

# The Heroic Role of the BMA, UK in 1971

**The Bengali doctors swiftly coalesced, recognizing the imperative for a unified effort to support the liberation war. The pivotal moment arrived in April 1971 with the establishment of the Bangladesh Medical Association U.K.**

PRIYAM PRITIM PAUL

In 1971, in England, a small group of Bengali doctors from then East Pakistan were immersed in their studies. Amidst the pursuit of their academic dreams, they found themselves attuned to the dynamic political landscape unfolding in East Pakistan. The resonance of the non-cooperation movement reverberated among them, gaining momentum with each passing moment. As the movement crescendoed to its peak, a realization dawned upon them – an awareness of the potential for the Pakistani Junta to suppress the movement through force and violence. In the face of these challenges, their spirits ignited with a shared determination to stand against oppression and advocate for justice.

Just like their fellow expatriates, the Bengali doctors from then East Pakistan were abruptly confronted with the shocking events of the night of March 25 in Dhaka, learning of the harrowing experiences through various British newspapers and the BBC. This catalyzed a swift response among them, leading to regular meetings in London with known doctors, and engagements with other Bengali diaspora groups. Detailed updates on the situation trickled in from the BBC, newspapers, and clandestine sources within the country.

In the wake of this collective awareness and growing sense of responsibility, the Bengali doctors swiftly coalesced, recognizing the imperative for a unified effort to support the liberation war. The pivotal moment arrived in April 1971 with the establishment of the Bangladesh Medical Association U.K. The distinguished Late Prof. Saidur Rahman, an Ophthalmologist from Diabetic Hospital, Dhaka, assumed the role of President, while the renowned Late Dr. Zafarullah Chowdhury took on the responsibilities of the secretary. Dr. Kazi Kamruzzaman, a member of BMA, UK, leased offices at No. 26 Delync Street, a prime location in the heart of the City of London, solidifying their commitment to the cause.

The primary objectives of this association extended beyond medical-related concerns; they encompassed various insightful initiatives. These included:

a) Establishing contact with all Bengali doctors situated in the UK and

other countries worldwide.

b) Engaging in communication with the Bangladeshi Government in exile in Calcutta.

c) Disseminating information globally about the liberation movement in Bangladesh.

d) Shaping worldwide public opinion regarding the Bangladesh liberation movement.

e) Collecting and dispatching financial aid, clothing, and medicines to various refugee camps in India.

f) Coordinating medical arrangements for freedom fighters, dispatching medicines, medical equipment, and doctors.

g) Maintaining regular contact with members of the House of Commons and House of Lords.

h) Sustaining connections with the recently formed Bangladesh Action Committee and Steering Committee under the leadership of Justice Abu Sayeed Choudhury to foster collaboration.

i) Establishing communication with expatriate Bengali diplomat Mohiuddin Ahmed and, with his assistance, liaising with various embassies, particularly for sending medicines, clothing, and covert war materials to India through the Indian Embassy and Air India.

Dr. Zafarullah and Dr. Mobin initially journeyed to India under the auspices of BMA, UK, primarily to provide medical assistance to freedom fighters. Concurrently, Dr. Kamruzzaman and Dr. Altaf Rahman assumed the responsibility of maintaining communication with them, facilitating correspondence as mandated by the government in exile.

Beyond dispatching conventional supplies like clothing and medicines, they sourced and sent specialized items crucial for the liberation war, such as night vision spectacles, special binoculars, gas masks, and bulletproof vests. These materials were sourced from Marseille, France, and, with the approval of the Government of England, were transported by Air India to the Government of Bangladesh in exile in Kolkata through the Indian Embassy channel. Kamruzzaman and Altaf undertook these tasks on behalf of the organization.

Simultaneously, BMA, UK took on the commitment of funding and equipping the Bangladesh Field Hospital established in Sector 2 for the treatment of freedom fighters. Dr. Kamruzzaman and Dr. Altaf played a key role on behalf of BMA, UK in fostering unity by mediating differences during the meeting. At the Coventry gathering, the Bangladesh Action Committee and a compact 5-member Steering Committee were established, with Justice Abu Sayeed Choudhury appointed as the advisor. Acting as the organization's representatives, Kamruzzaman and Altaf were entrusted by BMA, UK to liaise with the Steering Committee, situated on Goring Street in London, and diplomat Mohiuddin Ahmed, a representative of the government-in-



PHOTO COURTESY: CAPTAIN (RETD.) DR. SITARA BEGUM

## Bangladesh Hospital at Bishramganj.

Dr. Zafarullah, representing BMA, UK, played a pivotal role in communication on this front. Dr. Kamruzzaman and Dr. Altaf received the assignment of coordinating the provision of funds, equipment, medicines, and other necessities to the Bangladesh Field Hospital in Sector 2.

During this period, Justice Abu Sayeed Choudhury assumed the role of Special Envoy of the Government of Bangladesh in exile to the UK. Despite some disagreements within the expatriate Bangladeshi community in the UK, a significant gathering took place at Trafalgar Square in the early stages of the Liberation War, in which BMA, UK actively participated. Subsequently, another meeting in Coventry aimed to reconcile differences among the Bangladeshis and garner collective support for the Liberation War, with Lulu Billik Banu presiding over the proceedings.

Dr. Kamruzzaman and Dr. Altaf convened with expatriate Bengalis and local British political and social leaders in various cities across the UK, including Birmingham, Cardiff, Glasgow, Newcastle, Manchester, etc. These meetings aimed to shape opinions in favor of the liberation war and garner donations for the government in exile and refugees. Monthly gatherings of doctors in the United Kingdom were organized, facilitating opinion-sharing events to create a positive impression about the Bengalis' war.

The intensity of the liberation war heightened in September.

The Government in exile in Calcutta requested the assistance of experienced doctors from abroad. Consequently, a 5-member medical team from BMA, UK was formed under the leadership of Dr. Kamruzzaman and Dr. Altaf to serve on the war front. They liaised with the Indian Embassy through Mohiuddin Ahmad, the temporary high commissioner of the government in exile from Bangladesh to England, to secure visas. Each team member was issued a full escape paper Bangladeshi passport in accordance with the Indian Embassy's instructions.

This document is believed to be the first ever Bangladeshi passport. The Indian Embassy recognized and accepted this one page passport as valid, granting the team permission to visit India. In Calcutta, they met with Syed Nazrul Islam, the acting President of the Government in exile, Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad, and other ministers and staff.

As the war intensified on various battlefields a few days later, the medical team continued to serve freedom fighters on all fronts, attending to the needs of both civilians and injured members of the regular armies.

The contribution of these young Bengali doctors in England during the liberation war went beyond immediate battlefield service. Their actions not only showcased courage and a keen sense of responsibility but also laid the foundation for sustained efforts in rebuilding the nation.

After the conclusion of the war in 1972, the Bangladesh Medical Association, UK, provided crucial support for the establishment of a hospital. Initially situated at Eskaton Ladies Club, it was later relocated to an abandoned house at 127 Eskaton Road, serving as a gathering point for doctors from abroad.

Responding to General MAG Osmani's directive, a dedicated team, comprising Dr. Zafarullah, Dr. Mobin, Dr. Altaf, Dr. Barkat and Dr. Kamruzzaman, took a significant step forward by forming the Ganashasta Trust. This initiative aimed to contribute to the development of a medical system in the war-devastated country, reflecting a commitment to long-term healing and reconstruction.

**Priyam pritim Paul** is pursuing his PhD at South Asian University, New Delhi.

## HAMOODUR REHMAN COMMISSION REPORT

# A Testimony of Pakistan's Cruelty, Genocide and Failure in Bangladesh

MARINA YASMIN

History is usually written by the winners. But the Liberation War of Bangladesh is such a huge affair; it has so many characters like an epic, so many layers of incidents, and so many chapters and segments that its history cannot be completely captured by writing in a small scale. The span of the Liberation War cannot be fathomed with the facts that almost ten million people became refugees, three million people were martyred, and three to four hundred thousands of women were raped. The War of Liberation and the struggles associated with it messed up the lives of the seventy-five million people of then East Pakistan in one way or another. Every family had to migrate inside or outside the country at some point, the country was flooded with blood and tears, and new stories of resistance, bravery, heroism and self-sacrifices were created every day in every locality. India, Russia, America, China, England – the heat of this war spread across the world.

Henceforth, not only are many books being written about the year 1971 in Bangladesh, but valuable researches and memoirs are still being written and published in various other countries including India, Pakistan, USA and United Kingdom. Defeated army generals in Pakistan have written many books, mainly trying to exonerate themselves. Yet those books also have historical value, because by putting together the many small pieces of the puzzle we get a dim but detailed picture.

The Report of the HAMOODUR REHMAN COMMISSION of Inquiry into the 1971 War (HRC) is one of the most important texts among all the books and documents published from Pakistan. It's good news that the available original English content of this report has been first published in Bangladesh by Prothoma Prokashan. The preface of the book is as follows –

'The Hamoodur Rehman Commission was assigned by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto immediately after the defeat of the Pakistan Army in Bangladesh. The Commission investigated

what happened in 1971 in East Pakistan. They have analyzed the struggling democracy of Pakistan, the periods of Marital Law leading up to the birth of Bangladesh, and all the events up until the surrender of the Pakistani army in Dhaka. It presents a striking analysis of the personalities who ruled Pakistan and those who carried out their orders. The report's findings accused the Pakistan Army of carrying out senseless and wanton arson, killings, and rape on the pretence of quelling the "rebellion".

It is known from the Publisher's note of the HRC Report published by Prothoma Prokashan that originally only 12 copies of this report were made. All were destroyed, except the one handed over to President Bhutto who never made the report public as he was afraid that the report would further contribute to the demoralization and humiliation of Pakistan armed forces. He told Justice Rehman that the report was either lost or stolen from the Prime Minister's Office. In the year 2000, Pakistani media informed that the report was found within armed forces and Pakistan officially declassified the report in December of that year and later VANGUARD, a Pakistani publisher, printed and marketed the report and it became a source of debate from the very beginning. Pakistani daily Dawn said, 'One can say, on the authority of unimpeachable sources, that the probe body was specifically told to confine its investigations to the military debacle and not to delve into the "cause of surrender," notably its political background.'

The Hamoodur Rehman Commission started recording its evidence in February, 1972. It was empowered to call before it any citizen of Pakistan, including former president and chief of staff to seek information about the incidents during the war. The Commission questioned some 300 witnesses including General Niazi and examined hundreds of classified documents and army signals. The initial report was handed over to the President in July, 1972 as the "Main Report" and the final report was submitted to the government of Pakistan in October, 1974. The HRC report has been divided into several parts that include Political Background, International Relations, Military Aspect, and Moral Aspect of the 1971 War as analyzed by the Pakistani side. Later a Supplementary Report was also added as Top Secret which includes Political Events of 1971, Military Aspect, Surrender in East Pakistan and the Moral Aspect.

The HRC Report reflects the worm-eaten military-backed politics of Pakistan and at the same time it is a testimony of their torture, cruelty, oppression, genocide and failure in Bangladesh during 1971. Although the Commission never mentioned the word "genocide" in the report, we see in chapter 7 under the Section Political Background, it stated that it had clear evidence to show that from time to time the Pakistan Eastern Command issued instructions that there should be no indiscriminate killing or wanton action. 'Cases have been brought to our notice where those guilty of taking advantage of the situation to gratify their own lust were duly dealt with and properly punished,' it said.

SEE PAGE 57

আমাদের সম্মানিত প্রাহ্লাদক, পৃষ্ঠাপনক  
শুভানুধায়ী ও দেশবাসীকে জানাই  
**মহান বিজয় দিবসের**  
৩১ ডিসেম্বর

বিজয় দিবসের অঙ্গিকার:  
বৈদেশিক মুক্ত্য অন্তর্মুক্ত অক্ষয়ক্ষেত্রে  
হিসাব খুল দেশের চলমান উন্নয়ন অংশগ্রহণ করি

মার্কেটেইল ব্যাংক পিএলসি  
Mercantile Bank PLC  
মার্কেটেইল ব্যাংক পিএলসি