

Reconstitution of the Bangladesh Rifles

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The mutiny in Bangladesh Rifles in February 2009 tainted the image of the most important para-military force of Bangladesh. It completely destroyed the command structure of the force and created distrust between army and the BDR. In this situation, it became necessary to reconstitute the force. Bangladesh has undertaken this exercise. But the proposed reforms somehow does not appear geared to deal with the grievances of the BDR soldiers which have been seen at least as one of the causes of the mutiny. On the other hand, the proposed reforms are likely to increase the control of Bangladesh army over the para-military force. Only future will tell whether this good or bad for the BDR.

The Bangladesh Rifles, the most important para-military force of our eastern neighbour was rocked by a bloody mutiny on 25-26 February 2009. The mutiny had completely destroyed the command structure of the force as nearly all its top officers who had come from the Bangladesh army on deputation were brutally killed. The officers who had risen from the ranks of BDR were seen with suspicion and one of them was actually found involved in leading the mutiny. The reputation of the para-military force which has won laurels for itself and freedom for the country by playing an important role during the Liberation War was sullied forever. A force tainted with mutiny and enjoying no trust of the army could not have been relied upon for protecting the borders. Though it was impossible for a country like Bangladesh to disband completely its border guarding force and create a new one, a more feasible option was to reconstitute the same force while taking lessons from the mutiny. With this objective a restructuring of BDR is planned, but the moot question is that will this step redress the grievances

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of rank and file which were seen as immediate motivation for triggering the mutiny.

Mutiny Necessitated Restructuring in the BDR

In the immediate aftermath of the mutiny there was a general agreement that the force should be restructured.¹ But Dhaka did not know how to reconstitute the force and with what command structure. The other question facing them was how to integrate it with the intelligence set-up or whether to integrate it at all.

The mutiny also forced the authorities in Bangladesh to take a close look at the structures of Indian para-military forces and the army that has substantial mechanisms in place to prevent mutiny. Most importantly, while Bangladesh was facing BDR mutiny, the Indian para-military force, BSF, showed an exemplary friendly behaviour. It did not try to take advantage of the chaotic situation prevailing in Bangladesh. On the other hand, after the 29th Border Coordination Conference, BSF Director General M L Kumawat assured Bangladesh that any "recalcitrant elements" of the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) will not be allowed to enter the country and if anyone was caught, BSF would hand them over to Bangladesh. This friendly attitude of the BSF was also acknowledged by the Director General of BDR who said, "The BSF has shown prudence and wisdom during the (BDR mutiny) crisis. It has been dealing the whole matter with wisdom and we expect them to do so in the future."² This environment of friendliness and goodwill also encouraged BDR chief to seek the assistance of BSF in restructuring the force. India agreed to offer all

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possible help because it wanted the Indo-Bangladesh border to be secure.³ In the absence of a functioning border guarding force this border might have been further misused by terrorists and smugglers. India also wanted Bangladesh to come out of this trouble as soon as possible. But, unfortunately, a section in Bangladesh which is opposed to India did not like this idea of involving India in restructuring the force. They created a big controversy in Bangladesh which only cleared after the Director General of BDR Mainul Islam stated that BSF would help the reorganization of BDR by only exchanging information between the two forces.

Grievances of the BDR Soldiers

In the initial phases of mutiny, it was suggested that it was spontaneous and was due to the unfulfilled

longstanding demands of the BDR. The mentality of not accepting authority of the army had been dormant among the BDR members for long. They had been demanding appointment of their own officers under a system as the BCS cadre, increase of border allowance, 100 per cent ration allowance, sending them to the UN Mission, restructuring of their salary structure in a similar model as that of the army. Besides, discontent was also present in the force because of the Daal-bhaat programme, punishment of sepoyys, lack of transparency in running BDR shops, luxurious lifestyle of officials and corruption in running the schools. They circulated leaflets at different times with the aim of venting their discontent and realising their demands.⁴

It is, however, unlikely that the mutiny of this magnitude was carried out just because these long-standing demands were not fulfilled. Moreover, some of the former officers of BDR claimed that many steps were taken to improve the working condition in BDR and soldiers were better off under present dispensation than what they were during the days of East Pakistan Rifles.⁵ Some others also argued that it was difficult to justify the mutiny over corruption in Daal-bhaat programme as most BDR soldiers and their lower level officers were themselves extremely corrupt and often hand in glove with the smugglers operating on international border.⁶

However, when the brutality of the mutineers became known after the end of the mutiny, the public opinion swung from one end to the other.

Now several conspiracy theories started taking shape. The most important among them is the theory of destabilization attempt. Under this theory it was suggested that forces inimical to Awami League government were involved in inciting this mutiny. Through the mutiny they wanted to create a civil war kind of situation by pitting army against the BDR. Bangladesh Premier Sheikh Hasina also subscribed to the view.

Investigation and Enquiry Committees

The BDR mutiny was investigated by three enquiry committees. These enquiries were conducted by the army, CID and the civilian government. Out of these three, the enquiry committees by the army and the civilian government have given reports. Part of the report of enquiry conducted by civilian government has been made public. This report has failed to fully establish the causes behind the mutiny but it came to conclusion that the immediate trigger

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for mutiny was issues of pay, working conditions and command structure. According to the investigation officer of the CID, Abdul Kahhar Akhand, the probe being conducted by them also was "near closure" and until now, the reason behind the mutiny was found to be "dissatisfaction" among the BDR ranks.

The BDR Director General Major General Mainul Islam has also conceded that long ignored problems caused the revolt. He recently admitted that in Bangladesh, authorities have tendencies to sweep the dirt under the carpet. Suggesting that the problems had piled up to unsustainable proportions, the BDR chief said, "Only after the carpet was bloodied by 58 fallen officers, did we find out that there was too much dirt under it." He also openly admitted that it was indeed a reflection of failure of huge proportions.

In contrast to the findings of these committees, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Shaikh Hasina recently made a significant disclosure in the port city of Chittagong, where she stated that 30 army officers out of the 57 killed during the mutiny of paramilitary border guards Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) last year had been picked for special duty or belonged to families of ruling Awami League (AL) leaders.⁷ This statement once again suggests that many in Bangladesh still believe that despite the three enquiry committees investigating and submitting their reports, full mystery behind the BDR mutiny has not been revealed and probably may never be known.

The Proposed Reconstitution of the BDR

The para-military force is being reformed in line with the suggestions made on May 27, 2009 by an investigation committee, formed after the rebellion, headed by former Secretary Anisuzzman.⁸ A committee, headed by the BDR director general Major General Mainul Islam, formulated the draft and submitted it to the home ministry.⁹

On March 1, 2010, the cabinet of Bangladesh approved in principle the Border Guard Bangladesh Bill 2010.¹⁰ Once put in force, the current Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) Order of 1972 and Bangladesh Rifles (Special Provision) Ordinance 1976 will be annulled and the force renamed as Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB). It appears that the implementation of this bill would further increase the hold of army over the para-military force.

The cabinet has, however, also formed a six-member high-powered committee for a detailed analysis of the bill, and asked the committee to submit a report in the next cabinet meeting, with suggestions for modifications in the bill if necessary. The committee comprises Prime Minister's advisers HT Imam and Moshiur Rahman, Cabinet Secretary Abdul Aziz, the premier's Principal Secretary Abdul Karim, Home Secretary Abdus Sobhan Sikder, and Law

Secretary Anwarul Haque.¹¹ The bill is also likely to be submitted to the parliament in the current session, for making it into a law which will also change the name of Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) to Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB). The restructuring of BDR will take place once the bill is passed in parliament.

A New Organogram

But like its change of name, which is felt to have been tainted with the mutiny, the top posts among the border guards are also perceived to carry a stigma since the revolt. The draft law suggests a new organogram abolishing the rank of deputy assistant director (DAD), the highest among the border guards. It was a DAD who was accused of leading the mutiny. The new law will also toughen promotion for guardsmen to equivalent positions. According to the deputy director general of the border guards, Brigadier General Md Obaidul Haque promotion to such ranks will have more requisites and conditions attached.¹² In the past, the border guards used to get promoted to these ranks quite easily. But this will not be the case in future.

Capital Punishment for Mutiny

According to the BGB Bill 2010, a court of the restructured border security force will be able to sentence convicted mutineers and provocateurs of any mutiny to death.¹³ It also proposes a special tribunal in BGB to allow a convict to appeal against any punishment or to seek commuting of sentences, which are not allowed by the existing law. According to the Press Secretary of the prime minister of Bangladesh Abul Kalam Azad the bill was okayed as the prime minister thinks a stronger law is necessary to prevent repetition of incidents like last year's mutiny in BDR.¹⁴ The existing law allows the BDR authorities to jail any soldier for a maximum of seven years for involvement in a mutiny. The force is currently trying the mutiny suspects in its own court, while the suspects of killing, looting, arson, and other grievous offences deserving capital punishment, will be tried in civil courts. The new act stipulates that photographs and recorded conversation will be accepted by the special courts as evidence.

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Changes in Command Structure

According to the Home secretary of Bangladesh, the proposed law would

introduce new regional headquarters directly under the central Pilkhana headquarters but above the sector headquarters in order to consolidate and further streamline the border guard's command structure. Army officers would lead the paramilitary border guards on deputation as they did in the past, while the four regional headquarters of the BGB would be headed by a brigadier general. Officers from navy and air force too would now be posted in the borders security force on deputation.

Expansion of the Force

The force is also planning to expand itself. It has submitted a draft proposal to increase battalions through recruitment of soldiers and also to decentralise the force at an estimated cost of about Taka (Tk) 1,300 crore. The border force has

46 battalions under 12 sectors and approximately 38,000 soldiers work under the existing battalions. It proposes to add 11 battalions under 4 sectors by recruiting 9000 soldiers.¹⁵ The proposal, if accepted, will be implemented by 2013.

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Bangladesh shares its longest border 4,096 km with India. BDR has 524 Border Operation Post (BOP). But now the BDR would also increase its outposts and reduce system loss. Work is underway to set up 90 new outposts. The average distance of the border outposts would be five kilometers and the force would be equipped with motorbikes for patrolling. Under the reform, in view of the topography of the country the frontier force would

now be categorized in different modifications to carry out duties in hills and rivers and for engagement in law enforcement duties. In most of the areas, the BGB troops would also be equipped with tractors suitable for movement in rural terrain alongside the trucks.

Under the proposed reconstitution plan a large number of retired army personnel would be inducted in lower ranks of the force on a "makeshift basis". The reconstituted frontier force would have reduced service length for the soldiers and other rankers having required qualification and age and could be inducted as regular commissioned officers of BGB with six months of training in Bangladesh Military Academy (BMA).

Greater Emphasis on Intelligence

A three-layer intelligence unit equipped with modern equipment has been proposed instead of the single layer Rifles Security Unit (RSU) as it had failed to

get advance intelligence about the recent mutiny and the subsequent carnage at the force's Pilkhana headquarters.¹⁶ As a part of the first layer of the new intelligence network, special desks will be set up at the National Security Intelligence (NSI), and Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) for BGB. The second layer will carry out counter intelligence, working under a regional head, similar to that of the army and Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). The third layer will collect internal field intelligence and cross-border intelligence, like the field intelligence unit of the army.

Nearby Cantonments to Keep Reserve Arms and Ammunitions

Keeping the force's reserved arms and ammunition in nearby cantonments instead of with its battalions has also been recommended. It was found that during the mutiny the BDR soldiers had looted weapons stored at the headquarters and used them against their superiors from the army.

The border force's chief, Major General Mainul Islam, has hinted that the changes may not address the long tendency of overlooking problems of the rank and file. The BDR chief pointed out that when Bangladesh Rifles came into being after independence, it simply followed the East Pakistan Rifles model. He said there will not be any major changes in that model even now, hinting that long-held frustrations between border guards and their army officers might remain.

However, speaking to BDR jawans at a special Darbar at Pilkhana BDR headquarters in Dhaka on March 3, 2010 Director General of Bangladesh Rifles Major General Md Mainul Islam expressed the hope that the border guards will emerge as a disciplined force in a year through necessary reforms. He informed that the force will have to take fresh oath which will be 'Amra notun, amra ek, amra boliyan' (we are new, we are united, we are strong). He pointed out that the heinous killings and mutiny had belittled the force before the nation. However, he also observed that the force has regained people's confidence since mutiny, which is its main achievement.

Conclusion

The reconstitution of BDR became essential to stop the mutiny tainted past from haunting the para-military force. The force also appeared to have recovered its operational capability in last one year. Besides, it is also planning to go for expansion. But, in the planned reconstitution of the force, very little effort has been made to meet the grievances which were widely publicized during the course of the

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mutiny. On the other hand, the mutiny has only made army to reassert and further increase its control over the para-military force. The army has tried this in many ways. Now, it will be having more army men in its rank and file by recruiting retired soldiers. The BDR was campaigning for creation of its own cadre from which the officers were to be recruited. This demand has been completely ignored. On the other hand, the promotion of BDR personnel to senior posts has been made far more difficult. The law governing the conduct of the BDR soldiers has been made far more stringent. The soldiers from para-military force indulging in mutiny would be given death sentence. There is also greater emphasis on intelligence collection to prevent similar occurrences in future. Clearly, the approach adopted is to keep the para-military force in increased control of the army than to address the long-standing grievances of rank and file voiced during the mutiny. Army being an important institution in Bangladesh, it is impossible for any civilian government to sideline army from BDR, especially when they have suffered so badly at the hands of para-military force. Addressing the grievance of the BDR would have meant massive organizational restructuring of the Armed forces in the country. Given the Army's disregard for democratic governments in Bangladesh, any civilian government is unlikely to antagonize the Army by according to the BDR a co-equal status. Thus, the proposed reconstitution of the BDR would only mean increased control of army. However, only time will tell, whether this approach will work or not.

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Notes:

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