

Army officers returned

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talked about the cultural shifts within the military and their increased political involvement.

Ziaul stands accused of orchestrating the enforced disappearance and murder of 104 people between 2010 and 2013.

The former army chief said posting soldiers trained under the "one bullet, one enemy" doctrine to Rab was a disastrous decision.

"Soldiers are trained to dehumanise and gradually view humans as targets, preparing them to kill without hesitation. Their training was ill suited for Rab appointments. Mixing army personnel with civil police was unwise. But that's exactly what happened after Rab was formed."

Iqbal recalled extrajudicial killings during Operation Clean Heart (2002-2003), noting the army had officially attributed 12 deaths to heart attacks while Human Rights Watch estimated the number of deaths at 60.

"Later, soldiers who participated in the operation were granted indemnity."

Iqbal termed this indemnity a "licence to kill".

Detailing his repeated attempts to rein in Rab abuses, he said, "I had summoned the then Rab additional director general, Col Mujib, and ordered him to halt crossfire killings and control then Rab intelligence chief Lt Col Ziaul Ahsan."

Though reports of killings had briefly disappeared from newspapers, Iqbal later realised they were being concealed. The situation, Iqbal said, had worsened when Benazir Ahmed became Rab director general and Ziaul Ahsan was promoted to additional director general.

"At that point, I had asked the Director of Military Intelligence [DMI] Brig Gen Jaglul Ahsan and Commanding Officer of the Army Security Unit Brig Gen Fazal, now an election commissioner, to speak to Ziaul Ahsan.

"Jaglut said he spoke to Ziaul but received no promise. Brig Gen Fazal said that there was no point talking to Ziaul and that his head was filled with bricks and stones."

Fazal further informed Iqbal that Ziaul had kept weapons, armed guards, and CCTV cameras inside his residence – all violations of military rules.

"Ziaul openly defied army command, refusing to release two officers for disciplinary action. I barred Ziaul from entering the cantonment and ordered then Logistic Area Commander Maj Gen Mizan to enforce it," said Iqbal.

This move had provoked intervention from then prime minister Sheikh Hasina through her military secretary Maj Gen Mia Zainul Abedin, he added.

Despite intense pressure, Iqbal had refused to rescind the ban for two days before withdrawing it to avoid internal conflict.

'ACT OF COWARDICE'

Speaking before the tribunal, Iqbal said he had urged officers to reject killing missions during their time with Rab,

telling them that it was cowardly to execute a defenceless prisoner.

"I had decided that any officer posted to Rab, DGFI, or BGB must come to me for an interview before and after their posting. Those going to Rab, I would tell them: 'to kill a person with their hands and feet bound is an act of cowardice.'"

Despite these efforts, Brig Gen Jaglul later told Iqbal that officers were being demoralised once they joined Rab.

"Listening to the horrifying accounts of killings from those who returned, I became deeply worried about the future of the army."

He told the tribunal that he had raised the issue with the then prime minister and appealed for the army officers serving in Rab to be brought back into the army.

"She admitted that Rab was worse than the Rakhi Bahini, but she gave no assurances and later took no further action on the matter."

He said he later encouraged officers who came for interviews to contact him if they were ever ordered to carry out a killing mission and added that at least two later refused such missions and were rehabilitated in the army with honour.

"In the meantime, Brig Jaglul fell out of favour with Col Ziaul Ahsan. He was removed from the DMI post by Maj Gen Tarique Siddique. Normally, the DMI is chosen by the army chief. But in this case, he was transferred against my wishes, which was an extreme humiliation for me as army chief."

However, he added that he had been successful in thwarting a later attempt to transfer Brig Gen Fazal.

'POLITICAL INFLUENCE'

The former army chief said that from 2007 to 2009, following a state of emergency triggered by attempts to extend the chief justice's retirement age, the DGFI became Bangladesh's main power centre.

During this period, many political figures, including BNP leader Tarique Rahman, were abducted, detained, and tortured, normalising secret detentions and impunity, he added.

"Picking up civilians and keeping them in cells became a routine practice... They came to believe that no matter what they did, they would ultimately get away with it."

At that time, the military, according to Iqbal, underwent cultural shifts: increased political involvement, a sense of dominance, senior-junior divisions, a cash-driven culture, and unquestioning obedience grew among army personnel.

'HASINA WANTED CORRUPT ARMY'
In his testimony, Iqbal said that following the 2009 BDR mutiny, which left 57 army officers and 17 civilians dead, around 50 BDR personnel died due to torture at Pilkhana during interrogation by Rab and army personnel, according to Human Rights Watch.

"After the BDR mutiny, hostility toward India and the Awami League intensified among army officers. Divisions between senior and junior officers deepened, professional officers were sidelined in favour of loyalists, and

by engaging the army in various national projects, the force was made corrupt."

"A corrupt army, Sheikh Hasina believed, would be safer for her," Iqbal told the tribunal.

At that time, Hasina appointed her relative Maj Gen (ret'd) Tarique Ahmed Siddique as her security adviser and sought to control the armed forces through him.

"Siddique soon established himself as a 'super chief' over the three service chiefs. He brought various institutions, including DGFI, NSI, Rab, NTMC, Ansar, and BGB, under his control."

Soon, Iqbal said, four networks emerged. The first was the crime network, which Siddique operated using DGFI, NSI, Rab, and NTMC to "suppress the political opponents through repression, killings, and enforced disappearances".

The second was the deep state, which Siddique managed through the military secretary to the prime minister, DGFI, and NSI, "taking all policy decisions regarding the three services – often conflicting with the service chiefs".

The third was the procurement network, involving the PSO, Armed Forces Division, DGDP, and service chiefs, through which Siddique "exerted influence over purchases".

The fourth was the military engineering network. As an officer of the engineering corps, Siddique built a separate circle with senior engineering officers, using them to "expand his influence over national projects".

"This became the principal source of illicit funds," said Iqbal.

'CULTURE OF KILLING'

Recounting his experiences as the chief of army staff from June 15, 2012, to June 24, 2015, Iqbal described how a "culture of enforced disappearance and killing" gradually took root within the army.

He said the army has had a long-standing culture of killing, which predates 2008 and began shortly after independence. Enforced disappearances emerged later.

While army deployments outside cantonments for law and order sometimes led to torture and deaths, such cases were limited and later regulated through inquiries and legal action. Military operations, such as those in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, also resulted in deaths, with perpetrators punished when identified, he added.

Saying the army's primary role is national defence, he noted its deployment to support law enforcement during crises, manage disasters, and oversee elections, where its presence has come to be seen as a guarantee of fairness.

Speaking with journalists, Chief Prosecutor Tajul Islam said, "This is an extremely important day in Bangladesh's judicial history. For the first time, the trial of a person accused of killing the highest number of people extrajudicially is underway at this tribunal. A former army chief is testifying as a prosecution witness in this case."

The tribunal is scheduled to resume recording Iqbal's testimony today.

were trying to see how much further it could be reduced. At this moment, I do not want to say, nor am I able to tell you, how much it will be reduced. We will see based on the discussions," he added.

He said the government's effort was not only focused on reducing the overall tariff, but also on ensuring that the tariff on Bangladesh's main product, garments, becomes zero. "We are continuing that effort."

"In this context, our existing export volume of Tk 1 lakh crore holds the potential to increase significantly. Our objective is to utilise this potential," he added.

Voting a matter

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practise their faith and enjoy equal dignity.

In this election, IAB candidates are contesting in 258 constituencies under the party's electoral symbol, Hatpakha (hand fan).

Urging voters to elect his party's candidates, the IAB ameer said, "If you recommend a good policy and a good person through your vote, you will earn rewards for the good deeds done under that policy and by that person. But if you recommend a bad policy or person, the sins of their wrongdoings will also be added to your record of deeds."

Throughout his speech, he outlined his party's commitments for the upcoming polls, its vision for state formation and reform, as well as key aspects of its manifesto and special programmes.

In the concluding part of his address, the IAB chief called on young voters to cast their first votes in favour of Islam and change.

"I promise you that Islami Andolan Bangladesh will not use your votes for its own gains. Instead, we will introduce improved, science-based moral education, create job opportunities, eliminate unemployment, and build a peaceful and prosperous country together with you."

He also urged voters to vote "yes" in the referendum.

"Remember, a single vote does not make anyone rich or poor. But a single vote shapes the destiny of the country and your own future. So, cast your votes for Hatpakha, the symbol of long-tested, honest, competent, and God-fearing people."

He also called on those involved in the election process to rise above fear and inducements and work in the interest of the state and the people.

Nearly 10 lakh security agency members deployed

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and striking forces, the dispatched personnel will work under the authority of the respective returning officers.

Members of the armed forces have also been placed under the "in aid to civil power" provision to assist local administrations in maintaining security.

Election Commissioner Abdur Rahmani Masud told reporters on Saturday that the army had already begun deployment and more troops would join from yesterday.

"They will be on the field for seven days before and after the polls," he said.

He added that all security personnel would work in coordination with the returning

officers, while the EC's central coordination cell would monitor the situation nationwide.

The commission will also receive real time updates through its security application.

"All necessary measures have been taken to ensure a peaceful and uninterrupted voting atmosphere," EC Masud said, adding that ballot boxes had already been sent to the districts and received by returning officers.

"Everyone is now busy with election preparations. We are prepared, and voters too are ready for a festive election after the campaign. The commission believes the electoral environment is fully conducive, with law and order under control," he said.

39 hurt in pre-polls violence in 2 dists

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Protesting the incident, Jamaat activists brought out a procession in the upazila headquarters around 3:30pm.

When the procession reached near the upazila health complex, a chase and counter-chase took place between BNP and Jamaat activists, said witnesses.

Later, Jamaat activists blocked the Barishal Baufal road in front of Baufal Police Station for around two hours till 6:30pm and demanded transfer of its OC, claiming that the police officer was biased towards the BNP.

Contacted, Khalidur Rahman, secretary of Jamaat's upazila unit, alleged that BNP men carried out attacks on Jamaat activists, and the OC was playing a role in favour of the BNP.

Upazila unit BNP Convener Taslim Talukder denied the allegation and

said Jamaat men attacked their activists.

OC Siddiqur Rahman of Baufal Police Station dismissed the allegation of bias and said, "I am performing my duties with complete neutrality. The overall law and order situation in the area is under control."

Baufal UNO Saleh Ahmed, also assistant returning officer, told The Daily Star that legal action would be taken upon investigation.

In another development, independent candidate Ataur Rahman Angur, also former BNP lawmaker, alleged that his motorcade came under attack and several vehicles were vandalised in Narayanganj's Araihaazar upazila yesterday night.

Speaking at a press conference at his Elumdi's house around 8:30pm, Ataur, who is contesting with "Kolosh" (pitcher) symbol, claimed that supporters of BNP contender

Guard polling stations to protect July

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In an apparent reference to BNP leaders and activists, he said, "We humbly requested them that if you were oppressed, do not become oppressors. You should understand the suffering of the oppressed. Why are you now causing suffering to people? We observed reckless extortion, land grabbing, and case trading beginning from the morning of August 6 [2024]."

He further alleged that some individuals who had left the country over the past 15 and a half years and taken shelter abroad had returned and were now engaged in "case trading", an abuse of criminal cases as a tool of extortion, coercion, or political pressure.

Pointing fingers at his main polls rival, the Jamaat leader also questioned the nomination of loan defaulters, asking why 59 "notorious loan defaulters and bank looters" had

been given party nominations. "You are sheltering them and making them MPs to curb corruption? Even owls would laugh hearing this," he said.

Describing February 12 as the day to repay the "debt of blood" of those who sacrificed their lives during the 2024 mass uprising, he warned that history would not forgive those who betray that sacrifice.

Criticising the BNP's pledges to introduce family and farmers' cards if voted to power, he said, "Just as their promise of rice at Tk 10 was false, these cards are false too. On February 12, people will show these fake cards a red card, Insha'Allah."

The Jamaat ameer said five years would be enough to transform the country's fate, adding that Bangladesh would then find its path and move forward along that highway.

He also vowed to ensure social justice if Jamaat comes to power. "Justice will not vary from person to

Earlier, on January 7, the Ministry of Home Affairs issued a circular stating that police, BGB, Ansar and VDP and the coast guard would be deployed to ensure a free, fair and peaceful election.

The circular also confirmed the deployment of armed forces under the "in aid to civil power" framework. According to the directive, 16-17 security personnel will be stationed at each general polling centre outside metropolitan areas, while 17-18 will be deployed at centres identified as vulnerable.

In metropolitan areas, 16 personnel will guard general centres, and 17 will be posted at vulnerable ones.

In designated remote areas across 25 districts, 16-18 members will be deployed at each polling centre.

Nazrul Islam Azad carried out the attack in the Tingaon area.

"I informed the law enforcement agencies immediately after the incident. They assured me of conducting a fair investigation. I urged the administration to ensure a level playing field so that voters can cast their ballots without fear."

Rejecting the allegation, Araihaazar BNP President Yusuf Ali Bhuiyan said none of the party leaders or activists were involved in the incident.

Contacted, Md Alauddin, officer-in-charge of Araihaazar Police Station, said police rushed to the spot after getting a verbal complaint. "We heard that two to three people sustained minor injuries. No written complaint has been filed yet. We are looking into the matter."

[Our correspondents in Noakhali, Patuakhali, and Narayanganj contributed to this report.]

Govt to buy 14 Boeings

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materials such as cotton, according to Secretary Rahman.

Asked about the trade deal with the US, Bashir Uddin sounded optimistic, noting that the 37 percent tariff initially imposed on Bangladesh was negotiated down to 20 percent.

"Unfortunately, we were embarrassed there. We are the only country in the world from which the terms of this agreement were made public globally. Even then, we have significantly brought the tariff down to 20 percent compared to our competitor countries.

"If this agreement had not been

made public, I firmly believe that we would have secured a rate even lower than 20 percent," he said.

"We promised to buy 25 aircraft... But whenever any agreement is in the early stages, there is always a Non-Disclosure Agreement. This Non-Disclosure Agreement means that if anyone wants to buy property or enter into any bilateral contract, there is a non-disclosure clause until the contract is executed. Once the contract is signed, the agreement will certainly be disclosed. I don't see any issue with the disclosure."

"We are hopeful that under the agreement scheduled for the 9th... We

Adviser Bashir dismisses conflict of interest

Accuses Star of running smear campaign against him

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Rejecting criticism, Civil Aviation and Tourism Adviser Sk Bashir Uddin yesterday defended holding both his positions as adviser and chairman of Biman Bangladesh Airlines, saying he saw no conflict of interest in serving in both roles.

Speaking at a press conference at his ministry on Sunday, attended by senior officials including the ministry secretary, he also accused The Daily Star of running a smear campaign against him, claiming that despite working in the interest of the state, he has become a victim of misinformation.

On February 6, The Daily Star published a report titled "Lord of the Wings" on Bashir, highlighting the conflict of interest that arose after he assumed the posts. According to the report, Bashir is also pursuing a commercial helicopter licence.

The adviser argued that no law barred him from serving as Biman chairman and pointed to achievements under his tenure, including a drop in airfares by more than 50 percent.

Detailing Biman's successes, Bashir claimed that Tk 60,000-70,000 crore previously flowed out of the country due to high airfares, and those who lost out

because of his reforms are now plotting against him.

"Because of their anger, I am being accused of shameless nepotism and called the 'Lord of the Wings,' even though my helicopters have no wings," he said, referring to The Daily Star report.

"You cannot manage everything within a legal framework. Morality is necessary too. I am the adviser to the jute ministry and also the largest jute trader in Bangladesh, so there could be a conflict of interest. But ask all the jute traders in Bangladesh – has any conflict of interest arisen?" he asked.

He added, "You cannot manage your bedroom with laws. You cannot manage your family with laws."

Bashir noted that 22 ministers and advisers, including a former prime minister, had previously served at the helm of Biman.

Asked whether it was appropriate to accuse a newspaper without sending a formal protest letter, he replied, "Okay, I got your point; we will send a formal protest."

Rejecting allegations of nepotism, the adviser added that 39 people had been barred from travelling abroad under government initiatives, including someone close to his family.

simple. Above all, they want protection from floods – or at least a reduction in the damage they cause.

Asked what they want from the next government, the answer was unanimous: stronger, well-maintained embankments.

"The same demand my father had, my grandfather had – and now us," Wahid said.

Zahed Ali, the most vocal of the group, added two more items to the list: jangal and dredging. Jangal refers to the slightly raised paths criss crossing the haors, crucial for transporting harvested rice from deep inside the wetlands. When flash floods arrive early, farmers try to salvage crops through hurried harvesting, but weak or broken pathways mean much of the grain is lost. Regular river dredging, they said, would also create seasonal

that's on them."

This time, some in Shanir Haor are cautiously backing a BNP candidate who, they said, stood with them during the 2017 floods, working alongside villagers to shore up embankments. In Tahirpur town, however, others questioned his record as upazila chairman, suggesting hope remains fragile.

That mix of expectation and distrust followed me to Bardal, a more remote village by the Matian Haor. During the monsoon, boats are the only link to Tahirpur town, five kilometres away. In the dry months, makeshift stalls line the narrow road cutting through the wetland. The village itself sits clustered on raised ground, typical of haor settlements.

At a tea stall, I met Saifur Rahman, a final-year honours student of Islamic Studies at MC College in Sylhet, home for the election. Enthusiasm for voting, he said, was high.

"This election comes after a successful movement that pushed out authoritarian rule," he said. "People believe something better might happen."

Had life or governance improved over the past year and a half? Saifur paused. "There are problems, unfortunately," he admitted. But he argued politicians would now think twice before repeating old habits.

"They've seen the consequences of ignoring people," he said. "No one should assume villagers here don't know their rights – or won't raise their voices."

The men listening – a member of the local gram (village) police, a farmer, and the stall owner – watched their college educated neighbour closely. Their faces suggested less certainty.

For them, politics still boils down to a narrow set of demands: embankments that hold, protection for a single vital crop, and reliable communication with the outside world in a region submerged for half the year.

In the haors of Sunamganj, the ballot is cast with hope – but anchored firmly to the embankment.



work through sand extraction once harvesting ends in May.

"What do the candidates say?" I asked.

"They say they will do everything," Rahim Ali replied, a note of suspicion in his smile.

"Do you believe them?" No one did. "They come, they promise, then they disappear," Rahim said. "I've seen it all my life."

Yet the farmers of Shanir Haor are keen to vote on February 12.

Why vote when trust is so thin? The answer, repeated in different ways, was that voting itself is seen as a duty – a way of staying part of the community and visible to power. Abstention, they felt, meant exclusion.

"We do our duty by voting," Rahim said in parting. "If they don't do theirs,

Against this backdrop, the farmers' political expectations are starkly