

JANUARY 10, 1972

The day history was made

ENAM AHMED CHAUDHURY

Every moment of this day is vivid in my memory. January 10, 1972, the day Bangabandhu came back from prison to his freed motherland—to the nation which he had led to victory and independence, but from a distance. I was a witness to his great and historic return.

I would like to recount the days immediately prior to this unforgettable moment. We formally won the war on December 16, 1971, but the independent government did not quite start functioning immediately. The remnants of the old Pakistani administration continued to operate, but as a part of a new independent country—adjusting to the completely changed set of circumstances.

The first visible change occurred when the first main batch of officials of the new government started arriving. It appears to be incredible, the way the skeleton government structure started functioning almost automatically, but in an organised manner. Noorul Quader, Secretary, General Administration, however arrived a day earlier on December 17. He was sent primarily to organise the proposed first meeting of the Secretary General the next day. From the airport, he was picked up by Faruq Choudhury and brought to Surma, our family home in Dhanmondi. He requested me to inform some senior officials present in Dhaka to attend the next day's meeting, which I did. The batch of officials, comprising Ruhul Quddus, the Secretary General, Abul Fateh, MA Samad, KA Zaman, HT Imam, MA Khaleq and Anwarul Huq Khan, arrived in the forenoon of December 18. Ruhul Quddus held the meeting at the Secretariat that afternoon—the very first meeting of the senior officers present in Dhaka. SM Hasan, a senior ICS-CSP officer, who was not a Bengali, also attended the meeting. He declared his allegiance to the new government. In fact, he was known to have been sympathetic to the cause of Bangladesh and had chaired the meeting of the CSP Association (East Pakistan Chapter) in the second week of March 1971, where a decision was taken to cooperate with the transition process for the newly elected government led by the majority-leader in the Parliament, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. However, after the initial introduction, he left the meeting, saying that he would be available if called upon. A few decisions were made in the meeting, one of which was to have a seven-day working week for the time being from 9 am to 5 pm with an hour of mid-day break. Mr Quddus gave a few instructions on behalf of the new government.



The political leaders comprising Syed Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmad, Mansur Ali, AHM Qamaruzzaman, Khondaker Mostaq Ahmad, Abdus Samad Azad and others arrived on December 22, 1971. The old Government House, renamed Banga Bhavan, become the central headquarters of the government from where initially the Acting President Syed Nazrul Islam, and the Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad started operating. General Osmany, the C-n-C of the victorious Bangladesh Army arrived on December 24.

On December 27, Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad announced the expansion of his cabinet and on December 29, the portfolios were announced. Most significant was the appointment of Abdus Samad Azad as the Foreign Minister, in place of Khondaker Mostaq Ahmad, who got charges of Law, Parliamentary Affairs and Land Revenue. On January 4, a decision was taken by the prime minister to send a delegation to Delhi primarily to step up and mobilise international efforts to secure the release of Bangabandhu, to ensure urgent essential supplies to Bangladesh and to discuss

about planning for immediate rehabilitation of some disrupted sectors. Abdus Samad Azad, the new foreign minister, led the delegation comprising Mosharraf Hossain, Member, Planning Commission, Faruq Choudhury, Chief of Protocol and DG (Foreign Ministry Administration and Coordination) and Enam Ahmed Chaudhury, Joint Secretary, Commerce (additionally of Industries) and arrived at Delhi on January 5, 1972.

Sardar Swaran Singh, the foreign minister of India, was there at the airport to receive his counterpart. A few officials from the Foreign Office, Planning Commission and Commerce Ministry were also present. The visitors were accommodated at the state-run Hotel Ashoka.

The next day, January 6, the delegation led by the foreign minister called on President VV Giri, Foreign Minister Sardar Swaran Singh and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Mrs Gandhi expressed her earnest hope about the release of Bangabandhu, assured to extend all co-operation to the new government and wished success for the delegation. The Bangladesh delegation met, for the

first time, the Indian delegation led by DP Dhar, minister-level Chairman of the Policy Planning Cell at the North Block, and decided to break up into two groups to expedite work. One was the Foreign and Diplomatic Committee and the other was to deal with planning, economic affairs and commerce. Mani Shankar Aiyar, though from the Foreign Office, assisted and played an important role in the working of the Second Committee, along with me. Montek Singh Ahluwalia of the Planning Commission, who was a friend of mine from our Oxford days, also participated. That evening, Sardar Swaran Singh held a big dinner party for the delegation where the Indian C-n-C General Manekshaw (later field marshal) was also present. I recall, while Minister Azad was talking with a group, Defence Minister Jagjivan Ram called the Indian General to introduce him. The next day, the Bangladesh delegation heads held discussions with Finance Minister Chavan, Agriculture Minister Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, Defence Minister Jagjivan Ram, Industrial Development Minister Moinul Haque Choudhury and Irrigation Minister Rao. In the South Block Commerce Minister LN Mishra (who had state minister status), Planning Member Dr Shukhamoy Chakravarty and Joint Secretary Commerce Raghupati held meetings with the other group led by Prof Mosharraf Hossain. I was in this committee.

On January 8, while the official discussions were in progress, Mani Dixit of the Foreign Office dramatically announced that Bangabandhu had been set free and he was on his way to London on board a special flight of the Pakistan International Airways. We were all excited, and joy and jubilation knew no bounds.

The amicable discussions ended decisively. On January 9 the joint communique was announced, which included, inter-alia, clause 13. It said that both the governments categorically agreed to note that, on the request of the Bangladesh government, the Indian Army, which had been to Bangladesh to join the liberation forces in their war of independence, would leave from

Bangladesh as soon as the government of Bangladesh so desired.

It was also stated in the communique that prices for supplies from India would be determined at the prevalent international price. The silver Comet of the British prime minister carrying Bangabandhu touched down at Palam Airport, Delhi at 8.10 am, on January 10, 1972. That was a sight to remember, and it will remain culled in my memory forever. From the open door of the plane emerged Bangabandhu, a handsome, tall, erect figure with a smiling face and raised hands. And he loudly uttered Joy Bangla! Present at the airport were President Giri, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, members of her cabinet, heads of many diplomatic missions and hundreds of local and foreign journalists and photographers.

As the grey closed-neck suit and back over-coat clad President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman climbed down the stairs of the plane, 21 cannons fired loudly and many among the waiting crowd shouted "Joy Bangla". National anthems of the two countries, written by the same Bengali poet, were played by brass bands, and Bangabandhu inspected the guard of honour. In a formal statement Bangabandhu recalled his flight "from darkness to light, from captivity to freedom, from desolation to hope". He stated that within a short span of time, his "people have traversed centuries" and now he would come back to the country to "turn the victory into a march ahead on the road of peace, progress and prosperity". He said, "Truth has at last triumphed over falsehood, sanity over insanity, courage over cowardice, justice over injustice and good over evil."

He profusely thanked the people and the government of India for their support and co-operation in our war of independence and for their tireless efforts and sacrifices in our struggle to establish independent Bangladesh. He remembered his people, the Bengalees. He said, "When I was snatched away from them, they cried, they fought when I was in prison and now as I return, they stand victorious."

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An emotional moment at Tejgaon Airport, when Bangabandhu returned after a long imprisonment in West Pakistan. January 10, 1972.

PHOTO:
RASHID TALUKDER

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