**Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s Initiative on**

**Humanitarian Service in International Arena leading to**

**Future Journey of Bangladesh in this Field**

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I recall with reverence the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on the auspicious occasion of his birth centenary. Deprived of their rights, the repressed Bangalis could emerge victorious against the powerful Pakistani military force because of the foresight, love for his people, intellect and mindset of this great leader. He had tremendous sympathy and affection for the suffering masses in different regions of the globe. Consequently, he took such a timely humanitarian decision in October 1973 for human welfare by means of which the door to the infinite potentials of Bangladesh was opened up on the global stage.

The joining and contributions of Bangladesh to the United Nations Peacekeeping Missions have been a matter of pride for us. The armed forces of Bangladesh have been running this program for many years. The Bangladesh Armed Forces and Bangladesh Police have remained actively involved in UN Peacekeeping Operations since 1988. The armed forces of Bangladesh have helped in creating a bright image for Bangladesh in the international arena by accomplishing their tasks during disasters both at home and abroad through demonstrating humanism, efficiency and untiring efforts. Notable among the peacekeeping missions were: Reconstruction of Kuwait (OKP or Operation Kuwait Punargathan) in 1990; Operation SAARC Bandhan following Tsunami in Sri Lanka and Maldives in 2004; the mission following the cyclone ‘Nargis’ in Myanmar in 2008; and the earthquake in Haiti in 2010. Besides, the armed forces, the police and civilian staffs have made significant contributions by participating in numerous UN Peacekeeping Missions, such as: UNIIMOG, UNGOMAP, UNTAG, MINARSO, UNIKOM, UNGCI, UNAMIC, UNPROFOR, UNTAC, UNOSOM, UNIMOG etc.

The Arab-Israeli War had commenced on Saturday, 6 October 1973 at 2.00 pm immediately after mid-day. This war is also known as the 1973 Arab-Israel War, the Ramadan War, etc. The war lasted until 25 October. Bangabandhu was always concerned about the repressed people of the world. As he was keen about helping them, he promptly extended support to the Arab countries in their just war. It was not confined to mere moral support; a decision was taken to send a team of military doctors for actively participating in the war. It may be noted that many Arab countries had not accorded formal recognition to Bangladesh till then. Above everything else, Bangabandhu sent the assistance out of humanitarian consideration despite the uncertainties and risks inherent in the situation.

That historic decision taken by Bangabandhu was very courageous one that wielded a far-reaching impact. It may be mentioned that only a few Muslim countries outside the Middle-East had taken such a brave decision against powerul America, Europe and Israel. Bangabandhu summoned the Director and Deputy Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Muhammad Zamir and directed him to accompany the medical team after completing all administrative formalities. He also called the Army Chief Brigadier Shafiullah and the Director of Army Medical Services Colonel Khurshid Uddin Ahmed, and told them that the Middle-Eastern Arab and Muslim countries were in grave danger; it was therefore our humanitarian obligation to stand beside them at this critical juncture. Although our capacity was limited, standing beside the suffering brethren was our duty.

Colonel Khurshid became very emotional on hearing Bangabandhu’s words. It may be mentioned that Colonel Khurshid Uddin Ahmed was one of the principal accused in the Agartala Case. He was then a captain and was the accused number 34. The Pakistani intelligence agency ISI had brutally tortured him during interrogations while the case was in progress. Bangabandhu had great affection for Khurshid Uddin from that time onwards. Glancing at Khurshid Uddin he said affectionately: Khurshid, I am sending you on this tough mission. After saluting Bangabandhu, Khurshid Uddin said: Sir, I shall accomplish this mission successfully even at the peril of my life. Later, on Bangabandhu instructed 7 officers from the Army Headquarters and 21 soldiers were assigned for this task and directed them to take preparations swiftly. Before the mission’s departure, Bangabandhu invited the 28-member contingent to his office and issued necessary directives. While concluding, he said: The welfare of the repressed people, and the prestige of Bangladesh depend upon your successful performance. This prediction by the Father of the Nation proved to be accurate. Later Bangladesh also sent 4 tons of tea-leaves with the medical team that went to Egypt and Syria.

The team of Bangladesh Army that participated in a foreign mission for the first time left Bangladesh on 19 October 1973. The group included Colonel Khurshid Uddin Ahmed, the Director and Deputy Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Muhammad Zamir, Major Amir Ali, Major Shafiul Islam, Captain Shahjahan, Captain Noor Hossain, Captain Rezaul Islam, Captain Mafidul Islam and others. The Bangladesh contingent took off from Tejgaon Airport aboard a Boeing 707 aircfraft at 10.00 am in the morning.

In accordance to their plan, the team was supposed to land in Baghdad first. But the Israeli planes were attacking the area. Therefore, the Bangladeshi aircraft flew towards Syria after refueling from Dubai. But the plane could not land in Damascus and Beirut as well due to persistent Israeli air attacks there. The British pilot of the plane Captain Macintosh then overflew the Caucasus Mountain, the Island of Malta, and Syria and then landed at night at Benghazi of Libya after sending SOS signal, although the plane did not have permission to land in Libya. This was done as the plane had only 30 minutes of fuel left. The landing of the plane carrying the Bangladesh contingent inside Libya was an unexpected event. But the Libyan authorities extended all-out assistance to the Bangladesh team after learning about its importance.

With the help of the Libyan authorities, the contingent moved towards Beirut the next day i.e. on 20 October noon aboard a Middle-East Airlines flight. The ambassador of Bangladesh welcomed them at the airport after the plane reached Beirut. The team then set off for Damascus on a bus at 10.00 pm night after crossing the Lebanon-Syria border checkpost. They arrived near the city of Damascus at dawn. There was war-like situation all around. The siren started to blare immediately after they entered the city as 5-6 fighter jets of Israel attacked the area. The Health Minister of Syria Dr Madani Al Khyami formally welcomed the Bangladesh contingent on that day, 21 October.

The Bangladesh contingent was deployed at Dares Salam behind the 9 Division of Syrian Army, about 4 kilometres west of Damascus. The team set up a field hospital there with facilities for operations at a 2-storeyed girls’ school building. The Bangladesh team stayed there until 22 November. A few thousand army-men, Mujahids and wounded villagers were provided with treatment at this hospital over a period of 30 days. The members of the medical team untiringly took care of the war-wounded patients. The Bangladesh contingent became well-known in Syria as it earned a good reputation while discharging its responsibilities. A number of newspapers in the Arab world commended the activities of Bangladesh team.

At the end of the war, the Grand Mufti of the Great Mosque of Damascus highlighted the contributions of Bangladesh contingent in one of his sermons and showered praises on them profusely. The significance of this mission was huge and far-reaching. The Bangladesh contingent moved to the Lebanese capital Beirut from the battle-field on 22 November. On 24 November, high officials of Syria gave a hearty send-off to the Bangladesh team at Beirut airport. This support and firm stand in favour of the Arabs played a special role in eliciting recognition from them. In fact, Bangladesh was able to earn the confidence of the Arabs by the end of 1973 and relations with them improved notably. Ultimately, 15 Middle-eastern countries accorded recognition to Bangladesh at the end of 1973. As a token of recognition for Bangladesh’s support and contribution, the Egyptian President Anwar Sadat presented a regiment of tanks to Bangladesh.

Today, Bangladesh occupies a place of honour in the international arena because of the foresight, diplomatic positioning, timely and courageous decisions, and competent leadership of the greatest Bangali of all times, the most auspicious leader and Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Until now, Bangladesh has successfully completed 54 peacekeeping missions under the United Nations, with participation of 175,089 personnel. At present, a total of 6,413 personnel are discharging their duties in peacekeeping missions. Significantly, this journey of peacekeeping had started in 1973 under Bangabandhu’s directives with the participation of only 28 members of a medical team.

***Translation: Dr. Helal Uddin Ahmed***