

BANGLADESH

THE BDR MUTINY

SANDEEP BHARDWAJ

Research Officer, IPCS, New Delhi

An Overview

On the morning of 25 February 2008 more than one thousand jawans of Bangladesh paramilitary force, Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) staged a mutiny at its headquarters in Dhaka at Pilkhana. For the next 33 hours, the mutineers held the BDR HQ, keeping several officers and civilians as hostage. Initially confined to Pilkhana, the mutiny later spread to other outposts of BDR. There were reports of disobedience or violence from at least twelve other BDR outposts. The killings, however, were confined only to the HQ. By the end of the mutiny, 74 people including 56 officers had lost their lives.

The mutiny has shocked the entire nation. Not only has the mutiny left a big question mark on the state of security in Bangladesh. It is clear that for a long time to come the ghost of the mutiny is going to haunt Bangladesh.

I THE MUTINY: RECONSTRUCTING THE EVENTS

The mutiny began at the second day of the annual BDR Week celebration. The celebrations had begun on 24 February, inaugurated by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at BDR HQ, less than twenty-four hours prior to the outbreak of mutiny. Around 150 BDR Officers, including its entire top-brass, was in attendance at the HQ for the celebrations. In addition, there were at least four battalions of BDR- 24, 36, 13 and 44- in the compound, with each battalion consisting of around 850 troops. Additionally there were 3000 more soldiers from other battalions. The estimates have been made of around 9000 people, including the troops and

their families, were at the Pilkhana compound¹.

According to witness reports, the mutiny began at around 8:30 am in Darbar Hall of the HQ. It quickly spread throughout the compound and gunshots were heard along with grenade bursts. It is believed that the mutiny began in the Hall during the address of the BDR Director General Maj Gen Shakil Ahmed. Within a very short time, a large number of troops were involved.²

According to some unconfirmed witness accounts, initially there was little or no organisation or leadership among the mutineers.³ Nevertheless, it was apparent that mutineers were NCOs and jawans of the BDR and their targets were mainly their officers. Several officers and their families were rounded up, some from their homes in the residential complex.

By 9:40 am the situation had gone completely out of control. Mutineers even sprayed bullets outside the complex, injuring the passers by and killing three.⁴ The mutineers even fired mortar rounds at the army helicopter hovering over the

¹ Manik, Julfikar Ali and Khan, Sharier, "Mutiny, bloodshed at BDR HQ," *The Daily Star*, 26 February 2009, <http://www.thedailystar.net/story.php?nid=77491>

² Manik, Julfikar Ali, "How it began," *Daily Star*, 26 February 2009, <Http://www.thedailystar.net/story.php?nid=77496>

³ "Conversation between PM Sheikh Hasina and surviving victims," uncorroborated and anonymous source, <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-3649058570203302495>

⁴ Manik, n.2

compound⁵. According to witness accounts, killings of officers began soon after. Several officers, including the top hierarchy of BDR, were killed. Some may even have been tortured; officers were shot, hanged, mutilated or bayoneted. BDR DG Gen Ahmed was shot along with his wife, although the time of their death is still unconfirmed. Dhaka Sector Commander, Col Mujibul Haq was killed and his house set on fire.⁶ It should be noted that despite contrary reports, there was no act of rape committed by BDR. However, there were mass graves, with many bodies recovered from the sewage pipes.

Soon afterwards the compound was surrounded by Rapid Action Battalion, local police and Bangladesh Army. Mutineers contacted the media and put forward their demands. They also accused BDR officers of corruption, exploitation and treason.

Within next few hours, there were three attempts by Bangladesh government to negotiate a truce. One was led by a State Minister and Jatiya Sangsad Whip. Another was made when fourteen BDR members visited PM's official residence, (check, I don't think they visited the PM) following which, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina announced amnesty for the BDR mutineers. At 9:40 pm a team of government negotiators, including the Interior Minister, Sahara Khatun visited the HQ for another round of negotiations. After some preliminary negotiations the Home Minister entered the compound at 12:25 am, 26 February. In subsequent negotiations the Home Minister succeeded in release of 29 hostages. At 2:30 pm, 26 February, PM Sheikh Hasina in a televised address to the nation, gave a firm line to the mutineers. This calm but strong response to the mutiny from the PM has been

⁵ Ahmed, Inam and Hasan, Rashidul, "Bullets buzz in the air," *The Daily Star*, 26 February 2009, <http://www.thedailystar.net/story.php?nid=77494>

⁶ Col Haq's son confirmed so to a journalist through an SMS during the mutiny, Manik & Khan, n.1

credited as the turning point in the situation.

On the second day, the mutiny spread to other parts of the country. There were reports of disobedience and general indiscipline in BDR outposts at Chittagong, Rangpur, Chapainawabganj, Satkhira and Jessore. Several BDR bases reported gun fire in the air, which led to at least three wounded. Two army officials were taken hostage in a village in Satkania.⁷ According to Indian Border Security Force, BDR was not functional at many check posts on the border.⁸ Several of the highways were barricaded by the troops. According to one report, the mutiny spread to at least 12 towns and cities across the country.⁹ However, there wasn't any death caused due to mutiny outside the Pilkhana compound.

By late evening of 26th, a convoy of APCs and tanks from the Army's 9 Division in Savar and the 46 Brigade in Dhaka Cantonment drove down surrounding the compound at Pilkhana. This was the time when mutineers, raising a white flag, surrendered. Finally the ordeal was brought to an end after 33 hours. At 7:00 pm, Dhaka police commissioner entered the compound.

Immediate Aftermath

The immediate reaction of public at large after the mutiny was one of relief. Clearly, this was a possible catastrophic crisis that

⁷ "Calm across country after chaos, revolt," *The Daily Star*, 27 February 2009, <http://www.thedailystar.net/story.php?nid=77644>

⁸ "BDR personnel missing from Indo-Bangla border posts," *The Economic Times*, 28 Feb 2009 <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/News/Politics/Nation/BDR-personnel-missing-from-Indo-Bangla-border-posts/articleshow/4204714.cms>

⁹ Chowdhury, Khaled Iqbal, "BDR Mutiny: Security implications for Bangladesh and the region," *Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies*

was averted. However, at the compound, a lot of confusion ensued. An undetermined number of BDR soldiers had escaped during and after the mutiny. It was almost impossible to hunt them all or identify which ones were involved in the mutiny. Due to the lack of preparation of any agency for such a crisis, it took many days for authorities to give a credible death toll. Similarly, due to the destruction of records by the mutineers, it took the authorities some time to reorganise. It was only two days after the carnage that the army could access the databases of BDR.

As the reports of barbarity of some killing came out, the country was shocked. The death toll of officers was 56, highest in the history of Bangladesh.

Amnesty and Prosecution

True to her word, Sheikh Hasina gave the absconding BDR soldiers 24 hours to return to their posts. Around 5000 soldiers reported back for duty. There was not however, return to business as usual. The soldiers were confined to their barracks and under close supervision of the army. The BDR was stripped of heavy weaponry like machine guns and mortars.¹⁰

Almost immediately after the mutiny, the government argued that the general amnesty did not include those accused of committing crime during the mutiny. On 28 February, the government moved to setup a special tribunal for quick prosecution of those involved. On 2 February, government filed charges against a thousand mutineers although only six were identified by name¹¹. On 2 March, government also launched 'Operation Rebel Hunt,' to capture the absconding mutineers. The hunt,

¹⁰ "BDR men seen with rifles, not heavy weapons," *The Hindu*, 3 March 2009, <http://www.hindu.com/thehindu/holnus/002200903031869.htm>

¹¹ "Over a thousand BDR men sued for mutiny," *The Daily Star*, 2 March 2009, <http://www.thedailystar.net/story.php?nid=78082>

though led by police, involved the army significantly.

The government also set up a probe on the matter. However, the probe was reconstituted on 2 March, to exclude Home Minister and State Minister for Law making the probe strictly apolitical¹². This was probably in response to the first significant political opposition government faced on the matter of the mutiny. The government also asked US Federal Bureau of Investigation and British Scotland Yard to aid in the investigation.

The PM held a meeting with survivors of mutiny after the carnage. In this closed door meeting surviving BDR officers accused the army and government of late response. They also criticised the government's granting amnesty to the mutineers. Some of the officers viciously attacked the government and the army top brass of being corrupt and ineffective.¹³

The audio recording of this meeting was leaked and released on internet. On 7 February, Bangladesh government banned websites like YouTube and eSnips from the country without giving any reason. It was alleged that the ban was imposed due to this leaked conversation. Notably, any news regarding the censorship was not reported in the Bangladeshi media. Five days after the ban, government lifted it on 12 March¹⁴. The significance of the

¹² "Govt probe body recast," *The Daily Star*, 3 March 2009, <http://www.thedailystar.net/story.php?nid=78211>

¹³ The audio recording is available at <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-3649058570203302495>. It is in Bengali. It includes several witness accounts of surviving BDR officers in detail. It also includes their criticism of the government in not responding quickly to the crisis. The officers claim that the government could have averted the whole crisis if RAB or army had made a rescue effort immediately after the outbreak of mutiny when the mutineers were not organized.

¹⁴ "Bangladesh lifts YouTube ban over mutiny row," *AFP*, 12 March 2009,

conversation remains puzzling, since although it blithely criticises government, it is hardly incriminating enough to be suppressed to such an extent.

Investigation

Immediate investigations have revealed several interesting aspects. Numerous soldiers had fled the compound with their weapons, some which will never be recovered. Search of the compound revealed a small amount of unauthorised weaponry, including LMGs and SMGs. The surveillance video footage also showed some unknown personnel in BDR uniforms in the compound during the mutiny¹⁵. Another mystery was the appearance of two Chinese nationals out of the compound after the mutiny.¹⁶

After the stepping down of political leaders from government probe on the mutiny, Commerce Minister Lt Col (ret'd) Faruk Khan was tasked to coordinate the probe as its sole political member. On 13 March, Khan issued a statement, accusing the Islamic terrorist organisation Jama'at ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) to be involved in the mutiny. This statement has led to several rumours and finger pointing across the nation, leading many to believe that the mutiny was orchestrated for other than the apparent reasons.

II ROOTS OF THE MUTINY

The mutineers put forward several demands during the negotiations. Their main grievances were low pay, lack of

http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gTD1NhCUBntqxGK_wMcf5VnUf0Q

¹⁵ "Video footage shows outsiders in uniform," *The Daily Star*, 4 March 2009, <http://www.thedailystar.net/story.php?nid=78384>

¹⁶ Sarkar, Kailash and Mollah, Shaheen, "Some seizures puzzle army," *The Daily Star*, 3 March 2009, <http://www.thedailystar.net/story.php?nid=78209>

benefits, less holidays and the bar on them from going to UN peacekeeping missions. They were also irate over the army officers deputed to BDR and also demanded abolishing the discrimination in ration entitlement as compared to the Army.

The officer corps of BDR is on deputation from the Army. Independent BDR recruitment is only done at the NCO level with no prospect for promotion. This has also led to general frustration among the BDR soldiers.

Assessment

The mutiny and mysterious findings after it have led to several speculations and rumours. The most popular theories currently are:

- it was an attempt of anti-democratic or anti-Awami League forces, with or without help of foreign elements, to destabilise the country by provoking a violent reaction from army¹⁷;
- it was a stunt from Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to strengthen her position;
- it was a pre-planned mutiny financed by insurgent groups and criminal elements, activities of whom, were being shutdown by the new civilian government.¹⁸

Destabilisation Attempt Theory

Foremost is the theory of destabilisation attempt. Several statements were made from government sources suspecting

¹⁷ Samanta, Pranab Dhal, "Dhaka rebels reveal plot to provoke army, topple govt," *Indian Express*, 1 March 2009, <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/dhaka-rebels-reveal-plot-to-provoke-army-topple-govt/429342/>

¹⁸ Roy, Bhaskar, "BANGLADESH: Return Of The Razakaars?" *South Asia Analysis Group*, Paper no. 3080, 3 Mar 2009, <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/%5Cpapers31%5Cpaper3080.html>

involvement of Islamic fundamentalists in the mutiny. Considering irregularities discovered at the HQ, it seems that there was at least some involvement from outside. In examining the possibility that the mutiny was orchestrated by terrorist organisations, one has to consider several implications. If the fundamentalist or terrorist organisations have the capability to mount such a massive operation, their capabilities in Bangladesh are clearly far beyond any of the recent assessments. It would also indicate a disturbing level of influence these organisations enjoy in Bangladesh Armed Forces. Such possibility can spin off a number of hypotheses and require a more extensive investigation from the Bangladesh government and the international community.

It would also indicate that a substantial portion of state's security infrastructure may be compromised, leading to a need for a substantial overhaul in the entire architecture. In a country like Bangladesh with precarious civil-military relations, this would be a very tricky problem.

However, the possibility that the mutiny was orchestrated from outside has some arguments against it. First of all, if the mutiny was directed against Sheikh Hasina, it seems strange that mutiny didn't take place twelve hours earlier when the PM was visiting BDR HQ on a scheduled visit. Also, when the army did arrive in Dhaka, threatening an action, the mutineers surrendered without provoking any reaction. Moreover, if the attempt was to destabilise the government politically, why wasn't there any political opposition mounted against the government by other political factions? In fact, in a rare display of solidarity, rival political parties offered support to the government.¹⁹

Dispute over Profits Theory

¹⁹ In fact, since the mutiny, BNP chief Khaleda Zia has not even directly attacked PM Seikh Hasina, something unusual for her.

It seems that the most logical explanation of the mutiny was the grievances of BDR soldiers, which are genuine. It can be speculated that behind-the-scene factors for the mutiny involved corruption in the BDR. It has been reported that the dispute between the officer corps and NCOs of BDR was over the sharing of the profits of illicit activities of the force.

Corruption in the BDR, like in the rest of the country, is rampant. BDR is often accused of being involved in illicit trafficking of men and material across its national borders. During the mutiny, there were some statements by mutineers, which were lost in the flood of information, indicating in this direction.

One of the mutineers confided in the media that the late BDR DG had embezzled Tk 7 Crore from election duty that was supposed to be paid to BDR soldiers²⁰. Another of illicit profits made from the Operation Dal-Bhaat. Under CTG government, this operation was to sell vegetables and food items through BDR to curb inflation.²¹ It is significant that Col Haq was the officer leading the BDR Dal-Bhaat programme under the caretaker government. Col Haq was also one of the first officers killed and his house was set on fire by mutineers.

Further Possibilities

However, even the pent up anger over money is unlikely to lead to such barbarity as displayed during the mutiny. It is possible that this anger stemmed from a much deeper resentment towards BDR officer corps. It has been mentioned that the BDR officers, brought in the force for only a short time, exploited the jawans. Since it was not a permanent deputation, the officers had much less concern over the

²⁰ "Demands they put forward," *The Daily Star*, 26 March 2009, <http://www.thedailystar.net/story.php?nid=77501>

²¹ Manik & Khan, n.1

well-being of soldiers under them, possibly leading to the carnage of 25 February. As for the irregularities discovered in the investigation, they cannot be dismissed out of hand. But it has to be noted that Palkhona HQ is a huge compound with over 9,000 people present during the mutiny. It is very likely that among such a large number, in any place, at any given time, there are some irregular or illicit activities taking place.

The theory that it was a political gimmick by Awami League to strengthen its position sounds too farfetched. Even accepting the fact that Awami League was evil enough to orchestrate such inhumane massacre, simply for political gains, there seems no need for AL to do so. It should be remembered that AL came into the government only two months ago, with largest majority in the history of the country and is still in its honeymoon period. Further, arranging such an elaborate mutiny would require massive resources and influence along with time. Under the CTG rule till December 2008, AL lacked at least two of the three factors.

As for the interest groups like criminal elements orchestrating the mutiny as a beginning of a civil war to take over the government is, again, very implausible. One thing that has to be considered is that law and order has actually deteriorated in Bangladesh since the return of democracy. The CTG was actually far more efficient in keeping crime down because of its emergency powers. Moreover, such a civil war would definitely have been short-lived since Bangladesh army is far superior in strength and equipment, has the capability to crush such mutiny. Also, it should be considered that the mutiny was against the officers of BDR. How is any army expected to win a war, even a civil war, without its officer corps?

III RECOMMENDATIONS

The mutiny, if anything, has only strengthened the Sheikh Hasina government, at least in the immediate term.

Throughout the country the new civilian government has been praised for its calm and level-headed response during the crisis. Hasina's address to the nation during the crisis and the brave negotiations undertaken by Home Minister Sahara Khatun have earned the government a lot of political points. Although the rival party Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has since the mutiny, voiced usual accusations against the government, they have been largely ignored. In fact, except for a half-hearted political opposition there has been no major campaign against the government.

More importantly, during the crisis the Bangladesh Army demonstrated that it will remain apolitical and subservient to the civilian government. This is a significant development since it was feared by many that after the restoration of democracy, army will continue to interfere in civilian matters. It should be also noted that the army followed the civilian government lead, despite the fact that many in the army favoured a violent solution. Clearly the army top brass is intending to keep a professional and disciplined image of Bangladesh Army.

Moreover, the mutiny has tarnished the image of Bangladesh Armed Forces. The military has recently retreated from power leaving high inflation rates and a failure of political reforms campaign. This setback has further weakened the position of the military making it unlikely that it would be interfering in civilian matters for quite some time to come.

Security Implications

BDR is a force of 67,000 troops entrusted with guarding the national borders. The mutiny has left the entire operation in disarray. Both India-Bangladesh border and Myanmar-Bangladesh border are notorious for smuggling. From FMCG goods, petrol and fertilizers to arms and drugs all are smuggled across these borders. Illegal immigration is another problem that these borders face.

Moreover, the borders also provide a perfect cover for criminals and insurgents to slip past the security forces.

A border security force functioning at less than its usual capacity is a serious security concern. Moreover, BDR plays an important role in counterterrorism effort in the country. A dysfunctional BDR can hamper the government's counterterrorism efforts.

Another question remains of looted weapons. Not only did several soldiers escape with their weapons, some of the weapons were looted by civilians in the chaos²². These weapons, in the hands of criminals or militants add to the security threat.

Economic Implications

Except for a minor initial slump in stock market during the mutiny, domestic economy of Bangladesh is yet to show any signs of significant economic backlash. However, internationally the mutiny has come off as a sign of instability in the country. The images of tanks rolling down the streets of Dhaka have tarnished the country's image. In times of recession, with a slowing growth rate and increasing unemployment of Bangladeshis the world over, the mutiny has made the task of attracting investments in the nation more difficult. Portfolio investment in Bangladesh is already showing a downward growth and FDI has not shown any signs of improvement²³. After this fiasco, it is unlikely that these indicators will be climbing any time soon.

Political Stability

During and since the mutiny, almost everyone has expressed fears over

²² Chowdhury, n.10

²³ Bhardwaj, Sandeep, "Bangladesh: Forthcoming Election," *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies*, Issue Brief 86, December 2008, http://ipcs.org/publications_special_details.php?recNo=178&pT=1

stability in the country. With a new and fragile democracy, a crisis like this tends to shake the faith of most.

However, it should be noted that at no point during the crisis the government or democracy itself was under threat. Though it can be argued that had the mutiny spread to other parts of the country it could have resulted in bloodshed of much greater degree. Nevertheless, it is highly unlikely that it would have resulted in a destabilisation of democracy.

The mutiny was a law and order issue, though of massive proportions. To destabilise democracy or to take over the country, the mutineers needed several essential components they did not have. First, with an army much larger and better equipped than BDR, the mutineers could not expect a victory of any sort. Second, the mutineers were contained in one small compound. It should be also noted that BDR does not signify any kind of political force or agenda. Thus any action by them would be purely criminal.

Though the mutiny has tarnished the image of Bangladesh as a stable country in rest of the world, it has failed to actually destabilise the country in any significant manner.

Implications for India

The Indian government took a position that the mutiny was entirely an internal matter, which required no interference by the Indian government. The primary concern for India after the mutiny is border security. Fortunately, given the animosity between BSF and BDR, there is hardly any cooperation and interdependence between the two forces. Therefore, a partially functional BDR doesn't affect Indian border security significantly.

Much more importantly, the mutiny has highlighted the state of affairs in Bangladesh Armed Forces. Bangladesh military has often been accused by Indian security forces of harbouring and

supporting anti-India terrorists. There have been several reports from across the world accusing factions of Bangladesh security forces having links with insurgents and terrorists like ULFA, HUJI and AL Qaeda.

Given the concern over the state of discipline in BDR, India may persuade the Bangladesh government to strive for better discipline in the armed forces and a tab on any possible activity linking terrorists and militants to service personnel.

The decision taken by the Bangladesh Government now to diband the BDR and constitute an entirely new force, albeit with many of the soldiers from the BDR may be the right decision. Its implementation will remain a challenge.

IV CONCLUSIONS

It must be reiterated that the mutiny, no matter how bloody and tragic, was a law and order problem not a direct threat to democracy. However, it did highlight several problems with the armed forces in Bangladesh.

The mutiny has emphasised that change is desperately needed in the armed forces in Bangladesh. Like any other government institution, military too must bring reforms and checks against corruption and exploitation. Hopefully, with a willing top brass in the army and a firm government, this mutiny can be the trigger to undertake these reforms.

The government should also look into the matter of treatment of BDR and other security forces. Some of their grievances seem to have benn genuine.

With calm response of the government the mutiny was brought to a peaceful end. Performance of the newly-formed government must be praised. However, subsequently the government seems to be losing the credibility earned. The censorship it imposed on YouTube and

other internet websites has done damage to its democratic image.

The government must bring in a swift conclusion to this tragedy by completing the probe and prosecution in a timely fashion. Openness in the investigations is of utmost importance.