

The Chattogram Resistance

In an interview with Priyam Pritim Paul of The Daily Star, Major (Retd) Rafiqul Islam Bir Uttam, a Member of Parliament, and Commander of Sector-1 during the Liberation War, discussed some of the initial episodes of the Liberation War of 1971. Below are excerpts of the conversation.

Priyam Pritim Paul: Please briefly describe the developments in March 1971 before West Pakistan's crackdown on the Bengali nationalist movement.

Rafiqul Islam Bir Uttam: On March 1, 1971, Yahya Khan suddenly cancelled the inaugural session of the Pakistan National Assembly which was supposed to start just 2 days later, on March 3. People were expecting that the Bengalis would be able to form the government of Pakistan after a great victory in the National election in 1970.

This cancellation confirmed our suspicion that the Pakistan army would not hand over power to the Bengalis. Instead, they were sending troops from West Pakistan to East Pakistan. A ship named 'Swat' arrived at Chattogram port with 10,000 tonnes of explosives and other war materials. I was serving as Adjutant of the East Pakistan Rifles (EPR) in Chattogram at the time and was cautiously watching these developments.

I came to realise that the Pakistan army was strengthening their military strength in East Pakistan in order to unleash a genocide upon the Bengalis which could destroy the peoples' spirit for the next 50 or 100 years.

Priyam: How did you plan to attack the Pakistani forces in an act that is now considered dangerous, yet exceptional, in the history of our Liberation War?

Rafiq: I made a war plan based on the conviction that if we attacked them before they were ready, our chances of victory would be greater. So, the options were to either attack them first or wait and consequently be killed. Carrying out a pre-emptive strike against the Pakistanis meant that our chances of winning was greater.

Therefore, I gave directions to my EPR soldiers regarding the target and instructed them that once I gave them the order to attack, they should be fully prepared to attack and destroy the Pakistani's and take control of Chattogram city.

Chattogram sector of EPR had its headquarters in Halishahor. About 70 to 80 percent of the EPR soldiers were Bengalis. In

Sholoshahor, the 8th Bengal Regiment was made up of exclusively Bengali soldiers. Major Zia, Captain Khaleq, Captain Oli, Lt Shamsher, and Major Shawkat—all Bengali officers—were in 8 Bengal Regiment.

In EBRC (East Bengal Regimental Centre) in the cantonment, there were 1,800 Bengali soldiers who were either being trained or awaiting posting to different regiments. My plan was to take over Chattogram city, and later with the help of 8 Bengal Regiment and soldiers from EBRC the naval base, Chattogram Port and the Cantonment.

Priyam: Did you have discussions with political leaders regarding the plan?

Rafiq: I secretly met with the Awami League president of Chattogram, MR Siddiqui, on the night of 3rd or 4th of March with the help of a senior Awami League leader, Dr. Zafar. I told MR Siddiqui that I was planning for war and requested him to let Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman know about it.

I requested MR Siddiqui to let Bangabandhu also know that my father Mr. Ashrafullah, a government officer in Gopalganj in 1951-52, was known to him. After the historic and tragic day in our language movement on 21st February, 1952, Bangabandhu was released from jail on 27 February, 1952, and I had gone to greet Bangabandhu with some of my school friends from Gopalganj Model School. That was the first time I personally saw and met Bangabandhu. When MR Siddiqui delivered my message to him, Bangabandhu recognized my father and told MR Siddiqui 'he can be trusted'.

Bangabandhu's historic speech on the 7th of March at the Ramna Race Course Maidan sent a clear message to everyone—that people had to be prepared to make great sacrifices to achieve freedom. He declared, "The Struggle this time is for emancipations, it is for Independence.

On the 24th of March, the Bengali Brigade Commander in Chattogram was withdrawn and a non-Bengali, Brigadier Ansari, was given command. He ordered the unloading of arms and ammunition from the vessel MV Swat. Those Bengali workers and porters who tried to prevent the unloading were shot and killed. People in the city set up barricades all along the road.

I received this information through the intelligence unit under me and realised that the Pakistan Army was about to launch an attack and start a campaign of genocide on that night.

Orders were issued by me immediately to all Bengali soldiers in EPR to disarm the non-Bengali soldiers in the bordering EPR posts and come to take control of Chattogram city.

Having sent the orders, I went to the Railway Hill where I had planned to establish my headquarters during war. As I waited for my additional troops to come from the border areas to the city to join the battle, two Bengali



Syed Nazrul Islam, Acting President of the Bangladesh Government-in-exile, visiting Sector 1 at Harina on October 14, 1971. Major Rafiq, Sector Commander of the Sector 1, is seen on his left.

officers came to my headquarters at Railway Hill. One was Major Zia from 8th East Bengal and the other was Colonel Chowdhury from EBRC in Chattogram Cantonment.

"They enquired as to what was going on. I said, 'I have given orders to my soldiers to launch attack against the Pakistanis.'

"You can't do that because Bangabandhu is in the midst of negotiations with Yahya Khan."

"If we don't attack them first, we will never get a chance and will be the losers. We either make the pre-emptive strike and defeat the Pakistanis or risk being attacked and killed—with no hope of getting an independent country."

"Tonight we can't join you and attack the Pakistanis."

Unable to convince them to launch a pre-emptive strike, I sent a message to my Bengali soldiers to stop all military actions. By that time, they had wiped out all non-Bengali soldiers in the border outposts. That made me worried, and I was apprehensive of very grave consequences. Stopping all military actions stopped my soldiers from coming to the city, but what about the non-Bengali EPR soldiers who had been killed in action in Border outposts? The news would reach the Pakistan military; we would be arrested, court martialled and killed. In quick time.

Priyam: What happened after that night?
Rafiq: On the night of March 25, Awami League leader Dr Zafar came to me and informed that the negotiations between Bangabandhu and Yahya Khan had failed. It

was around 8:30PM.

Two days earlier, I had sent a message through MR Siddiqui to Bangabandhu that, in case of war, Bangabandhu could come to Chattogram city, form a government here and seek help from friendly countries. With my troops I could hold the city under control for 10 to 14 days. Later MR Siddiqui told me that the message had been delivered to Bangabandhu by him personally in Dhaka and Bangabandhu would send message at the proper time.

I then disclosed to Dr Zafar that I had already launched the war on the night of the 24th and requested him to go to Halishahor and talk to Major Zia or other junior officers to capture Cantonment and then join me to take over the port and the naval base. I had also planned that we would take defensive position on the banks of Feni and Muhuri rivers so that the Pakistan army from Dhaka couldn't come to recapture Chattogram. I sent a message to my loyal JCO's and NCO's to capture all the tactically important buildings along the main roads of advance and deploy weapons to attack the Pakistanis—should they even try to venture out from the naval base or cantonment.

Our initial pre-emptive strike against the Pakistan army was such a great success that it emboldened Bengali soldiers in the EPR as well as others—especially the Bengali population. Everyone's morale was high, and the Bengali nation realised that it could now hope to achieve freedom.

The Pakistan army had a plan up their

sleeves as well. They planned to launch an attack on us in Chattogram in the same way they did in Dhaka—capture the city and surroundings and carry out a genocide to subdue the population for decades to come.

In the early hours of March 26, I received a message through telephone that Brig Iqbal Shafi, Commander of the 53 Brigade in Cumilla, had left for Chattogram with nearly 100 vehicles and a big military force. I immediately asked Subedar Musa, one of the company commanders of my reserve force, to lay an ambush in Kumira area—just about 13 miles from Chattogram.

In the evening of March 26, 1971, the Brigade was within the well-laid ambush zone when Subedar Musa's force—which had taken position on the high ground of Sitakunda Hill Range—opened fire on Brig Iqbal Shafi's forces with LMGs, MGs, mortars and rocket launchers.

Taken completely by surprise, the non-Bengali soldiers of Iqbal Shafi ran for cover in the hills. By the time they could return fire, nearly 72 of the enemy officers and soldiers were dead, many injured and a number of their vehicles totally destroyed. Brig Iqbal Shafi narrowly survived but could not make much headway and remained stuck for the next three days. The Pakistan army's plan of an easy and quick attack in Chattogram and capture the city was a total failure, and we had won a brilliant victory which had great impact on the war.

Priyam: What is the significance of this initial war attempt?

Rafiq: Had I not made plans for war and executed the plan taking mortal risk, the Pakistan army would have launched a vicious attack and start the genocide for which they had prepared for over a month.

They did carry out a genocide in Dhaka where the EPR Head Quarter in Peelkhana, Rajarbag Police lines, Students Halls in Dhaka University and other areas came under attack.

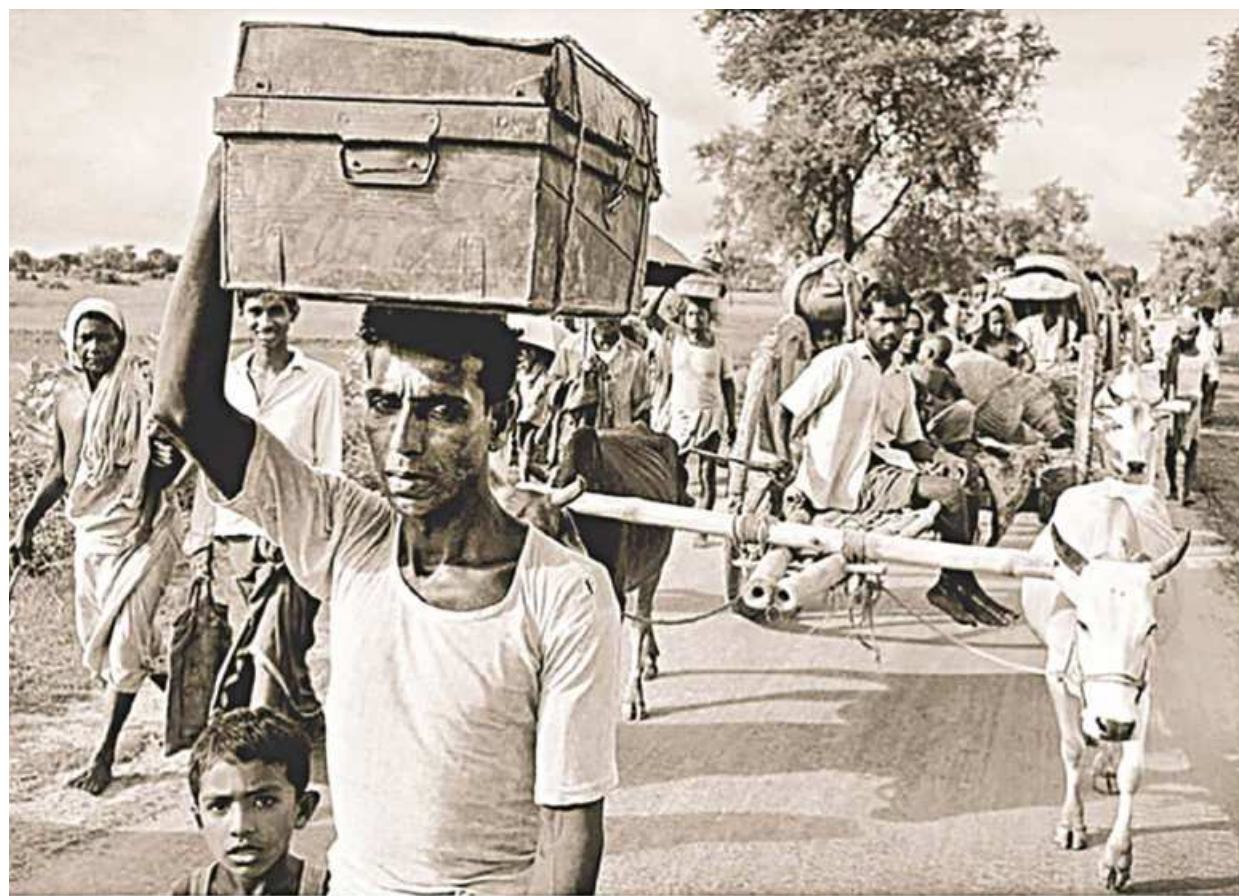
Because of our pre-emptive attack, the Pakistanis failed in similar sinister move in Chattogram.

The risks we had taken in launching a pre-emptive attack was a tide turning event in our history. Otherwise, the Pakistan army would have taken over the city of Chattogram and carry out a bloodbath on the Bengali population there.

Our success helped the Muktiyoddhas. They could quickly get organized and put up stiff resistance—inflicting heavy casualties on the Pakistanis.

We launched the attack on March 24, took control of Chattogram city on March 25, and our forces executed a successful ambush on March 26. All these acts proved to be of great historical significance that culminated in our victory on the 16th of December 1971. We raised our national flag in front of Chattogram Circuit House on the morning of 17th December, 1971.

Retracing the 1971 exodus



Bengalis fleeing for a safe refuge, 1971.

PHOTO: MARK GODFRET/MUKTIJUDHO E-ARCHIVE

DR. RUDABEH SHAHID

To commemorate the 50th anniversary of the victory that led to the birth of Bangladesh, attention should be paid to the devastating humanitarian crisis that unfolded during the nine-month war.

In addition, it is useful to understand this crisis in light of the ongoing Rohingya crisis, which unfolded more recently before our eyes.

The British had slit an undivided India with a 7,000 kilometre gash in August 1947. Pakistan may have been born along this artificially constructed border, but this led to deep wounds for many years to come.

Other than creating a refugee crisis during the partition of 1947, the British left the region in such a way that it generated subsequent refugee crises during the formation of Bangladesh, and in today's situation

concerning Rohingya refugees.

First, let us analyse the case of Bangladesh. As a response to the economic and cultural discrimination from the 1950s onwards, Bengali Muslims from East Pakistan began demanding more regional autonomy from the authorities of West Pakistan, leading to an ethno-linguistic shift in their identity consciousness.

The Pakistani military began a sweeping crackdown in its eastern wing in 1971 with the intention of suppressing dissent and stunting Bengali nationalism permanently. Around ten million people were displaced into India's border states as a result.

In the beginning, the Indian government provided hospitality to the refugees and trained many Mukti Bahini freedom fighters from East Pakistan, who fought the Pakistani army for nine months.

Subsequently, the Indian army

intervened militarily in East Pakistan, resulting in the Pakistani forces surrendering. India justified its military intervention with the argument that continual refugee flows into eastern and north-eastern India would create additional human suffering and further destabilise the region.

In spite of the USSR's backing, India's humanitarian intervention was not met with substantial support internationally.

A quick glance at the origins of the Rohingya crisis also point towards events surrounding the partition. In the time leading up to the partition of India, the Rohingya people of the adjacent Arakan province in colonial Burma hoped to join the future Muslim-majority province of East Pakistan, but were denied this opportunity.

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বিজয়ের গৌরবে ভালো থাকুক বাংলাদেশ ভালো থাকুন আপনিও

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প্রিয় বাংলাদেশের মাটিতেই।








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