



No mission is impossible, says Bangladeshi sector commander

When Islam Rafiq, a young student, prepared to join Bangladesh's army in 1978, he came armed with a belief: for a good soldier, no situation is impossible: challenging, yes, difficult even, but never impossible.

So when, a quarter of a century later, Brigadier-General Islam Rafiq found himself in charge of a sector covering some 120,000 sq. km. with about 2,300 Bangladeshi peacekeepers in a French-speaking West African country, he was completely unruffled.

"I knew that the size of the sector and the number of peacekeepers would present a major challenge because I knew right away that there were not enough men to adequately cover such a vast area," recalled General Rafiq, commander of Sector West. "But on top of all this we were also hampered by not speaking French."

Rather than dwell on any perceived handicap, though, he decided to focus on their strengths. "In the Bangladesh Army we have wide and varied peacekeeping experience," said Rafiq, who was based in the western town of Daloa. "Some of us had also worked in other parts of West Africa, so we were familiar with the region and some of its politics, and we simply decided to get on with the job."

For the Bangladeshis, together with about 225 Senegalese peacekeepers based in the southwestern town of San Pedro and some 100 military observers from various countries, getting on with the job has meant monitoring the Zone of Confidence between the opposing forces. It has also meant carrying out daily patrols throughout the western sector, which stretches from Odienne in the north to San Pedro in the south.

The Bangladeshi peacekeepers also provide medical care to the local population and mediate inter-ethnic talks in an attempt defuse the tension that is ever present in areas such as Bangolo, Man, Duékoué and Guiglo.

That tension erupted on 28 February 2005, when Bangladeshi peacekeepers found themselves involved in armed combat with a group of armed youths known as Young Patriots, who had attacked them in Logouale, a town under the control of the Armed Forces of the Forces Nouvelles (FAFN), some 30 kilometers from Man. One of the peacekeepers was seriously injured.

General Rafiq said that though the incident was unfortunate, it was not totally unexpected. "Prior to the attack, we had been receiving reports about mass movements

of young men in the Zone of Confidence, so we were ready,” he explained. “We are always ready, but primarily we are not here to fight, we are here to keep the peace, to prevent the two sides from fighting each other. However, we are also allowed to defend ourselves when attacked and that’s what we did at Logouale.”

General Rafiq said he preferred it when his troops were involved in more rewarding pursuits like sensitizing the population about the role of the UN Operation in Cote d’Ivoire (UNOCI) in the peace process, treating the sick and injured at their medical camps, and brokering inter-ethnic dialogue.

The Bangladeshi contingent was forced to intensify its mediation efforts when people from two ethnic groups, the Guéré and the Dioula, clashed violently in and around the western town of Duékoué on 29 April 2005.

Speaking soon after the inter-ethnic clashes, General Rafiq said inter-ethnic mediation had been the most challenging of the peacekeepers’ activities.

“Although many of us have experience in mediating between ethnic groups in our own country, I believe the inter-ethnic problem here is a political one,” he explained. “We only understand the problem on one level, but I think it goes deeper than our own understanding. The only thing we can do is try to keep things under control while we are here.”

As he prepared to leave the mission at the end of May 2005, General Rafiq said that his greatest wish was to see the peace process come to a successful end - for peace to return to the country.

“Of course I won’t be here when that happens, but wherever I am I will be keeping in touch with what’s going on in Cote d’Ivoire,” he vowed.





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