

50TH ANNIVERSARY OF MUJIBNAGAR GOVERNMENT FORMATION

An eyewitness account of the Mujibnagar government's swearing-in ceremony



R P SINGH

ON April 17, 1971, the provisional government of Bangladesh was sworn in. I was lucky to have witnessed the historic event

first-hand. India was monitoring the developments in Bangladesh, particularly Pakistan army's build-up, from March 1, 1971 onwards. India had apprehensions that Pakistanis might create some mischief on the International Border (IB) to draw away the attention of Bangladeshis. Therefore, from March 20, the Indian Army deployed some units (including my one) on the IB as a precautionary measure. The Indian Army's Wireless Experimental Units (monitoring enemy wireless transmissions)—due to being located on the high mountains of Meghalaya—picked up all the VHF wireless transmissions between Pak formations and units from zero hours on March 26. India, thus, knew about all the developments inside Bangladesh. All BSF BOPs along the Indo-Bangladesh border were alerted to be ready to receive political leaders, civil servants, and armed forces personnel from Bangladesh.

Tajuddin Ahmad, the second-most influential Bengali leader after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, along with Barrister Amir-ul Islam came to the Indian border via Kushtia. They reached Banpur near Chuadanga on March 30, and sent a message to Banpur BOP that two Awami League leaders wanted to cross over to India. This information went up the chain of command to BSF IG Golok Majumdar, who personally rushed to Banpur to welcome them. He took them to Kolkata. Information about Tajuddin's arrival was passed on to New Delhi. He was personally escorted to Delhi by DG, BSF KF

Rustomji by a special Indian Air Force (IAF) plane at night on April 1. In Delhi, they met other leaders who had reached there from Chattogram via Agartala.

Bangladeshi leaders met with Indira Gandhi on April 3 and asked for India's help in the liberation war, assistance in taking care of Bangladeshi refugees, and requested her to recognise Bangladesh as an independent and sovereign nation. She assured them of all possible help. During the second meeting with the Indian PM, a day later, it was decided that the provisional government of Bangladesh should be formed and installed at the earliest. After returning to Kolkata, Tajuddin embarked on a mission of collecting all leaders and arranging for the swearing-in ceremony. KF Rustomji and Golok Majumdar helped him in locating them. On April 11, when they were around Siliguri, Tajuddin Ahmad's pre-recorded message was broadcasted from the Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra. This was the first address to Bangladeshis by any senior leader after the Pakistan military crackdown on March 26. He said that a provisional government had been formed in the liberated zone in north-west Bangladesh, and announced the names of zonal commanders of the liberation forces of Bangladesh.

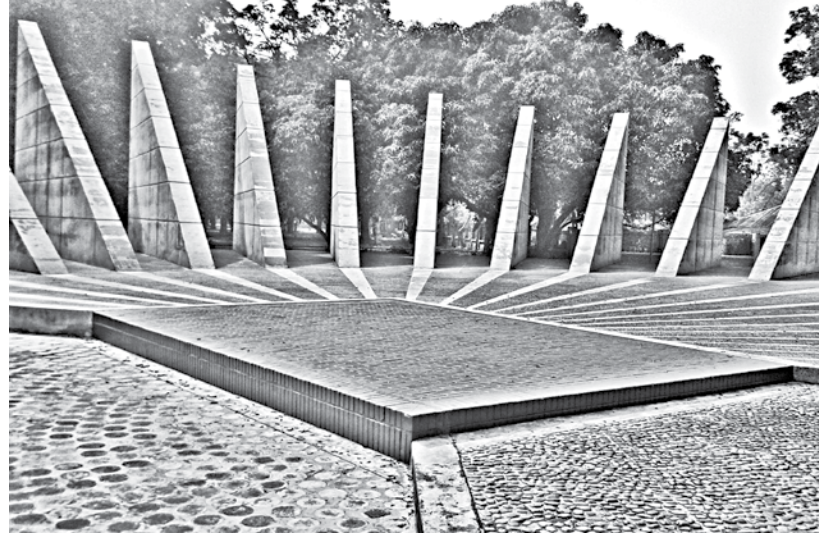
A press statement was issued on April 13 stating that, "A six-member war cabinet headed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman has been formed in Bangladesh with Nazrul Islam as Vice President and Tajuddin Ahmad as PM, which would guide and coordinate the liberation war."

Barrister Amir-ul Islam, then a young, dynamic Awami League, selected the village Baidyanathala in Meherpur district for installation of the government. It was rechristened as "Mujibnagar". I met Barrister Islam several times in 1971. In 2017, we met again after a gap of 46 years, and jointly recorded a programme on Ekattor TV that was anchored by his

charismatic daughter, barrister Tania Amir. We collected the events of March/April 1971.

Two major factors were kept in mind while preparing for the swearing-in ceremony—firstly, the venue was to be inside Bangladesh, and secondly, tight security arrangements were to be ensured. This was the first major event of independent Bangladesh and, therefore, Indira Gandhi wanted to ensure its success. Foolproof security was arranged jointly by the BSF personnel in civil clothes and the Mukti Bahini. In addition, army personnel in civil clothes were also deployed to thwart any possible mischief by the Pak army or its agents. I was one of those in charge of ensuring security for the swearing-in ceremony, in civilian clothes.

The rundown of the events is as follows: On April 15, 1971, the GOC 33 Corps came to my unit by road from Kolkata after meeting with Lt Gen. JS Aurora, GOC-in-C, Eastern Command. He was received by my CO and 123 Brigade commander and headed to the unit operational room. All other officers were told to leave as the three went into a huddle. The Corps and Brigade commander left after some time. Later, CO summoned the unit officers and asked them to prepare for operations. The next day, the army liaison officer, for coordination with IAF for ground support, and artillery officers reported. One field regiment was deployed west of the IB on April 16/17 night. CO issued orders to secure the area beyond Baidyanathala in civilian clothes along with Mukti Bahini members posing as BSF troops. An officer from military intelligence took me for reconnaissance on his civilian motorbike to identify the sites of deployment. All troops moved in the early hours of April 17 and secured the vantage points before first light. The IAF liaison officer and artillery Observation Post officers climbed the buildings or treetops to get a clear



The Mujibnagar monument with 23 pillars and a brick square in the centre, which marks the spot where the Mujibnagar government ministers took their oaths.

PHOTO: MASUM AL HASAN/WIKIMEDIA

field of observation. They carried out a silent registration of targets off the maps. Wireless sets were kept on the "Listening Watch", i.e. on complete radio silence, which meant that anyone could pass a message only on spotting enemy activity. Three "quick reaction teams" of one rifle company, each mounted in vehicles, were ready to meet any unforeseen eventuality. An IAF "combat air patrol" was airborne 1300 hours onwards till further orders. A dais for Bangladesh government functionaries, and chairs and tarpaulins for media persons and spectators were arranged by the BSF in civvies.

All members of the National and Provincial Assemblies who had crossed over to India were taken there by road. A large contingent of journalists was also taken from Kolkata that included some foreign journalists as well. The function commenced around 1530 hours BST. A march-past by Mukti Bahini and recitation of national anthem were the important features of the ceremony. The Proclamation of

Independence drafted by Barrister Amir-ul Islam was read by Professor Yusuf Ali on behalf of the people's representatives of Bangladesh. In order to keep similarity with Tajuddin Ahmad's broadcast on April 11, it was declared that this proclamation was made on April 10, 1971. After giving a brief background of events leading to the declaration, he said, "...declare and constitute Bangladesh to be Sovereign People's Republic and thereby confirm the declaration of independence already made by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman." The proclamation named Syed Nazrul Islam as Vice-President. He explained that if President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman "is absent, or cannot function or is incapacitated, Nazrul Islam would carry on the functions of the President." His address was followed by speeches by other government functionaries. The Mujibnagar declaration also named Khandakar Mushtaq Ahmed as Foreign Minister, AHM Qamaruzzaman as Home Minister, and Mansur Ali as Finance Minister.

Colonel MAG Osmani was appointed the C-in-C of Bangladesh Army. Other functionaries were also named.

The function went off smoothly and was over by 1830 hours. Nobody suspected the Indian army or BSF's involvement. However, some media personnel asked why the location of the venue was so close to the Indian border. Tajuddin Ahmad replied, "It was to ensure your and our safety." He then pointed to a road that passed by the dais and said, "You can go deep into Bangladesh along this route uninterrupted." That evening, we celebrated in the officers' mess where the CO told us that barring the Army Chief, Eastern Army, 33 Corps, 123 Brigade commanders and him, no one else was kept in the loop. The principle of informing only those who "need to know" was strictly followed. We were ordered to keep our mouth sealed as the involvement of India was denied by the government.

The office of Bangladesh government was located at 8 Theatre Road (now Shakespeare Sarani) in Kolkata although it was claimed at the time that it was functioning from liberated areas. A prominent citizen of Kolkata, Ashutosh Ghosh, welcomed the Mujibnagar government including members of the National and Provincial Assemblies to his big house. This building at Circular Road (now Moulai Road) has become a part of the history of the Liberation War. The announcement of the independence of Bangladesh was repeatedly broadcasted on All India Radio and Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra, which was heard in the whole of Bangladesh.

At that time, I did not realise that I had witnessed and participated in a historic event that would play such a big role in the glorious Liberation War of Bangladesh.

R P Singh, VSM is a retired Brigadier General of the Indian Army. He is a veteran of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, in which he was involved in different capacities from day one till the surrender of the Pakistan Army on December 16, 1971.

Time to declare a Republic Day in Bangladesh

ABDUS SATTAH MOLLA

ANY countries of the world have their "Republic Days". Some of these are "unique" in the sense that they are neither the Independence Day nor the Constitution Day. Some countries observe the day on their Independence Day while some on the day of the first functioning of the newly formed constitution of their state. The Republic Days observed in Italy (June 2, 1946), Iraq (July 14, 1958), the Islamic Republic of Iran (April 1, 1979), and Nepal (May 28, 2008) mark occasions when the concerned republic was first established as a sovereign state (Italy), left monarchism (Iraq), developed as an Islamic Republic (Iran) or reformed as a truly democratic state (Nepal). Countries like India and Pakistan observe their Republic Day on the day of the coming-into-effect of their first constitutions.

Bangladesh was born as an independent state through the Declaration of Independence on March 26, 1971 (hence, the Independence Day) and began its sovereign life after emerging victorious on December 16 (hence, the Victory Day). In between these days, the country fought a bloody nine-month war with the Pakistani occupation forces.



Acting President Syed Nazrul Islam speaking at the oath-taking ceremony of Mujibnagar Government on April 17, 1971.

PHOTO: ARCHIVES

Although fragmented "battles" with the occupation forces had started here and there after the brutal crackdown on unarmed civilians on early March 26, a more organised war effort ensued following the issuance of the Proclamation of Independence on April 10, especially after the formation of a provisional government for the People's Republic of Bangladesh and formal oath taking on April 17, 1971. Therefore, I propose that we should declare April 17 as the Republic Day of Bangladesh. Our Republic Day can be a unique one, distinct from our

Independence Day, Victory Day or Constitution Day (November 4, 1972).

The most important part of the Proclamation of Independence is where it says: "We, the elected representatives of the people of Bangladesh, as honour-bound by the mandate given to us by the people of Bangladesh whose WILL is supreme, duly constituted ourselves into a Constituent Assembly, and having held mutual consultations, and in order to ensure for the people of Bangladesh equality, human dignity and social justice, DECLARE and

CONSTITUTE Bangladesh to be a sovereign Peoples' Republic and thereby confirm the declaration of independence already made..."

Although this proclamation was made on April 10, 1971, the office-bearers of the new People's Republic took their oath a week later, on April 17. Thus, the Republic of Bangladesh actually started functioning on April 17. Therefore, in essence, it can be said that Bangladesh as a republic came into being on that day. It is only reasonable that we give this day its due recognition.

Successive governments of independent Bangladesh have so far observed April 17 as "Mujibnagar Day", a reference to the Mujibnagar provisional government formed on that day. There is nothing wrong with such observance, but in my view, it is not enough. In fact, I think it doesn't adequately capture the true significance of the day that goes beyond the formation of one government and actually marks the start of the journey of a republic. It is through the Proclamation of Independence by the public representatives of this new republic that the world came to know of us, our independence struggle, and the brutalities of the enemy we were facing. The world now knew who to interact with while dealing with the movement to free Bangladesh.

The formation of the republic, while clearing any remaining doubt about the legitimacy of our independence struggle, also greatly helped our war efforts by bringing the "fragmented" battles under a central command. Let me offer some more reasons as to why this day deserves reassessment to match its significance in our history.

We know that the declaration of independence was first made by Bangabandhu himself just after 12 am of March 26, 1971 as the Pakistani forces cracked down on unarmed Bengalis. Then this message was reiterated by Mr. Hannan of Chittagong Awami League via Swadhin Bangla Biplobi Betar Kendra around 7:40 pm of March 26. The following day, Major Ziaur Rahman "announced" the same message with military vigour and it further emboldened the general masses. I think if no government was formed and the liberation war was not organised centrally in the manner that it was, the unorganised battles taking place here and there would have failed to help us achieve victory.

Even if a "government" was formed but it was not helmed by leaders like Tajuddin Ahmad and Syed Nazrul Islam, as prime minister and acting president respectively, what would happen then? If someone else assumed the position of prime minister, say Khandakar Mushtaq

Ahmed or anyone else of the student leaders' choice, and somebody else other than Syed Nazrul Islam assumed the position of acting president, the nation could probably not have achieved freedom that year. Or worse, we might have been trapped again in the Pakistani net with the "governors" likely preferring a quick fix and forming a coalition with West Pakistan, as Mushtaq would probably choose to do. The point I am trying to make here is, not only was the formation of the government extremely important in the history of our republic, but those who led this government in exile—able lieutenants of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman whose vision they carried forward—were equally important in guiding us toward our destination.

By declaring April 17 as the Republic Day and celebrating it in a befitting manner, the nation can show proper respect to all our leaders—not just those in the government-in-exile but also those who executed their plans on the ground—and their enormous contributions to the building of this nation. There can't be a better time for such recognition than on the occasion of the golden jubilee of our independence.

Abdus Sattar Molla, PhD, is a retired professor of zoology. Email: asmolla@gmail.com

QUOTABLE Quote

DALAI LAMA XIV
Spiritual Leader of Tibet (1935—)

Happiness is not something ready-made. It comes from your own actions.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Emerald Isle city
- 7 Shoebox number
- 11 Morphine, e.g.
- 12 Hunted animal
- 13 Goose's mate
- 14 Script bit
- 15 Text additions
- 17 "You know how ..."
- 20 Different
- 23 Neither follower
- 24 Gaelic wailer
- 26 Mahershala of "Moonlight"
- 27 Ram's mate
- 28 Horace's "... Poetica"
- 29 Gets comfy
- 31 Carnival city
- 32 One of the

Down

- 1 Pound occupant
- 2 ... tree
- 3 Storage site
- 4 Stows cargo
- 5 Article
- 6 Notorious emperor
- 7 Breaks apart
- 8 Instrument on
- 9 Buddhist school
- 10 Retina setting
- 16 Music's Quincy
- 17 Laughable
- 18 Apartment sign
- 19 Mutton dish
- 21 Like Poe tales
- 22 Plant anew
- 24 "Twilight heroine
- 25 Stunned wonder
- 30 Wyoming range
- 33 Unhappy look
- 35 Distinct flavor
- 36 Notion
- 37 Force member
- 38 Log chopper
- 40 Unrefined
- 41 Pitcher's stat
- 42 Sun setting

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SUNDAY'S ANSWERS

P	A	T	H	S	O	M	E	G	A
A	F	O	O	T	R	E	L	A	X
R	A	N	T	A	N	D	R	A	V
T	R	I	G	E	E	N	E	D	
M	A	Y	A	S	R	E	T	R	O
A	G	E	D		S	C	R	A	P
N	O	S	I	R		E	A	R	L
A	B	E	M	A	R	N	B	A	
R	O	C	K	A	N	D	R	O	L
T	U	R	I	N		E	A	S	E
S	T	U	N	S		N	E	E	D

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

IT'S QUITTING TIME YOU JUST STARTED

I LIKE TO QUIT WHILE I'M AHEAD GET BACK HERE!

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

HOW'S YOUR FOOT TODAY? OKAY, I GUESS

I'D HELP YOU WITH THE DISHES, BUT THIS DAMN WALKING BOOT LIMITS MY MOBILITY.

I JUST HOPE I CAN DRAG IT ALL THE WAY BACK TO THE COUCH.

IT'S A WALKING BOOT, DARRYL, NOT AN IRON LUNG.