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Home > TERMINATING THE DEFECTOR: Recollections of an Mi Man

TERMINATING THE DEFECTOR: Recollections of an Mi Man

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Guest Column-by Col R Hariharan (retd.)*

Intelligence –the favourite whipping boy – is again in the news for the wrong reasons. An R and AW operative, supposed to be a mole of the CIA has vanished. As an old intelligence hand (even though of the much maligned military kind), it pains me to see the intelligence community pilloried for every failure. ‘Everybody remembers intelligence for its failures only’ is an age-old complaint of all intelligence agencies, the world over. But that is the *karma* of intelligence agencies. They are given the dubious sobriquet of ‘silent service’ and are asked by their own bosses to remember the injunction of Gita - just do your duty without looking for rewards.

Mr B Raman, himself a retired man from the Company, has written an eloquent column on the defectors from R and AW in this website. According to him in all there had only been nine such defections from R and AW in all these years. Considering the size of the operations this is not a bad record. But I am not going to nit pick about that information or question how R and AW handle its defectors. Different organizations have their own traditional methods of ‘taking care’ of the defectors. Some organizations not known to be accountable like the LTTE ‘dumps’ the ordinary by burning them with a tyre around their neck or puts them before a firing squad in case of the ‘high and mighty’ like its No. 2 man Mahathiya. Of course the suspects have always the option to bite the cyanide capsule – an inch long glass tube – strung around their necks. The KGB had more dramatic methods; it used to send killers with pens or blowpipes that fired poisoned darts at the victim. The original Company, the CIA puts out a ‘contract’ very much in the style of Dawood Ibrahim’s mafia giving a ‘supari’ to ‘terminate’ the defector. I am sure a

seasoned organization working in a democracy like R and AW must be having its own standard operative procedure for such cases.

As an MI officer of over two and a half decades experience, I have had my own problems not with any of my MI people, but only with agents, who vanished without a trace. Most of them vanish for more mundane reasons. Many get tired of the business of snooping, collect enough money and vanish. Some fall in love with another man's wife or something like that and vanish without a trace to escape the wrath of the irate husband. A few of them become double agents working for both sides; a very lucrative option practiced by secret agents the world over. Till the 90s many of Govt. of India's servants including scientists proceeding on foreign tenures, particularly in the U.K. and the U.S. used to vanish to join the band of illegal immigrants. But they hardly ever hit the headlines because they were not intelligence operatives even though they might have handled much bigger secrets in their other jobs. It seems defectors other than intelligence operatives are more acceptable to everybody, including the media. Right from Mir Jaffar, Indian sub-continent's history is strewn with tales of defectors; generally they had an uncanny ability to assess correctly and defect to the winners.

Just before the Bangladesh War in 1971, as a young MI officer I had my own experience of dealing with defectors. I was responsible for picking, training, and inducting more than three scores of agents into East Pakistan. Of course thanks to Gen Yahya Khan's far sighted policy in the East of carrying out mass reprisals against the Bengali population we had more than a million refugees to pick our potential agents from. We selected over 50 young fellows, most of them educated and raring to go against the 'Punjabi Army' as they called the Pak Army. We developed a training programme for them designed by me in collaboration with a defector from the Pak military intelligence. Das (his code name, he was not a Hindu), the defector, was not a true defector. In fact one of our enterprising MI officer's - Capt Rishi Gaiind went across the border in Karimganj and kidnapped Das and brought him back as a captive, well before the war started. Das was operating Pak sources from across the border in our own Army and gave us useful information on them. But that's another story. As a Bengali Das was moved by the plight of his people milling in Agartala as refugees, saw the light of the day and agreed to work with us. So the defector became a trainer (we did not allow him direct contact with our trainees because the basic principle in intelligence is 'a man is guilty till he is proved innocent') and became a great source of help.

We selected 61 persons for training, all in the age group of 18 to 35, except for a revenue officer of in his late 40s. They were a motley collection of students, itinerant traders, small time crooks (as we discovered subsequently), vegetable vendors, local contractors, and the like. None of them wanted any money (though we forced it on them because nothing binds loyalty like money) and wanted to get in to the fray to do their bit for their 'Sonar Bongla'. We taught them on what to look for when military operates, the different types of weapons, the security procedures adopted by Pak Army, secret methods of passing information, and a whole lot of works on passing on the information at contact points. As a standard security precaution we had 'cut offs' so

that even if one were captured he would not compromise the whole network. It was an exhilarating work for me to see the innocent rustic youth becoming cunning operators, learning the tricks of the trade very fast.

We selected Momin (code name), a highly motivated and bright post graduate student as our 'internal director' to canalize our operations. This was done not in haste. Mukti Bahini helped us verify his antecedents and linkages across the border and gave him a clean chit. We gave him special attention to teach a whole range of skills to operate a network of agents. At last the day came to induct the agents. A moonless night was chosen and they were infiltrated in various points along the Tripura-East Pakistan border. It was a poignant moment for me (I was young and not cynical yet) to see our 'babies' sneaking out in boats to fight the battles for their country in their own way. Within a week information started flowing in from them in bits and pieces. We were thrilled with each piece. Some of them were useful. But after ten days, bad news started coming in. It started with Mumtaz (code name; he was young boy of 18 and not a girl). He was killed by the Pak Army at the rendezvous point. One by one, five more of our operatives were killed in a matter of three weeks. We were puzzled. Our 'director' Momin wanted more money but had no word on the killings. It was our man Matiur Rahman (code name; he operated a handcart in Comilla streets) who cautioned us. He said that something was wrong and other network members should lie low. We immediately took damage control measures to save the network. Then came the shocking news. Momin was seen in Dhaka going in a Pak intelligence jeep, apparently a free man.

We requested our allies in Dhaka for a detailed report. Their news demoralized me. Momin had gone over to Pakistanis lock, stock and barrel. A week later Mukti Bahini came with a big list of complaints about Momin and how he was compromising Mukti Bahini's security. They wanted my 'clearance' to 'take care of him'. We know how such 'taking care operation' was done – a euphemism for assassination. Momin was the only son of his middle class parents, belonging to a cultured family. I had a heavy heart in deciding his fate; my boss in the true MI fashion refused to discuss the case for reasons of security – in fact, he did not know the details of our network and had no time as the war was about to breakout.

Reluctantly I said yes to Mukti Bahini. Mukti Bahini must have put out a supari for Momin. Within a week Momin was killed by Bachhu Mian, a 'patriotic' goonda of Dhaka underworld. He charged no fee for this patriotic act. Our network recovered and was useful when the war started.

The story should have ended there. But it did not. After the liberation of Bangladesh, when we were picking up our routine in Dhaka, parents of Momin traced me through Mukti Bahini. They cried and lamented about how their only son sacrificed his life for the nation and they felt betrayed because nobody had recognized it. It would have destroyed them to learn that their son was not a martyr but a turncoat. Neither Mukti Bahini nor we had the heart to correct their belief. In true traditions of Graham Greene ('Our Man in Havana'), I recommended giving some monetary reward to Momin's parents for their son's supreme sacrifice; of course, I

did so not because I had read 'Our Man in Havana' but because the whole thing was a shameful secret. There was yet another fall out. After the war, I developed a severe stomach pain that harassed me for months together. Army doctors examined, tested and scanned me but provided me no relief. After a year of troubled existence, my brother – a gastro-enterologist – examined me thoroughly. He asked me about my war experience as an MI man. I told him the truth about the death of Momin and how bad I had felt about it. He prescribed me a set of medicines; but surprisingly after my 'confession' to my brother, the pain started subsiding and I threw away the medications after a couple of months.

Intelligence operatives have a lonely existence, with everything shrouded in secrecy. Literally they live in a lonely planet. This burdens them with heavy responsibilities; most of them cope with the stress by developing an ironclad cynicism. Some start drinking and a few defect. Of course intelligence agencies of other countries, ever on the lookout for such 'victims' lure them. Our intelligence agencies also encourage such defections. So defection is 'part of the game' however we may not like it. But do intelligence agencies have a responsibility to prevent this? Of course, they do have and are conscious of it. But the PMO, and the ministries concerned also have a responsibility to share the blame. As Mr Raman has stated in his column, during V P Singh tenure as Prime Minister, the Government had agreed to set up a parliamentary 'oversight committee on intelligence operations' to bring in better accountability. Till date nothing has been done about it. Both the Intelligence Bureau and R and AW had agreed to this proposal, as they would not be blamed for every failure of government. Public would have welcomed it because there would be greater accountability from the government and the intelligence agencies. Of course, it's a different matter if parliament members with suspected criminal antecedents start overseeing the work of intelligence agencies. Then we will have a classic Catch-22 situation, with criminal elements supervising intelligence operations! God help our country!

(Col R Hariharan retired from the Intelligence Corps after 28 years of service in the Army. He had taken part in the Indo-Pak wars of 1965 and 1971. He had been a specialist in counter-insurgency intelligence. He had seen active staff and field service in counter-insurgency operations in Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Punjab, Tripura and lastly in Sri Lanka with the IPKF as Head of Intelligence. e-mail: colhari@yahoo.com [1])

Category:

Papers [2]

Topics:

Intelligence [3]

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