

The guerrilla of Garo hills

Indigenous freedom fighter recounts the struggle for independence

HASAN MEER and MATHEWS CHIRAN, back from Madhupur

Every day at the break of dawn, Albert Mrong sets out from home on his bicycle with a bag full of medicines. He rides over the uneven terrain of Madhupur -- surrounded by banana orchards -- stopping at homes of worried villagers and giving them necessary vaccines and antidote for their cattle.

For people of Kakragani and surrounding villages, this 66-year-old man is a friend in need, as communications there still remain quite challenging.

But the rugged landscape, lack of basic amenities or everyday struggles do not bother Albert, who has been helping villagers for decades. He is, after all, quite familiar with the terrain and loves the land he calls home.

And for the love of this land, he took up arms around 48 years ago and fought for its independence in 1971.

But to get him to share his experience with this newspaper was anything but easy. These correspondents had to persuade his family members to convince Albert for an interview. They finally agreed and invited us to their home last week.

By the time we reached their tin-roofed clay house after a journey by bus, auto-rickshaw, van and foot, it was almost 1pm. The quaint little place is surrounded by wood apple, date, coconut and banana trees.

Albert was out distributing veterinary drugs while his wife, Alpana Mree, just got back from Kakragani Primary School. Seeing us, the headteacher lit up a fire with timbers.

"My husband always says he did not fight for any reward. We even had to force him to take the allowance [for freedom fighters] to support the family," said the mother of three, as she chopped vegetables.

The clinking of a bike bell signalled that Albert was back from his daily round.

It was clear a hard life has taken a toll on his body, but not his spirit. May be it was the approaching Victory Day that motivated him to share his experience.

"I was 17 and studying in Mymensingh town when the war broke out. My father decided to take refuge in India. Our family along with many others went to the Garo hills of Meghalaya through Haluaghat border."

But Albert could not just sit idle.

"It was April. Bangabandhu, through his fiery address, had already made the clarion call to fight against Pakistani occupation forces to achieve our long-cherished independence," he said.

Albert, who was involved with

student politics [Chhatra Union], said he was shocked by the brutality unleashed by the Pakistan military junta through "Operation Searchlight".

"I mobilised other Garo youths," he said. "There were around 40 of us, around the same age and eager to fight for the country."

But he also had to convince his family, who were far away from the war. "I told my father he had more than one son, and could sacrifice one for the country."

"We joined an Indian camp in Meghalaya and trained for a month. We were divided in three companies of around 100 each -- from surrounding areas and different backgrounds."

Afterwards, they formed a base

injured. We had to swim almost the whole night, and were finally able to enter the mountains through the west."

"After that, we became more cautious. William Mrong became our new commander. Dr Mrong recently passed away at a Dhaka hospital," he went on.

During July and August, Albert and other guerrillas were able to successfully ambush the enemy in Tarakanda, Phulpur, Narandi and other areas.

"By the time it was August, we decided to walk around villages brandishing our firearms, to let people know that freedom fighters are with them, and are not afraid of the occupation army or their collaborators," he went on.



Albert Mrong and Alpana Mree.

PHOTO: STAR

in a mountain beside Dalu village in Meghalaya, from where around 10-15 used to enter Bangladesh and supply arms to freedom fighters on a regular basis, he said.

"We conducted guerrilla operations from the hills. Our target was to disorient the opposition forces. We were quite successful at it too. We were agile and knew the terrain well. We blew up quite a few bridges, laid landmines and guarded the hills. Locals also assisted us in our operations," recalled Albert.

As the war raged on, they decided to step up their efforts.

In May, around 53 of them travelled to Sherpur, and took shelter at a village.

"We were greeted by villagers. We had a hearty meal there after a long time. But after dinner, while resting, we suddenly heard loud noises. The occupation army had surrounded us. Someone must have tipped them off..."

"Bullets were flying everywhere. There was a canal behind the house; we jumped into it while they kept on firing."

"We lost three of our comrades, including company commander Nazmul, that night. Many were

"We did that for two weeks. There were 16 of us, including William, Sheikh Shawkat, Protut, and me."

The war intensified in October/November. "By this time, we were facing the enemy head to head with the help of Indian army. There were casualties on both sides, but we did not falter."

"Though the Pakistani troops managed to enter Mymensingh town in late April, they never could capture the hills or bordering areas. We made sure of that. We always kept them on their toes with our sneak attacks."

In November, Albert continued, freedom fighters along with Indian army attacked a strong Pakistan army base at Telikhali. "It was a planned and coordinated strike. We launched simultaneous attacks from three sides -- Karaitala, Baghaitala and Ramchandrakura."

"I was part of a back-up party that guarded the east side. We fought the whole night. After one point, it was all a haze. I remember, I just kept on firing at the enemy from a bunker."

"Around dawn, the occupation army surrendered. We lost many good men that night, at least 26 of

them. Shawkat died in my arms. The enemy suffered heavy casualties too. Over a hundred of them died that night."

After that fight, the tide started to turn.

Pakistan army had camps in Shalchura, Nakshi, Haldigram, Tawakucha and Mullah Para in Jhenaigati of Sherpur. "By early December, most of those were captured."

On December 7, Haluaghat was freed from the occupation forces. The next day, Phulpur and Bhaluka upazilas were freed, followed by Gouripur, Trishal, Ishwarganj and Tarakanda.

On December 10, freedom fighters, led by Principal Motiur Rahman -- former president of the district unit of Awami League -- and Indian allied forces marched towards the district town and freed it.

"Then came the cherished moment -- December 16 -- we achieved our independence after a ninth-month Liberation War. It's hard to express how we felt. We were shouting "Joy Bangla", hugging each other and crying our hearts out."

A NEW BATTLE

"I surrendered my arms soon afterwards. But there was also a sense of uncertainty. I just got back from a long war, and wasn't sure what to do or how to cope with everything. After a couple of months, I decided to go back to college. Slowly my life started getting into shape."

But little did Albert know he would have to take up arms again and fight another war.

"For me, everything changed in 1975. It was the month of August. We heard about the assassination of Bangabandhu and how Khandaker Moshataque Ahmed had grabbed presidency and declared martial law."

"I couldn't believe it. They killed Bangabandhu! I became restless. For the next couple of weeks, life was at a standstill."

"We heard Kader Siddiqui and his followers were organising attacks on the Moshataque-led government. I along with others decided to join them. Once again, we crossed the border and went to Assam and operated from a bordering base there. We were also supported by India's Border Security Force."

"The insurgency against the military government lasted more than two years. Over a hundred of us died and many more were injured during that period. But it was not coordinated like the Liberation War, and eventually lost steam."

With the country not the same after the assassination of Bangabandhu, Albert decided to remain in India.

SEE PAGE 4 COL 1

Construction of Sheikh Russel School at RU comes to a halt

BCL leaders of the university accused of extortion

RU CORRESPONDENT

Leaders of Bangladesh Chhatra League's Rajshahi University (RU) unit allegedly halted construction work of Sheikh Russel School at the university campus yesterday, as the contractor did not pay extortion to them.

Momtaz Uddin Don, a supervisor of the construction work, told The Daily Star that Golam Kibria and Faisal Ahmed Runu, president and general secretary of RU BCL, had been attempting to extort Tk 30 lakh as their firm is in charge of the construction project, worth Tk 10 crore 59 lakh.

The four-storey school is being built in front of Zuberi Building on the campus. Sikder Construction started the work in July 30, said Momtaz Uddin.

He said, "In the first week of August, BCL president and general secretary with five to seven other leaders came to the project site and asked why we started the work without informing BCL leaders. Then they demanded Tk 30 lakh."

"I told them they cannot demand such money, and the school is named after the prime minister's brother Sheikh Russel. They left the place but warned us not to start the work until their demand is met," said Momtaz.

Since that day, BCL leaders have been visiting the site and continuously threatening them for the money as they did not stop the work, alleged Momtaz.

Meanwhile yesterday, two BCL leaders allegedly came to the site and again told workers to stop the construction. When they

SEE PAGE 4 COL 2

'A people's mayor'

Mohiuddin Chowdhury remembered in Ctg



STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

ABM Mohiuddin Chowdhury dedicated his life to the development of Chattogram, said speakers at a discussion yesterday.

The event was held to pay tribute to the late Awami League leader and former three-time mayor of port city on the occasion of his second death anniversary. Chattogram city unit of Awami League organised the programme at a convention centre in the city.

Speaking as chief guest, member of AL advisory council Amir Hossain Amu said Mohiuddin played a strong role in Chattogram's development.

He loved Chattogram and Chattogram loved him. He did not accept the presidium membership offer from the party as he said he would always stay here, Amu added.

CCC Mayor and general secretary of Chattogram city unit of AL AJM Nasir Uddin said Mohiuddin was an uncompromising leader

SEE PAGE 4 COL 5

Diagnose early to treat cancer

Bangladesh Cancer Aid Trust launched

CITY DESK

To support the fight against cancer, Bangladesh Cancer Aid Trust (BANCAT) started its operations through an official launch event on Saturday. With emphasis on the values of care, strength and hope, the nationwide community-based voluntary organisation aims to promote cancer prevention through research, education, and advocacy, said a press release.

Speaking at the event, Rokia Afzal Rahman, president of BANCAT, said early diagnosis can make cancer treatment possible. "With this goal in mind, we want to extend a



PHOTO: COLLECTED

helping hand to all underprivileged people of Bangladesh with advice and assistance on cancer," she added.

She urged all to participate in the BANCAT initiative.

At the inauguration, Sadia, a 10-year-old girl with cancer, sought medical assistance.

The event also featured artworks by renowned Bangladeshi artists put on sell to help raise funds.

Najmus Ahmed Albab, founder and trustee of the organisation, spoke from his experience as a cancer survivor. "I have been diagnosed with cancer. But after early diagnosis, I was able to recover. But how do people in my country fight the disease, especially those who are underprivileged? The foundation was formed out of this specific thought," he said.

The event was also attended by Joao Tabajara de Oliveira, Brazilian ambassador to Bangladesh; Zeeshan Hasib, joint treasurer of BANCAT; trustees Rumana Ahmed, Sarwat Siraz, Sabrina Shaheed, and Mahzabin Ferdous; and Maqsud Ahmed Khan, director of Golden Harvest, among others.

'DECEIVING PASSENGERS'

4 railway staffers suspended

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh Railway has suspended four of its staff members allegedly for deceiving passengers in Dinajpur Railway Station for three consecutive days.

The four showed all tickets of December 3-5 sold out, but an investigation found that many remained unsold.

"Despite having vacant seats, a notice was put up at Dinajpur station, saying all tickets were sold out... they cheated passengers and it was a conspiracy against Bangladesh Railway," said a press statement of the railways ministry, issued yesterday.

The four are: Station Master Shankar Kumar Ganguli and booking assistants -- Abdul Al Mamun, Rezwan Siddique and Abdul Quddus.

Upon receiving the complaints, Railways Minister Nurul Islam Sujan ordered an investigation, and a probe found it true.

The team found that a notice was displayed at the station, stating that all tickets of December 3-5 were sold out. But the investigation showed that a total of 1,821 tickets out of 2,908 for December 3-6, were sold out and 1,105 remained unsold.

The four were found involved with the "conspiracy".

Following directives of the minister, the four were suspended, said the press release.

People in local stations often fail to buy tickets online or from stations and have to resort to scalpers and end up purchasing tickets at a higher price. In many cases, railway staffers have been found involved with scalping.

Newlywed

woman

murdered

in Ctg

Husband on the run

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

A woman was found murdered at her residence in Chattogram city yesterday, 15 days after she had got married.

The throat of Surma Akhter, a readymade garment worker, was slit, said Inspector (investigation) Gazi Fouzul Azim of Bandar Police Station.

Her husband Md Javed, a driver by profession and hailing from Jhalakathi, has been on the run since the incident, said the inspector.

Yesterday morning, Javed phoned one of Surma's cousins saying that his wife was sick, Sub-Inspector Abdul Gafur quoted the cousin as saying.

Inspector Fouzul Azim said the body was recovered from the couple's rented house, on the top floor of a four-storey building at Bandar East Colony in the port city around 11am.

SI Gafur said Surma and Javed rented one of their three rooms to one Didarul Alam, a Chittagong Port employee, after their marriage held on December 1.

Didarul, who lives there with his family, was being interrogated, said the SI. They were trying to arrest Javed, he added.

The body was sent to Chattogram Medical College morgue for autopsy, said the police officer.



Locals surround a large puddle at Cheragi Pahar intersection in port city, cordoned off by Wasa after an underground pipe cracked around 8am yesterday and started leaking. According to locals, the incident took place while workers were installing cables there. When this photo was taken in the afternoon, Wasa workers were still fixing the leak.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

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