



PHOTO: CAPTAIN (RETD.) DR. SITARA BEGUM, BIR PROTIX
Hilltop view of “Bangladesh Hospital” across the street at Bishramganj, Melaghar, Tripura in 1971.



PHOTO: JEAN-JACQUES KUR
An Indian Red Cross nurse vaccinating a Bengali refugee at Salt Lake, Kolkata.

WARTIME TREATMENT

The heroes who saved lives, silently

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AHMAD ISTIAK

While the armed freedom fighters fought valiantly on the battlefield during the 1971 war, a quieter yet equally crucial battle was being waged on the medical front.

Among the unsung heroes of the war were dedicated doctors who risked their lives to provide medical care to the wounded and sick.

One such individual was Dr Harimon Das, a rural physician from Chattogram.

During the brutal Banigram massacre, Dr Harimon bravely treated the wounded freedom fighters, including Sukumar Chowdhury, who survived despite suffering multiple gunshot wounds.

In October of this year, The Daily Star visited Chattogram and interviewed several doctors, freedom fighters, and witnesses for a report on the doctors' contributions to the war in the region.

Speaking to this newspaper, Somen Mitra Chowdhury, a witness to the Banigram massacre, said, “Even after the military was gone, villagers were afraid to leave their homes, fearing another attack. However, doctor Harimon bravely ventured out and treated Sukumar Chowdhury, removing three bullets from his body and stitching his wounds. Without Harimon's timely intervention,

of doctors participated in the medical efforts.

“Many doctors and medical students in Dhaka secretly provided medical services to the freedom fighters, because they were so easy to obtain.” Researcher and Freedom Fighter Dr. MA Hasan

The number of doctors killed by the Pakistani army and their local collaborators during the war is also unknown. As of 2024, 99 physicians are listed as martyred intellectuals by the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs.

INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTIONS

According to the book “Muktijuddho O Nari” by Rokeya Kabir and Mujib Mehdi, Dr Renu Kona Barua was an assistant surgeon at the East Pakistan Railway

government restrictions on the supply of medicines to private dispensaries, he ordered necessary items through rural medical practitioners.

“We would request the rural medical practitioners to stock up on the necessary medicines, as they received supplies from the government,” the doctor told The Daily Star. “It was a risky endeavour. On one occasion, we were caught by the Razakars while delivering medicine in Khiram, Fatikchari, but fortunately, we managed to escape unharmed.”

The book also tells the story of Rahima Khatun, a resident of Chaptla village in Kashiani, Gopalganj, who took the initiative to train women in nursing. These trained women later

Dr Rafiq continued to offer medical aid to the injured. Sadly, on April 13, Pakistani soldiers brutally murdered Dr Rafiq and three of his sons in front of their Railway Colony residence.

AJM Rakib Uddin, another son of Dr Rafiq, told The Daily Star, “While others fled to safety at the outbreak of the war, my father chose to remain and provide medical care to the injured freedom fighters. He believed it was his duty to help those in need.

“His selfless act of providing medical care ultimately led to his tragic demise, along with my three brothers, at the hands of the Pakistani army and their local collaborators.”

Like Dr Rafiq, Dr MK Sarker, a doctor from Chattogram, became a target of

INTERNATIONAL AID

The international community also played a significant role in providing medical assistance to Bangladesh during the war. Friendly nations, international aid organisations, and NGOs extended support in various forms, including medical supplies, equipment, and personnel.

According to Chowdhury Shahid Kader's book “Muktijuddher Chikishsha Shohayota”, the West German government, for instance, sent a 60-bed mobile hospital to West Bengal to treat injured freedom fighters. The West German Red Cross Society also donated funds to establish a 105-bed hospital for refugees.

Organisations like Caritas India, Save the Children, Oxfam, and the Red Cross provided essential medical services to refugees and displaced persons.

Caritas India opened a 270-bed hospital in Kolkata's Salt Lake, while Save the Children funded a 70-bed hospital in Kalyani.

Oxfam, in collaboration with Indian agencies, provided medical care to 600,000 refugees.

Foreign volunteers, such as those from Operation Omega, risked their lives to deliver medical supplies and provide treatment in the war-torn regions.

Despite facing numerous challenges, including arrests and imprisonment by the Pakistani military administration, the Omega volunteers, led by Roger Moody, editor at UK-based Peace News, persevered.

They were arrested three times in August, September, and October but were undeterred. They continued their mission, making nine incursions into Bangladesh in October and November to distribute essential medicines and food.

Churches and missionary hospitals played a pivotal role in the Liberation War. The Baniarchar Catholic Church in Faridpur, led by Father Marino Regan, and the Memorial Christian Hospital in Malumghat, Cox's Bazar, were particularly significant in providing medical aid and support.

The majority of refugees who sought shelter in India during the war received medical care from Indian doctors and health workers.

As per the book “Muktijuddher Chikishsha Ithash”, the Bangladesh Medical Association UK was formed in late March 1971, bringing together 450 Bangladeshi doctors residing in the UK.

Each member donated at least £10 per month to support medical initiatives in the war-torn country.

Meanwhile, the medical care of the approximately one crore refugees who sought shelter in India during the war posed a significant challenge.

The Indian government, its doctors, health workers, and citizens, were instrumental in addressing this challenge.

According to Chowdhury Shahid Kader's book “Muktijuddher Chikishsha Shohayota”, 25,000 unregistered doctors from West Bengal provided medical services to the refugees.

Over 7.2 million refugees took shelter in West Bengal, with 2.7 million receiving cholera vaccinations. The Karimganj Red Cross Society in Assam treated 37,000 refugees, while 1,000 trained and 2,000 untrained volunteers provided medical services to refugees and freedom fighters in Tripura.

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Translated from Bangla by Subrata Roy



Operation Omega volunteers enter Bangladesh with medicine and food for Bangladeshi people. August 17, 1971 .
PHOTO: AP ARCHIVE

“My father's crime was to provide medical care to freedom fighters. That's why my father and my three brothers were killed by Pakistani soldiers and Biharis.”
RAQIB UDDIN

Hospital in Chattogram in 1971.

In April, her husband was abducted and killed by the Pakistani forces. Overwhelmed by grief, Dr Renu returned to her father's home in Aburkhal village of Raozan upazila.

There she channelled her sorrow into strength and offered shelter and medical care to freedom fighters for the remainder of the war.

She also provided medical training to a group of young women, turning the house into a makeshift clinic. Many freedom fighters, after receiving treatment, returned to the battlefield.

In October, Dr Renu treated freedom fighters wounded in the Madunaghat battle in Hathazari. One of these fighters was Abdul Mannan, Bir Bikram, who suffered serious injuries. Despite Renu's best efforts, Abdul Mannan, unfortunately, did not survive.

Paritosh Barua, who was there at the time, told The Daily Star, “Dr Renu worked tirelessly day and night to save Mannan, but his injuries, particularly the stomach wound, were too severe. Despite her best efforts, he succumbed to his injuries.”

Dr Renu provided medical care to the local villagers of Aburkhal and surrounding areas as well. She passed away in the United States on October 27, 2015, at the age of 79.

The book also mentions Ferdousi Begum and her husband Hasanul Karim, who turned their Jashore home into a makeshift hospital to provide medical care to injured freedom fighters and civilians.

While Dr Mohiuddin and Dr Momtaz Begum of Jessore Sadar Hospital treated the most severe cases, around two dozen seriously injured freedom fighters received treatment at this house.

Medical supplies, including medicines and surgical equipment, were cleverly smuggled in grocery bags disguised as vegetables.

Another physician, Dr MA Mannan, was instrumental in supplying essential medicines to the freedom fighters of Sector 1 from within the country.

From May, he persistently sought to procure medicines and medical equipment for the fighters. To bypass

provided medical services in their villages, Chaptla and Ratal, under the Orakandidham freedom fighter camp.

Before the war, Dr Motahar Ali Sikder served as the director of the Central Medical Stores Depot in Tejgaon. As the war broke out, he secretly hoarded a significant quantity of medical supplies to aid the freedom fighters.

After he was transferred to Rajshahi in April, his wife, Salema Begum, provided medical treatment, equipment, and clothing to around a battalion of soldiers under Sector 2.

Dr MA Hasan, a Liberation War researcher, and the son of Dr Motahar Ali Sikder, told The Daily Star that the Pakistani authorities had ordered for his father to be killed in Rajshahi.

“However, he survived due to the intervention of Ayub Khan,” MA Hasan said.

Dr Hasan also said that many doctors and medical students in Dhaka secretly provided medical services to freedom fighters. “They discreetly supplied medicines and medical equipment through various channels, taking advantage of their easier access to these resources.”

According to Jahanara Imam's memoir Ekattorer Dinguli, a polyclinic on Elephant Road in Dhaka was run by Dr Azizur Rahman, Dr Sultana Rahman, and Dr Alim Chowdhury.

On August 19, Abdul Halim Jewel, a member of the Crack Platoon, was shot in one of his fingers during a reconnaissance mission at the Siddhirganj Power Station. He underwent surgery at the clinic.

On December 15, Dr Alim Chowdhury, an ophthalmologist and founder of the polyclinic, was abducted and killed by Al Badr members.

Dr Rafiq Ahmed, a physician at Pakshi Railway Hospital, was also martyred.

According to “Muktijuddhe Shaheed Chikitsak Jibonkosh”, the night of March 26 marked the beginning of resistance and all-out war in Pabna.

Dr Rafiq provided medical care to wounded freedom fighters and civilians from March 26 to 29. After the Pakistani army occupied Pabna on April 10 and initiated a brutal genocide,

the Pakistani army and Razakars for providing medical services to freedom fighters. To evade capture, he was forced to disguise himself as a monk and seek refuge in a Buddhist temple.

Dr MK Sarker told The Daily Star, “I regularly visited the freedom fighter camp at Latumura hill in Banskhali to provide medical treatment. Unfortunately, the Pakistani army and Razakars became aware of my activities. With the help of a local chairman, I managed to evade capture and sought refuge in a Buddhist temple.”

BANGLADESH HOSPITAL

Bangladesh Hospital was vital in delivering medical care during the war.

According to the book “Muktijuddher Chikishsha Ithash”, in April, Lieutenant Dr Akhtar Ahmed, an Army Medical Corps doctor, established a makeshift hospital in a dilapidated room in Srimantapur, Tripura. Later, when he was transferred to Sonamura, Dr Nazim Uddin joined the hospital. Eventually, a temporary Bangladesh Field Hospital was set up at Daroga Bagicha in Melaghar. In May, Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury and Dr Mobin arrived from the UK to join the hospital.

On August 26, Bangladesh Hospital was relocated to Bishramganj in Melaghar. While precise figures regarding the number of treated sick and injured freedom fighters are unavailable, a report from October 1971 indicates that the hospital staff comprised six doctors, four final-year medical students, and 18 volunteers and nurses.

As per the book, the massacre of 102 Bangalee members of the Army Medical Corps in Jashore and Cumilla cantonments by the Pakistani army at the war's outset ignited the resolve of their surviving colleagues to join the war.

The need for a dedicated medical corps emerged in October, as preparations were underway for a confrontation with the Pakistani forces in November.

Given the circumstances, medical treatment in the sub-sectors was carried out by a combination of qualified doctors and senior medical students, including second-year students and above.