



Soccer star-turned-soldier Hafiz Uddin Ahmad in Dhaka holding a portrait of himself in uniform. (Carney/Miklian 2021)



An aerial view of devastation in the aftermath of the cyclone that hit the Bay of Bengal in East Pakistan, November 1970. PHOTOGRAPH: HARRY KOUNDAKJIAN/AP

BHOLA CYCLONE AND THE LIBERATION WAR OF BANGLADESH

After the Storm

Dread didn't truly take hold of Hafiz until the wind shifted and he started to smell the devastation. It was faint at first—and almost sweet—but that didn't last. Notes of decay filtered in. The farther they travelled downriver, the more pungent and fetid the odour turned. This wasn't the smell of an odd corpse rotting on its own in one forgotten wallow. It had a darker character. It was the smell of mass death. When the boat approached a river bend, Hafiz made out another twenty bodies clustered in a cove, mixed in with rotting buffalo and goat corpses. He'd already seen as many bodies on this one short stretch of river as the papers reported dead in the whole country. And they were multiplying.

JASON MIKLIAN AND SCOTT CARNEY

Jessore Cantonment, East Pakistan
November 14, 1970
Two days after landfall

Hafiz Uddin Ahmad leafed through the stack of day-old newspapers in the officer's mess, scanning headlines in Bengali, English, and Urdu. He scrounged for details in articles that had precious few to give. Some papers said fifty dead. Others reported that a thousand people along the coast had perished. Hafiz guessed it was probably a lot more than that.

The night of the Great Bhola Cyclone, Hafiz had slept under a clear sky at Jessore Cantonment. Two years ago, he was one of the country's most popular football players. Now he was one of just a few Bengali officers in the entire Pakistan Army. The base was a hundred and fifty miles northwest of the Bay of Bengal and didn't see a single storm cloud that evening. His family, however, lived right in the cyclone's path, on Bhola, the next island over from Manpura. Worse, his father was in the middle of a busy reelection campaign—he was pushing Mujib's Awami League platform of Bengali self-determination and autonomy throughout his coastal district—and was likely to be away from home. Exposed.

Hafiz hoped his family was safe, but there was nothing he could do but wait for news. He reread the papers, hoping—and fearing—that he'd missed something. No luck. He finally gave up and went outside, where he watched the clouds grow thick, then gradually clear away into a perfect November breeze. The soldiers in front of him drilled lackadaisically. Hafiz was too distracted to reprimand them.

After a day of waiting and praying, a telegram arrived for him on yellow paper. It was from his mother. She never sent telegrams. Hafiz took a deep breath to calm himself before reading it.

Hafiz. Please come home. Many people dead. Including family.

storm's most violent winds thrashed the land. At Barisal, he caught a small ferry, which was currently the only vehicle able to navigate the narrow passages to Bhola. It was a four-hour journey.

He saw the first dead body about two hours after launch. It was a man's corpse, completely naked with fingers clenched toward the sky in some sort of grim repose. Hafiz motioned to the boatman, who simply nodded grimly.

The boat motored on. The engine's hum drowned out the sound of water lapping along the bow. Hafiz saw the next corpse just a few minutes later, followed by a trio of bodies—perhaps a family—caught in an eddy along the riverbank. It seemed that more people had died than the papers reported. A lot more. They'd only gone half of the way, and the number of corpses in the river seemed to grow exponentially.

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The clusters of bodies gave way to massive rafts of decay. The corpses of men, women, children, and animals, along with the flotsam of a thousand houses, clogged the waterway. At times, especially in the smaller channels, it was impossible to navigate through the water without corpses thumping against the aluminum frame. The boatman was careful to slow down when he got near women's bodies, lest their long, tangled hair get stuck in the propeller.

Though it only took four hours, Hafiz felt he'd aged a year when he finally arrived at the ghat at Bhola Island. He desperately scanned the motley group of survivors for familiar faces, then when he saw his father, a man in his fifties with a regal demeanor, waiting in a hastily assembled shed by the boat launch, Hafiz's face cracked into an impossible smile.

His father smiled back, with perhaps a hint of pride creeping into the corners of his mouth, at the sight of his son in a crisp officer's uniform.

"How did you survive?" Hafiz asked. "I was on the roof of the Arzu Hotel," his father replied. The Arzu was a dilapidated tin-roofed hotel-restaurant, which just happened to be the tallest building on this part of the island. "I was there all night. I was safe, but there was nothing I could do to help our people. My sisters died. Our village is... gone."

His father then explained that Hafiz's uncles, cousins, sisters, and brothers—at least twenty of his family members—were gone without a trace. His grandmother had only survived because her servants tied her to a tree. Over the course of the storm, she watched them all drown, one by one.

Hafiz looked out at the sea of floating bodies. He'd seen enough to know that corpses littered more than just their small nook of the delta; they were scattered along its entire length—across dozens of islands and clogged channels. It would take more than a few families coming together to rebuild. Simply burying the dead would require the organizational capabilities of the entire nation. Hafiz stiffened his spine to the task ahead.

There was no telling how any of this might affect his father's chances of being elected a minister in the national election just a few weeks away. There

was no time to think about those things right now.

Hafiz felt his father's hand rest on his shoulder. He watched his dad studying his uniform in admiration. Hafiz felt it was the first time his father saw a man as he stared out at the wreckage, not a footballer.

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"It doesn't look so bad."

Gripping an ice-cold beer, Pakistan president Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan directed his casual assessment both to the pilot and to himself as they hummed around in a Fokker Friendship propeller plane three thousand feet above what was left of the East Pakistan delta. Yahya took a swig and peered out the window again. Only the occasional palm tree jutting above the water pierced the rice paddies.

Yahya chuckled the empty out the window then reached for another. He drew the aluminium hoop back with a pudgy finger adorned with a dictator-size ring. Reports estimated that 500,000 people might be dead from the Great Bhola Cyclone, making it the worst disaster in human history.

Yahya thought the whole flyby was a

Kissinger, next year. Yahya expected that the trip would be a raging success: China would welcome Nixon with open arms and sign some impressive trade agreements that would make Yahya look like a major dealmaker who pulled his country's economy out of the doldrums.

Mao knew that Yahya was the impressionable sort and that every minute of his experience would be relayed back to Nixon, so he pulled out all the stops. He threw an impossibly lavish welcome party.

In a bid to sweeten whatever diplomatic offering might come of their relationship, Chinese emissaries plied Yahya with liberal helpings of liquor, women, and compliments. Yahya didn't realize until too late that he'd walked into an ambush. The regal welcome quickly gave way to a daylong scolding by Premier Zhou Enlai, who made it clear to Yahya that any meeting with the Americans was going to happen on China's terms or not at all. Yahya hadn't told a soul in his delegation about the secret agenda of his visit, so he was alone with his wits while Zhou had an army of advisers at his disposal.

The talks dragged into a second, then

Yahya needed some way to show the people that he was the man they needed most—the only man who could save them.

Yahya needed a miracle. As day three of Yahya's talks with Zhao neared its end, a staffer wearing a squarish, ill-fitting suit that epitomized Pakistan's sluggish bureaucracy, interrupted the president's rambblings. He waved a telegram in Yahya's face. The exact text is lost to time, but it likely would have had something typed out about a once-in-a-lifetime storm hitting East Pakistan.

Yahya couldn't believe his luck. The cyclone news added the very sense of urgency to the China talks that he'd been trying—and failing—to achieve. He immediately told Zhao, who shared the news with Mao. Both men were concerned about the storm's impact, so they relented on their posturing and offered to get at least the economic trade package squared away. After that, Mao relented on the military deal, which to be honest was in both their interests anyway.

His confidence suddenly bolstered, Yahya turned on the charm for his coup de grâce, and even Mao succumbed to Yahya's silver tongue and infectious smile. He convinced Mao to start secret communications with Nixon, under two conditions: First, the only communication would come through secret couriers; letters; and second, those could only go through Yahya himself. The telegraph had turned everything around.

While the cyclone might have saved Yahya's hide, that didn't necessarily mean he thought it worth touring its aftermath a few days later. The whirl of the propellers just a few feet away gave him a headache that beer wasn't powerful enough to numb, and the wind scuffed the thick waxed eyebrows he took such great care to shape. He tried anyway, downing the entire six-pack in the hour they circled. This whole cyclone business seemed blown out of proportion. Hell, one hit the coast two months earlier and only killed a few people. The delta always recovered.

He glared down at the black flecks of corpses bobbing on the surface of the water. The pilot suggested landing for a closer look at the damage. Yahya recoiled. He had no interest in stumbling over debris in front of some destitute peasants who would just claw at his suit. The press knew that he'd seen some of the devastation himself, maybe that would be enough.

They flew back to Dacca. Yahya boarded his personal plane for Islamabad without leaving the airport—or meeting the officials tasked with the Bhola response. He refused to declare East Pakistan a disaster area or worthy of a national emergency, two actions that would have allowed the local government to reallocate their meagre resources to relief.

Yahya had more important things to worry about: spectacular news that he wanted to telegram to President Nixon as soon as possible. Abandoned by Yahya, the first responders held a press conference later that day, asking the journalists in the audience what they should do.

The presser ended with journalists and bureaucrats walking out of the room together in a confused, dreadful silence.

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The above mentioned writers are the authors of the book, titled The Vortex: The True Story of History's Deadliest Storm and the Liberation of Bangladesh, HarperCollins India(2022). This article is an excerpt from the book.



President Yahya Khan and President Richard Nixon along with their wives at a state dinner in Lahore, West Pakistan, August 1, 1969. (Nixon Library/National Archives)



President Yahya Khan with Chou En Lai in Beijing, 1970.