

BDR Mutiny: Security implications for Bangladesh and the region

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Introduction:

As the 36-hour long bloody mutiny by a number of the Bangladesh Rifles (paramilitary force in the country) personnel, who happened to be known as the ‘ever-vigilant sentinels of the border’, at its headquarters in Dhaka drew to a conclusion, along it took the lives of 56 officers, with 7 missing and a number of by-stander casualty. Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) jawans (soldiers), who are entrusted with the duty to safeguard the border of the country,



staged a mutiny on the 25 February 2009, the second day of the yearly occasion "BDR Week" which was earlier (24 February 2009) inaugurated by the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. More than a thousand BDR soldiers mutinied, took over the BDR headquarters, sprayed bullets in the Darbar (BDR's yearly gathering/ meeting) to kill senior BDR officers (who are on deputation from Bangladesh Army) and held their families as hostage. By the second day (26 February 2009) the so called "Rebellion" spread over to 12 other towns and cities across the country. Though the mutiny crumbled on 26 February (2009) in the face of a fear of using military force, it cost the lives of innocent

military officers including BDR Director General, Major General Shakil Ahmed, and his wife, invoked lament among the families of the victims and left the country in a disarray.

BDR, one of the oldest of its kind institution in this entire region, has a history of 213 years. The BDR jawans play a very significant role in defending the long Bangladesh border line of 4,427 km. This force is also responsible to curb smuggling in the border region and to assume the role of 1st line defence in the event of war. But the mutiny that broke out on last 25 February destroyed the fabric and core of this two hundred year old institution. As the whole episode is increasingly getting public, a close observer of the event can very easily grasp that the entire episode was a pre-planned elimination of the complete command structure of BDR to destabilize the security environment of the country. The BDR mutiny has several security and strategic implications for Bangladesh and, to some extent, the region.

Organizational collapse:

Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) is a major actor with in the state security architecture of Bangladesh with 67,000 soldiers stationed across the country. The 25 February mutiny, in the fashion of decapitation, has resulted into the elimination of the top ranked officers of BDR. It is a major blow to the security structure of the state. It leaves a dent in a major security apparatus, BDR, which contributes immensely to the total size of country's security forces. Since BDR suffers a collapse, which will require a while to repair, it may also compromise the Trans-boundary security of Bangladesh and its neighbours.

Unguarded border:

The BDR mutiny may usher serious security consequences for Bangladesh. The primary duties of BDR are; to protect the border (4,427 km long) of Bangladesh, to carry out routine

patrolling along the fringe and to conduct anti-smuggling drive. In the aftermath of the bloody “rebellion”, it can essentially be assumed that the core objectives of BDR will be hampered from being achieved, since a significant number of top BDR officers are dead and a complete vacuum in the command and control structure within BDR reigns in. Without proper direction from above, BDR will not be able to carry out their duties properly. Though, efforts have already been made for the resumption of BDR (border) patrolling. But at least for the time being, it will be difficult to ensure prevention of inbound and/or outbound infiltration through Bangladesh border.

Therefore to bring BDR “back on track” and to make it fully functional again, extensive political engagement, support of military, additional resources and, on the top of everything, time would be required.

Transnational security threats:

Given the nature of porous border between India and Bangladesh, unguarded border has grave security consequences for the region as well. Militant/ Islamist terrorists or armed ethnic groups will eventually try to exploit this situation for trans-boundary movements. Apart from this, the following transnational security threats may also constitute difficulties in the aftermath of the crumbling of BDR following a bloody mutiny:

- a. Smuggling of illegal goods.
- b. Narcotics.
- c. Human trafficking and
- d. Transnational movements of criminal gangs.



It is note worthy that, each year illicit goods (mainly FMCGs) worth two billion US Dollar enter Bangladesh from the neighbouring country. Due to its geographical location and strategic

importance, Bangladesh is considered to be a transit route for smuggling narcotics and small arms across the South Asia. Therefore, an unguarded border has serious consequences not only for Bangladesh, but also for the entire region.

Weapons looted:

As the mutiny was drawing to an end, the “rebel” BDR soldiers escaped the BDR compound and along they took huge load of explosives (mainly hand grenades), ammunitions and weapons. Once the BDR jawans ran away, local criminal groups went inside the compound to steal the weapons and explosives left behind by the absconding BDR jawans. It is feared that if the weapons and explosive end up in the hands of the local criminal goons or, to make it even worse, end up with the militant terror groups, it will create severe security threat for the country in the days to come. It also has serious security concerns for the region. The is an increased probability that the looted weapons might be smuggled out of the country to neighbouring states and end up in the hands of terrorists/ insurgents there.

Law enforcement agencies have already initiated operations to recover the looted weapons. But analysts suggest that the recovered arsenal is only the “tip of an iceberg”. Major General ANM Muniruzzaman (retd), President of the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security

Studies (BIPSS), while speaking to an international media told, "A large number of BDR soldiers have fled with arms and ammunition from their headquarters while many left their work stations keeping the country's border areas almost unprotected."

Intelligence failure:

The mutiny has left serious impact on the morale of the law enforcement agencies of the country. The intelligence agencies are facing stern criticism. They were just caught off guard. Many security specialists deem that the incident is the result of blanket intelligence failure. Any "rebellion" of this magnitude cannot be a spontaneous act. It was well orchestrated and well coordinated. They circulated leaflets night before the mutiny. It requires months of planning, communication and coordination to get it off the ground.

The entire episode of this blanket intelligence failure makes us vulnerable and recurrence of such incidents in future would be catastrophic. Hence, concerned bodies must take immediate measures for intelligence agencies' capacity building and coordination.

CT capacity:

Following the mutiny, another set back would be witnessed in the field of Counter Terrorism (CT). Though BDR is not overtly involved in the CT drive, but it plays a significant role in deterring the transnational terrorist groups to enter Bangladesh, in hunting them down and in carrying out counter terrorism operations. As the country is currently in a state of disarray, there is an increased chance that the terrorist groups, operating in Bangladesh, may opt to capitalize the present situation. Security analysts even predict that transnational terror groups may also try to infiltrate into the country. Colonel Gulzar Hossain, who till very recently was stationed in Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and had made immense contribution to the CT capacity building of the country, is gone missing since the mutiny began. Colonel Gulzar, immediate past Director of Intelligence, RAB, was a key person in combating Islamist militancy in Bangladesh who apprehended dozens of Islamist militants and their kingpins. Since his dead body neither could be found till date nor could be identified, one can not rule out the fear of him being captured and taken out of the BDR compound by the mutineers. If that is the case, though very much farfetched, then Bangladesh's CT architecture is in real danger. In case of such a scenario, it will also have regional implications.

Fear of internal instability:

The country had been in a state of panic and confusion since the mutiny broke out. It has not yet recovered entirely. Apparently the worst is over, an after shock of this incident cannot be ruled out. If the situation is not handled with prudence and efficiency, it may trigger off internal instability in the days to come. Internal instability in a country like Bangladesh, which is geographically and strategically very important, could have negative impact for neighbouring countries.



Safety of classified BDR documents:

BDR is the 1st line of defence during peacetime and fights along with Bangladesh Army during wartime. BDR, the then East Pakistan Rifles, had a very glorious role in the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. It suffered 817 casualties, and was honored with two posthumous

gallantries, 'Bir Srestho', award for extraordinary chivalry. Ever since the independence, BDR is involved in defending the border and have many classified documents. As it has been reported, both in print and television media, that the mutineers ransacked the Director General's office. If classified BDR documents end up in the wrong hands, it will have serious security implications for the country. Furthermore, as some local newspapers have reported, the information contained in the computer hard disks may also have been compromised. The implications of an information theft of such nature should also be looked into.

“Unseen hands” in the mutiny:

The size and scale of the mutiny and the associated violence indicate that it may have been possibly influenced by factors beyond BDR. While there has been a lot of speculation in the international media, it is too early to reach any conclusions. However, it would be important to undertake a detailed probe looking into the possible external linkages. If such linkages are found to be true, it proves that the country remains extremely vulnerable and external forces can penetrate deep inside the country, even inside its security apparatus.

Blow to fragile democracy:

As Bangladesh is currently going through a phase of democratic political consolidation with a newly elected government in power after two years of military backed caretaker government, the events of 25-26 February have dealt a major blow to that process. It is therefore critical for the Bangladeshi state to quickly recover and continue with the process of political consolidation. Efforts will also have to be made to mount immediate “damage control” in the field of civil military relations.

End words:

The top policy planners of the country including the Prime Minister have already termed the mutiny as a pre ordained massacre. They have also stated that the threat is still there. Bangladesh has hardly faced a national security situation of this scale in its nearly four decade long history. It would therefore be wrongful to view the BDR mutiny just as a mere insurrection to put forward certain demands. The incidents that took place at the BDR headquarters in Dhaka on 25 and 26 February have deep seated implications for the security of Bangladesh and also of the region. Hence, the need of the hour is to get to the root and see how such a tragedy took place. It is also important for the state and the national security apparatus of Bangladesh to take critical lessons in order to ensure that such a monumental tragedy never strikes this country again.