station. His contact number was also not available.

Contacted, DB SI Harun ur Rashid, complainant of the case, said whatever the witnesses and he mentioned in the case is true. He claimed Sabuj was a yaba trader and the woman used to shelter the yaba dealers.

Shaheda said her son Sabuj has some addiction to yaba, but he was never an yaba dealer. There was no drug case filed against him, she added.

However, Sabuj was made an accused in an arms case filed by SI Jahid in 2013 and he secured bail, according to the family members.

SI Md Eshak Ali also says he stands by the case statement and that "criminals say a lot of things." **POLICE 'TOOK AWAY TK 7.5 LAKH'** During the February 2 raid, police took away Tk 7.5 lakh breaking open the almirah of her room, alleged Shaheda and her family members.

But the amount was not mentioned in the seizure list, they said.

Shaheda said they got the money by selling off 1.5-katha land in the city's Paikpara.

"I wanted to construct another floor in my building for the future of Sujan's two children. But it seems that's not to be," she said.

SI Harun denied that police took away Tk 7.5 lakh from the house.

Be careful of 'traitors and killers': PM

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday urged all to be aware of traitors and killers so that they could not play with the fate of Bangladesh anymore.

"We have seen that traitors like Mir Jafar and Khandaker Mushtaque Ahmed were born on Bangladesh's soil time and again or killers like Zia came [to power] again and again. So, it is the people of Bangladesh and our young generation who will have to take responsibility to make sure that none can play ducks and drakes with the fate of Bangladesh anymore," she said.

The PM was addressing a discussion, organised by the Awami League at the city's Krishibid Institution Bangladesh, marking the Martyred Intellectuals Day.

Hasina, also the AL president, said Ziaur Rahman had been involved in killings and conspiracy as he killed many army officers, including freedom fighters, following a series of coup attempts.

Zia had tried to erase the name of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from history, she added.

Mentioning that the 1974 famine was a man-made disaster, the premier said then food secretary Abdul Momen, who was later inducted into the cabinet of Ziaur Rahman, had played the biggest behind-the-scene role in the famine.

"Mushtaque had promoted Ziaur Rahman as the army chief as Zia was his most trusted person. Why would Mushtaque have made Zia the army chief if he was involved in the August 15 killing or its conspiracy?" she questioned.

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Nation observes the Martyred Intellectuals Day

UNB, Dhaka

The nation observed the Martyred Intellectuals' Day yesterday paying tributes to a galaxy of intellectuals systematically killed by Pakistani occupation forces and their local collaborators just before the end of the Liberation War.

On this day in 1971, some of the country's renowned academicians, doctors, engineers, journalists, artists, teachers and other eminent personalities were dragged out of their homes, blindfolded and taken to unknown places.

Their bodies were later found at Rayerbazar, Mirpur and some other killing fields in the capital.

Pakistani occupation forces and their local collaborators committed the cold-blooded mass murder to cripple the emerging Bangladesh intellectually.

Among the martyred intellectuals are Prof Munier Chowdhury, Dr Alim Chowdhury, Prof Muniruzzaman, Dr Fazle Rabbi, Sirajuddin Hossain, Shahidullah Kaiser, Prof GC Dev, JC Guha Thakurta, Prof Santosh Bhattacharya, Mofazzal Haider Chowdhury, journalists Khandaker Abu Taleb, Nizamuddin Ahmed, SA Mannan, ANM Golam Mustafa, Syed Nazmul Haq and Selina Parvin.

The government, socio-cultural, political organisations and different public universities observed the day with elaborate programmes.

President Abdul Hamid and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina paid tributes to the martyred intellectuals on the occasion of the Martyred Intellectuals Day.

First the President and then the Prime Minister placed wreath at the Martyred Intellectuals Memorial in Mirpur.

After placing the wreath, both stood in solemn silence as a mark of profound respect to the memories of the illustrious sons of the soil.

A contingent of Bangladesh Armed Forces gave a state salute while the bugle played the last post at that time.

Family members of the martyred, freedom fighters and people from all walks of life paid tributes to the martyred intellectuals by placing wreaths at the memorial in Mirpur and Rayerbazar Killing Ground in Mohammadpur.

Protests rage on for fourth day

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the Citizenship Act, appealed for calm and warned tough action against those indulging in violence.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government says the he amended citizenship law will save religious minorities such as Hindus and Christians from persecution in neighbouring Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan by offering them a path to Indian citizenship. But critics say the law, which does not make the same provision for Muslims, weakens the secular foundations of India.

Barring a peaceful 10-hour flash strike in Nagaland that crippled normal life, the situation in northeastern states yesterday remained largely peaceful leading to easing of curfew in Guwahati and Shillong, Meghalaya state capital.

In Guwahati, which saw violent protests against the contentious law, curfew was relaxed from 9:00 am to 4:00 pm local time, a police spokesperson said. Schools and offices, however, remained shut.

Anticipating further unrest, authorities extended an internet ban across Assam till Monday. Most shops were shut and anxious residents were seen stocking up supplies yesterday.

Schools and colleges in Nagaland remained closed and markets were shut and most vehicles remained off the roads as the Naga Students' Federation (NSF) enforced a six-hour strike.

Several thousand protesters rallied in the capital New Delhi yesterday evening, urging Modi's government to revoke the law, some holding signs reading: "Stop Dividing India".

In India's most populous Uttar Pradesh state, in the north of the country, students at the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), a prominent institution set up in 1920, protested against the citizenship law and were mobilising Muslims via doorstep invitations for a bigger protest today.

Protests were also staged in several other towns and cities of Uttar Pradesh, including in the Hindu holy city of Prayagraj, whose former name Allahabad was changed by the state's Hindu nationalist government in 2018.

The protests has already postponed a summit between Modi and his Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe.

Yesterday, the United States, Britain and Canada warned their nationals to "exercise caution" if travelling to the wider northeast region.

Islamic groups, the opposition and rights organisations say the law is a part of Modi's Hindu nationalist agenda to marginalise India's 200 million Muslims.

He denies this and says that Muslims from the three countries are not covered by the legislation because they have no need of India's protection.

Assam has long been a hotbed of ethnic tensions. In 1983 some 2,000 people, mainly Bengali Muslims, were butchered in what became known as the Nellie massacre.

This year a citizenship registry left off 1.9 million people -- many of them Muslims -- unable to prove that they or their forebears were in Assam before 1971, leaving them to face possible statelessness.

On this day in 1971

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advance towards Dhaka from Savar in the night. Kaderia Bahini join them on the way. They confront the Pakistan troops at the Mirpur Bridge. The allied force conduct a commando style attack in the first phase. Pakistan troops keep firing from the other side of the bridge. Another group of the allied force attack them from the west bank. A ferocious fight take place all day long.

In the battlefield of Chittagong, Muktibahini free few more regions south to Kumira. In the evening, the freedom fighters attack Vatiari, the first protective defence region of Chittagong city. The skirmish spread out till Fauzdarhat.

The allied force advance towards Rangpur. They cordon the town. They schedule to attack the Rangpur cantonment the next day. But that was not necessary as the Pakistan troops already surrendered.

The allied force attack on Kamarkhali Pakistan army base in Faridpur region. The military start to retreat towards Faridpur town. The allied force chase and corner them. The military, led by a Pakistani major general, eventually surrender.

Dr Alim Chowdhury is an eye specialist. He takes life risks to help the freedom fighters. Al-Badr assassins brutally gouge his eyes and kill him. Maolana Mannan, who used to live at Alim's residence, helped the collaborators to catch Alim.

Indian fighter jets seen in the sky of Dhaka. Governor Malik with his cabinet and military advisors are busy in a meeting in the Governor House. The jets drop bombs on it. Malik runs into a trench to take shelter.

General Manekshaw advises the Pakistan commanders for the final round, saying, "This is the last time; any more attempt of resistance will be meaningless. Dhaka garrison is absolutely under our artillery range."

Pakistani troops start surrendering their weapons in the battlefields. Pakistani division and brigade HQ in Bogra fall within the afternoon. 1,700 Pakistani personnel surrender. The allied force recover huge amount of arms and ammunition.

Captain Mohiuddin Jahangir escapes from Pakistan and joins the Liberation War at sector 7. He takes a bullet in his head while crossing the Mahananda River in Chapainawabganj during an operation. He was posthumously awarded the title 'Birsrestha' after independence by the Bangladesh government.



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