
Bangladesh: A Sanctuary for Terrorists Operating Against India

Mansi Mehrotra

Bangladesh's long tradition of moderation in the practice of Islam has increasingly been under threat from radical extremists, which is one of the catalysts for the growth of the menace of terrorism. The role of religion in the politics and society of Bangladesh gained a thrust when Dhaka adopted Islam as a "state religion" during Hussain Mohammad Ershad's regime (1982-1990). Earlier, President Zia-ur Rehman (1977-1981) also initiated the process of cultivating the fundamentalists and Jamaat-e-Islami leaders for political support. The leaders of their Jamaat-e-Islami have allegedly been facilitating terrorist groups in Bangladesh. The successive governments have continued to obtain political support from the extremist groups.

The February 2009 mutiny by Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) had revealed some possible links of the BDR with the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). Earlier, in 2005, serial bombings, wherein more than 400 small bomb blasts rattled the capital and towns across Bangladesh, had indicated a steady increase in the activities of extremist groups in the political and social framework of the country. There have also been worries about the rise of suicide bombings carried out by Bangladeshis in the region, including India. There are also fears that these extremist might diffuse their area of influence across borders. The extremist groups of Bangladesh have also been reportedly aiding and providing safe havens to the insurgent groups active in the northeastern states of India; as also being involved in the killing of ethnic minorities and forcefully converting other religious minorities to Islam.

Ms **Mansi Mehrotra** is Associate Fellow, Centre for Land Warfare Studies.

Bangladesh in Turmoil

In 2001, two simultaneous events in the South Asian region — the establishment of Begum Khaleda Zia's government (2001 to 2006) in Bangladesh and the US' led "War on Terror" that led to the invasion of Afghanistan — redefined India's regional security scenario. And the security threat, which until then had come existed primarily from India's western border, extended to its eastern border.

Fundamentalist and *jihadi* elements were the notable allies of Begum Zia's national and international policy to weaken the opposition Awami League and its allies and to keep India destabilised respectively. In fact, leaders like Motiur Nizami Rahman, who fought during the freedom struggle of Bangladesh in 1971 and took over the Jamaat-e-Islami in late 2000, were made ministers during her regime. Aziz-ul Huq, the chairman of the Islami Olkyo Jote (IOJ) a radical Islamist party and a member of the advisory council of the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami Bangladesh (HuJI-B), Bangladesh's main terrorist group, formed part of Begum Zia's coalition government. Their presence in the political power structure encouraged the extremist elements to act without any fear as they enjoyed the patronage of the authorities.

9/11 and the subsequent "War on Terror" brought many fundamentalist outfits in Afghanistan under the US scanner. The unstable social, political and economic framework, along with the long absence of democratic polity made Bangladesh a soft location for the extremists and terrorists to establish their base. Easy money laundering and an inefficient police force provided ideal conditions for international terrorist groups, gun-runners, smugglers, pirates and ethnic insurgents to set up their recruitment and support centres in the region. Thus, the rogue elements of Afghanistan and Pakistan came to consider Bangladesh as an important base, if not the headquarters and staging centre, of their globalised terrorist activities.

According to the political analysts, links between the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Directorate and Bangladeshi Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), the military intelligence agency of Bangladesh, became evident in late 2001 after the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan, when a ship carrying several hundred Taliban and Al Qaeda cadres, along with arms and ammunition, arrived in Chittagong port. They were moved to the southeastern border area of Bangladesh. This could not have been possible without the knowledge and support of the security agencies within Bangladesh. In fact, Sayed Abu Nasir, a Bangladeshi national who had worked in an international Islamist charity outfit established by Osama bin Laden, was selected by the ISI and posted to Dhaka

and worked with the DGFI. According to the Indian intelligence sources, he was also involved in providing assistance to India's northeastern secessionists and sending them to training camps in Pakistan.

The Canadian Security Intelligence Service in its July 2003 report noted that the (Islamist) radicals in Bangladesh had established links with Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden's International Islamic Front (IIF). It also stated that Sheikh Abdul Salam Mohammad alias Fazlul Rahman, the leader of the "Jihad Movement in Bangladesh", signed Al Qaeda's official declaration of "holy war" against the US on 23 February 1998. In fact, HuJI-B was formed in 1992 with the aid of Osama bin Laden. Incidentally, HuJI-B also included Bangladeshis who had fought as volunteers in the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan. According to *Bangladesh Assessment 2003* in the South Asia Terrorism Portal, HuJI-B has 15,000 members of whom 2,000 are 'hardcore'. The assessment further stated that "Bangladeshi Hindus and moderate Muslims hold them responsible for many attacks against religious minorities, secular intellectuals and journalists."¹ In 2000, it was also suspected of an assassination attempt on the then Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed, who is regarded as pro-India and a secular leader. It was alleged that they were supported by the Jamaat.

The mission of the HuJI-B, led by Shauqat Osman, is to establish Islamic rule in Bangladesh. It has connections with the Pakistani militant groups like Harkat-ul-Jihadi-al-Islami (HuJI) and Harkat ul-Mujahideen (HUM), that advocate similar objectives in Pakistan and Kashmir and have been responsible for attacks in many cities of India. In May 2002, nine Islamist fundamentalist groups, including HuJI-B, formed the Bangladesh Islamic Manch (Association) at a camp near the small town of Ukhia, south of Cox's Bazaar. The Manch included Rohingyas, a Muslim minority in Myanmar, and the Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam (MULTA), a small militant group operating in India's northeast sector. Members of MULTA were reported to be trained by the Bangladeshi veterans of the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan of the 1980s, in at least two camps of southern Bangladesh. In fact, the linkage between Bangladeshi militants and India's radical militant groups is one of the major security challenges to reckon with.

The Jamaat-e-Islami and its students wing Islamic Chhatra Shibir (ICS) have maintained an anti-India stance and are supporting the insurgent groups in northeast India. The ICS maintains close links with terrorist outfits operating in South Asia and Afghanistan by helping them to recruit and indoctrinate youths exhibiting an inclination towards fanaticism. They were also reportedly involved

in the bombings within Bangladesh. Maulana Mirza Nurul Huq, convener of the Bangladesh Madrassa Teachers Association (BMTA) said in a Press conference that “the Jamaat-e-Islami and its student front Islami Chhatra Shibir are involved in terrorist activities in educational institutions using the name of Islam”. However, no serious steps have been taken to curb its activities. Other terrorist groups which are also quite active in Bangladesh include the Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh and Purba Bangla Communist Party.

The terrorist groups of Bangladesh have allegedly been receiving financial assistance from *madrassas* and several Muslim non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Bangladesh, including Adarsha Kutir, Al Faruk Islamic Foundation and Hatadin. Organisations in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Pakistan also provide them with logistic support. Other sources of funds include substantial revenues and profits from investments, enterprises and institutionalised extortion. The Jamaat has also set up dozen of trusts, and welfare and financial organisations like Islamic banks throughout the country. These organisations are almost entirely manned by Jamaat and Shibir members.

With considerable funds coming from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, the Jamaat-e-Islami and the group of related extremist organisations have turned into a formidable political force and became strong in the countryside as a result of being instrumental in setting up Deobandi *madrassas* and Shariat courts. Deobandi *madrassas* are the main recruiting centres for the terrorist outfits. The Jamaat-e-Islami has even facilitated the terrorist groups with financial assistance and manpower. For example, November 2001 witnessed one of the most recent high-profile murders of Gopal Krishna Muhuri, the principal of Nazirhat College in Chittagong and a leading secular humanist. He was killed by four hired assassins, who reportedly belonged to a gang patronised by the Jamaat-e-Islami.

The recruits of these militant organisations, referred to as “Bangladeshi Taliban”, are students of Deobandi *madrassas* that have mushroomed throughout the country, including the border areas of Bangladesh and northeast India. Apart from this, local residents and Rohingyas are also recruited by these terrorist organisations. These recruits are taken to Pakistan mostly via Nepal. In Pakistan, these recruits are trained and subsequently sent to military camps in Afghanistan. It is not known how many people from Bangladesh, including Rohingyas, have fought in Afghanistan. However, their numbers are believed to be quite substantial. Some of them have even served in Kashmir and Chechnya.

These recruits have extensive contacts with the Muslim groups of a northeast India. It is also reported that the members of HuJI-B easily cross over to India and

hide in *madrassas* and mosques in West Bengal and Assam. Thus, it is important for India to become conscious about security of the northeastern region and prevent it from turning into an ungoverned area like the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan which is nominally controlled by Islamabad and is a safe haven for the Taliban, particularly when connectivity with northeast India remains a challenge and the border between India and Bangladesh remains porous.

Institutionalisation of terrorism in Bangladesh has enabled India's northeastern insurgent groups to frequently use Bangladeshi territory as headquarters, sanctuaries, training camps, arms procurement and storage facilities, and transit route. On the other hand, there are also reports of the use of India's northeastern territory as a transit route for the purpose of infiltration into Jammu and Kashmir by the Islamist groups of the region. In addition, there have also been apprehensions about potential strikes by the extremists and separatist groups targeting West Bengal, Assam and other states of India.

In 2007, India had given Bangladesh a list of 112 separatist rebels from the northeast, who have allegedly crossed the border, urging it to hand them over to New Delhi. Senior Border Security Force (BSF) official Suresh Kumar Dutta was quoted as saying that the list given to the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) contained names of rebels, about whose presence in Bangladesh the BSF has "fool-proof evidence." He further said that a list of 172 camps allegedly run by northeastern separatist groups in Bangladesh was also handed over to the BDR delegation led by its Deputy Director General, Brig SK Gholam Rabbani.² Indian insurgent group camps are located in Dhaka, Chittagong, Sylhet, Mymensingh, Sherpar, Moulawi Bazar, Sunamganj, Rangamali, Khagrachari, and Bandarban. Cox's Bazar in Chittagong District is particularly used for the trans-shipment of weapons and explosives.

It was reported that during the director general (DG)-level talks between India's BSF and the BDR held between 28 October and 02 November 2002, in New Delhi, the DG BSF had handed over a list of 99 training camps of insurgent groups operating in India's northeast to the DG BDR requesting that action be taken against these.³ Some of the outfits operating in these camps are the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT), All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF) and People's Liberation Army (PLA). It is widely reported that the ULFA is a constituent of the Bangladesh Islamic Manch, a united council under the HuJI's leadership.

According to the intelligence inputs, leaders of various militant outfits of the northeast are based in Chittagong and Sylhet, both these regions having international airports which can be used to flee at short notice. In this respect, it may be noted that in certain quarters, it is believed that entire ULFA leadership has shifted its base to China after the new government under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina assumed office in January 2009.

In 2005, the Ministry of External Affairs prepared a list of 307 northeast insurgents supported by Bangladeshi extremist outfits and sponsored by the ISI, with money coming from the Gulf. The list was handed over to the BSF and erstwhile BDR.⁴ These insurgent groups, who are using Bangladeshi territory, are said to be cooperating closely with the erstwhile BDR, DGFI and ISI for their anti-Indian activity. It is suspected that ULFA 'commander-in-chief' Paresh Baruah and Arabinda Rajkhowa are having fake Bangladeshi passports and travel documents and are working under Bangladesh's direct 'diktat'. However, Bangladesh has maintained a policy of complete denial without verifying the details given to them. In fact, Dhaka counter-alleges that anti-Bangladesh elements are operating out of India.

Nevertheless, according to recent investigations in Bangladesh, Hafiz Rehman, one of the accused of the March 2004 weapons offloading consignment from China for ULFA, confessed before the metropolitan magistrate in Bangladesh that Paresh Barua was helped by Chittagong Urea Fertiliser Limited, the coast guards, the then chiefs of the DGFI and national security intelligence to offload weapons and ammunition which were enough to arm a whole military division.

India has regularly been taking up its security concerns with Bangladesh at different levels through diplomatic channels and institutional mechanisms existing between the two countries but without much success. In March 2004, while speaking to the media in Dhaka, Bangladesh Foreign Minister Morshed Khan ruled out the possibility of handing over ULFA leader Anup Chetia, presently in a Bangladeshi jail, to Indian authorities. The present government at Dhaka, however, seems committed to work with Delhi in its efforts to drive out the militant groups from its soil. In this regard, Bangladesh has recently accepted India's proposal to set up a Joint Task Force to deal with militants and other anti-national elements. However, the modalities of the Joint Task Force are yet to be evolved. As of now, India will mainly be assisting Bangladesh with intelligence inputs. But Indian troops will not be involved in any joint military operations to flush out militants taking shelter in Bangladesh.⁵

The decision for the establishment of Joint Task Force came at a very appropriate time for India, particularly when Delhi is becoming increasingly concerned about its security from its eastern border, principally since the attacks in major cities of India in 2008 had links to Bangladesh.

It should be noted that efforts towards joint anti-terrorist or security operations between India and Bangladesh started soon after Sheikh Hasina came to power. In this regard, a joint counter-terrorist military exercise took place in Jorhat, Assam, and West Bengal's Jalpaiguri in February-March 2009 despite the February 2009 mutiny by the BDR. Moreover, joint patrolling by border personnel has always been in operation on both sides of the borders. These developments are stepping stones for rebuilding strong regional ties and trust between the two countries. However, Bangladesh's Opposition leader Begum Khaleda Zia has strongly opposed the setting up of the Task Force to combat terrorism, alleging that Prime Minister Hasina was using it as an excuse to bring foreign troops into the country. Begum Zia asserted at a May 2009 rally, "There is no militancy in Bangladesh", and claimed that her government (2001-06) had successfully eliminated it.⁶

The Jamaat and the fundamentalists have been successful in managing the support of the people in their acts against the secular intellectuals and NGOs: and in their aggressive policies against women's emancipation, which has forced many women to commit suicide. However, despite the organised efforts of the Jamaat-e-Islami against women's emancipation, it is important to note that amongst Bangladesh's most powerful people, two women became prime ministers of Bangladesh, i.e., Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina Wajed. This could be possible due to Bangladesh's long history of a moderate Islamic culture where a large chunk of the population disapproves of fundamentalist bigotry. Nevertheless, if the activities of the Jamaat and the terrorist groups are not checked and the link with the Pakistani ISI is not restricted, the day is not far when Bangladesh will become another Pakistan or even Afghanistan, as a launch pad and base for the Islamists.

Also, after the recent BDR mutiny in Bangladesh, India's eastern border has become vulnerable to infiltration, illegal migration and smuggling of contraband due to absence of the security forces on the Bangladeshi side. Thus, it has become even more necessary for India to vigilantly guard its eastern border. This will require temporary permits for the migrants on humanitarian grounds and complete fencing of the border. It is important to give clear directions to the BSF to stop infiltration. Above all, there is a need to take appropriate steps

to contain illegal immigration from Bangladesh that has not only changed the demography in northeast India but has also been the cause for the people of the northeast taking to arms. It is also important to check mushrooming of Deobandi *madrassas* that are the main recruiting place of the militant groups.

The Joint Task Force can help contain and finally eliminate the militant groups in the country by sharing intelligence and, if possible, conducting joint anti-insurgency operations. Such endeavours can be a major development to enable both countries to deal with insurgency and militancy as well as build strong bilateral relations.

Finally, a holistic approach involving regional cooperation to eliminate terrorist groups under the Regional Convention on Suppression of Terrorism and its Additional Protocol under the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) needs to be pursued. Diplomatic commitment and military-to-military confidence building measures will help to stem the institutionalisation of terrorism in Bangladesh which will ensure India's security from its eastern frontier.

Notes

1. Hiranmay Karlekar, *Bangladesh: The Next Afghanistan* (New Delhi: Sage Publication) 2005), p.167.
2. "India Asks Bangladesh to Hand Over 112 North-East Rebels", 30/10/2007, http://www.my-india.net/n/a/2007_10_01_index.shtml, accessed on 30/11/2008.
3. Union Minister of State in the Ministry of External Affairs, Digvijay Singh, Rajya Sabha, Unstarred Question no.1701, Government of India, 5/12/2002, <http://164.100.24.219/rsq/quest.asp?qref=73800>, cited on 14/12/2008.
4. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2005.
5. Mansi Mehrotra, "India, Bangladesh: Joint Task Force for Countering Militancy," Article No:165, 27/5/2009, http://sspconline.org/article_details.asp?artid=art181, accessed on 28/5/2009 .
6. "Hasina Plotting to Get Foreign Troops to Fight Militancy: Zia," *SamasHits.com*, 5/3/2009, <http://news.smashits.com/NewsPrint.asp?nid=279748>, accessed on 5/3/2009.