

Govt making armed forces stronger, time-befitting: PM



UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday said the government wants to develop a professional and well-trained armed force for Bangladesh to keep pace with the constantly-changing world.

"We're well aware of what is needed for the country and when, and we're taking measures accordingly...we

want to develop a professional and well-trained armed force," she said.

The PM was addressing the graduation ceremony of the National Defence Course (NDC) and Armed Forces War Course (AFWC) 2019 of the National Defence College at Sheikh Hasina Complex in Mirpur Cantonment.

She said the government is taking

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Of bravery, of Betiara

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while two teams with LMGs took position to cover them.

Suddenly, they heard a voice. "Halt," shouted someone hiding nearby.

"Hands up," came next. In no time, they realised it was an ambush by Pakistan occupation force.

Reading the situation promptly, Nizam Uddin Azad, who was leading the group crossing the highway, retaliated with firing his Sten gun. His fellow fighters followed suit; their weapons roared. Some Pakistani soldiers fell to the ground.

Thus started a fierce gunfight in which nine guerrillas laid down their lives for their comrades and for the motherland. Today it is known as the "Betiara War", one of the remarkable battles in 1971.

Ahead of this Victory Day, The Daily Star talked to three of the guerrilla fighters who took part in the battle that raged for half an hour on November 11.

"It's a success that majority of us could return alive from the ambush. Usually it does not happen in such a situation," said Yeafesh Osman, who led the guerrilla group.

"Within minutes after the shooting began, the Pakistan army surrounded us from three sides. Some of us laid on the ground while others got into a paddy field," said Yeafesh, now the science and technology minister.

"We fought but the enemies outnumbered us and fired relentlessly."

The enemy's reinforcement arrived and it was getting difficult for the freedom fighters to continue with the weapons they had.

"It was the bravery and sacrifice of Azad and others that saved us," said Yeafesh, who was the vice president of Buet Student Union in 1971.

Apart from Azad, Bashirul Islam, Zahurul Haque Bhuiyan (Dudu Mia), Shahidullah Soud, Abdul Kayum, Awlad Hossain, Sirajum Munir, Abdul Kader and Mohammad Shafiullah embraced martyrdom that day.

Azad was exceptionally resolute and ready to sacrifice anything for the motherland. During the training he wrote a letter to one of his friends.

"There is no time to feel upset. We have to prepare ourselves for dedicating our lives for our motherland. Any kind of weakness will not work for us," read the letter.

Another valiant fighter, Mahmud Selim, said, "Azad's weapon went out of order. After a while Pakistani soldiers caught him."

And then Dudu Mia was captured "Bol Pakistan Zindabad [say long live Pakistan]," shouted a Pakistani soldier in Urdu, as heard by fellow warriors who were still fighting.

But a defiant Dudu thundered "Joy Bangla", said Muhammad Hilaluddin, another fellow guerrilla.

On this day

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extend surrendering period for another six hours.

An hour later, two officers of India and Bangladesh, in a vehicle, hoisting a white flag, go to Niazi's headquarters with a letter from divisional commander of the allied force, General Nagra. The message reads: "Dear Abdullah, I'm here. You will now surrender to me. This is an order."

At around 1:00pm, General Jacob, chief of staff of General Aurora, commander general of the allied force, reaches Dhaka.

Later in the afternoon, a meeting is held at the General's HQ for preparing the documents of surrender. Niazi, Rao Farman Ali and Jamshed represent the Pakistani side while Jacob, Nagra and Kader Siddiqui are present on Bangladesh's side. It has been decided that General Aurora would sign the document on behalf of the victorious side while General Niazi would sign

for the defeated side.

Within an hour, General Jagjit Singh Aurora, General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of the Eastern Command of the Indian Army, accompanied by the chiefs of staff of Indian navy and air force reach Dhaka from Kolkata. Niazi receives and congratulates him.

Around 4:45pm, General Niazi reaches the Race Course. For the final time, soldiers from both sides offer him guard of honour.

At 5:00pm, General Aurora and General Niazi sit on a table in the Race Course. Aurora sits on the right side and Niazi on the left of the table. The instrument of surrender is ready. Aurora hands it to Niazi. At 5:01pm, Niazi signs the paper and officially acknowledges Bangladesh as a free, independent and sovereign state.

After the nine-month-long nightmare, people of Bangladesh become the citizens of an independent country, thus earning the power to control of their own fate.



A memorial commemorating nine freedom fighters who embraced martyrdom near this very spot in Cumilla's Betiara during the Liberation War.

PHOTO: KHALID BIN NAZRUL

Govt publishes list

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"We are publishing the names of Razakars, Al-Badr, Al-Shams and anti-liberation elements, who collaborated with the Pakistan army in 1971, on the basis of records preserved at the home ministry," Liberation War Affairs Minister AKM Mozammel Haque said at a press briefing.

This was the first of the phases in which the government will make public the names of Razakars, he mentioned.

"We published the names so that the next generation knows about the collaborators."

He said they are trying to collect more names of Razakars and other collaborators from different districts.

No name will be included in the list without verification and cent percent confirmation, the minister stressed.

Asked whether the list will be published as a gazette, he said it can be done if the nation demands so.

The Liberation War affairs ministry in May this year started the process of preparing the list of Razakars as per the recommendations of the parliamentary standing committee on the ministry.

In January 1972, the then Bangladesh government had enacted a law to try the collaborators and war criminals. After that, 37,000 people were arrested and sent to jail. About 26,000 were freed following the announcement of a general amnesty.

Around 11,000 were behind bars when the government of Justice Sayem and General Ziaur Rahman repealed

the Collaborators Act on December 31, 1975. An appeal spree and release of war criminals en masse followed the scrapping of the law.

REPETITION Following the publication of the list on the ministry website, several netizens told this newspaper that they found it disorganised and repetitive.

The list contained names of Razakars, members of the peace committees, collaborators who went into hiding after the Liberation War, and also those who are under investigation over crimes committed in 1971.

The name of Ghulam Azam, considered by many as the symbol of war crimes in Bangladesh, was mentioned at least five times in the list with the same address.

In July 2013, the ICT-1 sentenced Ghulam Azam to 90 years in prison for masterminding crimes against humanity, genocide and other wartime offences in 1971.

The tribunal observed that the 91-year-old Jamaat ideologue deserved the gallows but he was given prison terms considering his old age. He died in prison in October 2014 while his appeal with the Supreme Court was still pending.

Besides, the names of East Pakistan Muslim League (council) leader Khwaja Khairuddin and Muslim League leader Khan A Sabur were mentioned at least thrice with the same addresses.

Asked, the Liberation War affairs minister said they published the names

from the documents of the home ministry without making any changes.

"We will look into the complaints of repetition and disorganisation... We will fix those after scrutiny," he told The Daily Star.

LEGAL ACTION

Law Minister Anisul Huq yesterday said the investigation agency of the International Crimes Tribunal will scrutinise the list of Razakars and will decide on taking action against them based on the gravity of their crimes.

"The International Crimes Tribunal will conduct probe and decide who is to face action. If it finds evidence against anyone, the person will certainly be brought to book."

Anisul was talking to reporters after a meeting with visiting Nepalese Deputy Prime Minister Upendra Yadav at his office at the Secretariat.

FFS LIST ON MARCH 26 Speaking at the press conference, Mozammel said the final list of freedom fighters will be published on the Independence Day next year.

He said the list will be published after scrutiny at the upazila level.

"There are about 6.50 lakh names of freedom fighters on various lists as those are full of duplication. My name is on five lists. We are working to prepare a complete list without any duplication," he said.

At present, 201,461 freedom fighters across the country are getting allowances, he said adding that the number of freedom fighters is not more than 2.12 lakh.

Blood, sweat, tears

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In the very first para, he mentioned the horrific slaughter carried out by the Al Badr, referred to as "the fanatic types of Bengali [Bangalee] Muslims", and the armed Biharis, the Urdu-speaking people.

According to historic documents, infamous Al-Badr Bahini was formed with selected members of Islami Chhatra Sangha, the then student wing of anti-liberation party Jamaat-e-Islami, and played a key role in the wholesale murder of intellectuals on the eve of the victory on December 16, 1971.

"The tale of slaughter is big enough as it is, with the dead set at the intellectuals, and for some reason the doctors as well, together with plenty of ordinary Bengalis..." wrote Bishop Blair, then posted at St Thomas Cathedral, which had come under mortar shell attacks on the night of March 25.

A whole paragraph describes his concern about the reactions of the armed Biharis following the Pakistan army's surrender.

"...among the Biharis there were two types; one which would have accepted the situation and lived in peace with their Bengali neighbours, and the other which in the last days of the military regime were saying openly in the bazaar, 'Let us kill as many Bengalis [Bangalees] as we can while we can.'"

He narrated an incident when a riot broke out in Nawabpur in the last days before victory, between Biharis and Bangalees, which was later quelled by the freedom fighters and Biharis who were "saner".

On fears about reprisals, he wrote: "There is hardly a family in Bengal who is not mourning the loss of some relations and the loss of money or property. A complete amnesty would be psychologically impossible."

About the government steps in post-war Bangladesh, he wrote: "The government has announced that no one is to be punished without trial, and therefore no-one is to take the law into his own hands. This is the best that they can hope to do. Unless they promised punishment after trial, people would certainly take the law into their own hands."

He drew a vivid picture of the war-torn country, broken communication system, casualties of the Christian communities and missionaries, and the curfews towards the end of the war. 'LITTLE TO LOSE, ALL TO GAIN' He described the night of December 3, right before Indian fighter jets started bombing Pakistani military establishments in Dhaka.

The Bishop had gone for supper in Dhanmondi. The dean of St Thomas Cathedral, Father Simon Delves

Broughton, and his wife Marcia Delves Broughton were also out in Gulshan.

On his way back to the church, on Johnson Road in Old Dhaka, he found that the streets were quiet and dark; curfew was imposed and there was a blackout.

"So, I had to stay where I was. Simon made his way home in ignorance through the curfew. At 2:30am or so the fun began; sirens and then fireworks over the airport about a mile away from where I was. We did not get much more sleep that night."

Father Simon and Marcia still remember that night. Talking to The Daily Star over phone from the UK, the couple shared how the streets were full of soldiers but somehow, they managed to get back to the church safe and sound.

Blair's thoughtful insights is reflected in the para where he wrote about the broken morale of the Pakistan army.

"When you let an army loose to loot and plunder and murder and rape, and when for nine months their fighting has been against unarmed civilians, and only occasionally against the elusive Mukti Bahini, you cannot preserve their morale. I had felt sure all along that when it came to the test, they would find they had forgotten how to fight. All they wanted to do was to get home and enjoy their ill-gotten gains."

On the other hand, he lauded the courage of the members of Mukti Bahini. "Some had ten days training, some a month. They were taught how to use their weapons and the rest was left to their native wit. Desperate lads most of them who had little to lose and all to gain."

Talking about the last part of the Liberation War, he wrote "They [the freedom fighters] knew every move of the Pak soldiers. They knew exactly where Niazi was lurking; and they got the news through with surprising speed. The Pak army did not stand a chance. I wonder if Yahya has ever read a history book in his life. He behaved as if he hadn't."

In recognition to the newly independent Bangladesh, in the very last paragraph of the letter, he wrote, "We obviously cannot now be the Church of Pakistan, as this is no longer Pakistan. We shall let the dust settle and then we shall see. Temporarily we call ourselves the Church of Bangladesh, as we have to call ourselves something."

Father Simon D Broughton told The Daily Star that they even hoisted the Bangladeshi flag on the church compound when the war ended.

Bishop Blair's hope for the new country is reflected in the second last para, where he observed ardently:

"The future has terrible problems, and there are all sorts of possibilities.

But there always have been in this country. Life is never dull. But now they have won their independence; although they had valuable help in the end, the Bengalis have spent quite enough blood, sweat and tears. They can truly feel that the victory is theirs.

It has not been handed to them on a plate. There is a healthy determination to make their country a better one, and one where the poor are less poor and the rich less rich, and where corruption does not frustrate every effort to improve. Good luck to them, and may God bless them."

HOW WE CAME ACROSS THE NEWSLETTER?

The Scottish-Indian Bishop was a priest of Kolkata-based Oxford Mission. He was born in 1906 in India's Roorkee, where his parents worked as missionaries.

Until 1951 the Anglican Church in East Pakistan was under the Diocese of Calcutta. After 1952, Dhaka became a Diocese of the Church of North India, Pakistan, Burma and Ceylon, and Blair was consecrated as the first Bishop of Dhaka Diocese, according to the website of Church of Bangladesh.

Various documents show that he served in this position till 1975, when he returned to Kolkata where he died in 1991 at the age of 85. He lived in different districts of Bangladesh for about five decades.

According to Oxford Mission's website, during his term as a bishop, Blair wrote and sent out a lively and informal diocesan newsletter every few months.

A copy was sent out to his friend George Davey, who was the deputy high commissioner of the United Kingdom posted in the erstwhile East Pakistan between 1955 and 1958.

Davey's daughter Susan Moulds, who lives in Buckinghamshire in England in the UK, discovered the newsletter eight years ago, after her mother's death.

"My mother passed away in 2000 and left a lot of papers and documents. Recently, as my siblings and I went through the papers, we came across the newsletter," she narrated over phone.

She told The Daily Star that she was in the then East Pakistan with her parents as a child and remembers Bishop Blair as a family friend. Her mother had kept in touch with Bishop Blair even after they left Dhaka in 1959.

Susan shared her discovery with her friend Dr David Sherlock, an orthopaedic surgeon in Scotland, who in turn sent a copy of the newsletter to Dr Md Wahidur Rahman, a physician friend in Dhaka.

Dr Wahid forwarded it to a friend who works at The Daily Star. [Read the full newsletter online]

MADRID CLIMATE SUMMIT

Major states snub calls for action

COP25 falls short of what science says is needed

REUTERS, Madrid

A handful of major states resisted pressure yesterday to ramp up efforts to combat global warming as a UN climate summit ground to a close, angering smaller countries and a growing protest movement that is pushing for emergency action.

The COP25 talks in Madrid were viewed as a test of governments' collective will to heed the advice of science to cut greenhouse gas emissions more rapidly, in order to prevent rising global temperatures from hitting irreversible tipping points.

But the conference, in its concluding draft, endorsed only a declaration on the "urgent need" to close the gap between existing emissions pledges and the temperature goals of the landmark 2015 Paris climate agreement - an outcome UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called disappointing.

Many developing countries and campaigners had wanted to see much more explicit language spelling out the importance of countries submitting bolder pledges on emissions as the Paris process enters a crucial implementation phase next year.

Brazil, China, Australia, Saudi Arabia and the United States had led resistance to bolder action, delegates said.

"These talks reflect how disconnected country leaders are from the urgency of the science and the demands of their citizens in the streets," said Helen Mountford, Vice President for Climate and Economics, at the World Resources Institute think-tank. "They need to wake up in 2020."

The gathering had been due to end at the two-week mark on Friday but ran on for two extra days - a long delay even by the standards of often-torturous climate summits.

After final decisions were made, Chile's environment minister Carolina Schmidt - who served as president of the talks - said she was "of mixed emotions".

The country had earlier triggered outrage after drafting a version of the text that campaigners complained was so weak it betrayed the spirit of the Paris Agreement.

The process set out in the Paris deal hinges on countries ratcheting up emissions cuts next year.

The final draft did acknowledge the "significant gap" between existing pledges and the temperature goals adopted in 2015.

Nevertheless, it was still seen as a weak response to the sense of urgency felt by communities around the world afflicted by floods, droughts, wildfires and cyclones that scientists say have become more intense as the Earth rapidly warms.

Guterres, who opened the talks on Dec 2, said he was "disappointed".

"The international community lost an important opportunity to show increased ambition on mitigation, adaptation and finance to tackle the climate crisis," he said in a statement. "We must not give up and I will not give up."

Delegates drew some consolation from an agreement reached in Brussels last week by the European Union's 28 member states, bar Poland, to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050, under a "Green Deal" to wean the continent off fossil fuels.

Another factory

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one stairwell, officials said.

At least 19 people were working there when the fire broke out, officials said, quoting survivors.

Alamgir Hossain, a resident of the area, said he and several others rushed to the spot after hearing about the fire but couldn't do anything as there were flames near the staircase.

"People trapped on the second floor were screaming for help... Their bodies were recovered after the fire was put out," he added.

Another witness said, "We tried, but couldn't go upstairs due to the scorching heat and smoke from the flames. I went up to the first floor with an extinguisher, but had to retreat." Shamsunnahar, superintendent of police in Gazipur, said the factory only had one entrance and exit.

The factory management's negligence may have caused the tragedy, she added.

After the fire broke out, the victims went to the rear side of the factory where they died, she added.

Firefighters said the victims might have died of suffocation before the flames got to them.

A five-member committee was formed by Gazipur administration to investigate into the incident.

The committee has been asked to submit its probe report within 10 working days, said Deputy Commissioner SM Tarikul Islam of Gazipur.

Pronoy Bhusan Das, medical officer of Shaheed Tajuddin Ahmad Medical College and Hospital said two workers were treated with minor burns on their hands, legs and backs.

The administration announced that each family of the dead workers would be given Tk 25,000 for burial.