



# MARITIME FOREIGN INTERNAL DEFENSE IN BANGLADESH

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## An Interagency-SOF Success Story BY MAJOR ARI A. COHEN, PH.D.

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*"The security of the United States is tightly bound up with the security of the broader international system. As a result, our strategy seeks to build capacity of fragile or vulnerable partners to withstand internal threats and external aggression while improving the capacity of the international system itself to withstand the challenge posed by rogue states and would-be hegemony."*

— *National Defense Strategy, U.S. DoD 2008*

In early 2007, the Government of Bangladesh faced a crisis that would potentially undermine its economic growth and the development of its growing export sector. In 2006, the International Maritime Bureau, a division of the International Chamber of Commerce,<sup>01</sup> named Chittagong, Bangladesh's main commercial port, "the world's most dangerous port" because of its high levels of piracy and maritime criminal activity. The unstable maritime security environment threatened to significantly damage Bangladesh's evolution from a poor agrarian state into a dynamic export-based economy. Criminal predation against international merchant shipping within the emergent piracy hot spot encompassing the Chittagong Anchorage and Port became an issue of national economic security.<sup>02</sup>

### HISTORY & BACKGROUND

Having fought a bloody Liberation War<sup>03</sup> in order to secede from Pakistan in 1971, Bangladesh has been a "state in the making," struggling with rule of law and internal security issues for more than 45 years.

As such, the state has struggled to bring order to under-governed spaces, particularly within its vast coastal area, territorial waters and exclusive economic zone on the Bay of Bengal. The challenge of effectively controlling this large and environmentally complex area of sea, mangrove and coastline against the depredations of seaborne criminals is not new. What is new is that the global linkages established through international trade have made Bangladesh's struggle with piracy a very public security issue of significant national and international importance.

The historical record of pirate attacks against maritime commerce on the brown waters of the Bay of Bengal goes back more than 2,000 years. As the Muslim and Hindu kingdoms of the Ganges delta waxed and waned and colonial powers began to build trading outposts for their empires beginning in the late 1400s, piracy and maritime conflict on the Bay flourished over long periods of time. The Mughals, Portuguese, Arakanese and British fought brutal sea and land battles for control over both legitimate trade and illicit plunder on a body of water that today is within Bangladesh's territorial waters and EEZ. Burdened by an incredibly complex shoreline of 714km, consisting of rivers, inlets, islands and mangroves, the waters of the Bay of Bengal have continued to harbor a stubborn maritime piracy problem even as piracy in much of the rest of the world has become a topic of historical study rather than modern policy consideration.<sup>04</sup>

In 2010, As a result of increasing lawlessness on the Bay of Bengal, particularly in the vicinity of Chittagong, the U.S. Government began a comprehensive, whole-of-government, foreign internal defense program to support the development of a more capable Bangladesh Coast Guard. U.S. Special Operations Forces, including U.S. Army SOF and U.S. Navy SOF, played key roles in the planning and implementation of the FID program, which nested within the Depart-

01 Boats line up at sunset at the Port of Chittagong in Bangladesh.

ment of State's Mission Strategic and Resource Plan for Bangladesh. In line with this plan, the USG supplied the BCG with more than two dozen fast patrol boats capable of conducting 24 hour patrols within the Chittagong Anchorage and adjoining territorial waters of the Bay of Bengal. Additionally, U.S. SOF began to train the BCG on a range of security operations, including civil-military operations in under-governed coastal areas, disaster relief, medical skills, vessel interdiction techniques, marksmanship and visit, board, search and seizure techniques. The USG also made substantial investments in security, disaster management and maritime domain awareness infrastructure for the BCG. Positive results from these investments in equipment, training and infrastructure became clear in a relatively short period of time.

Comparing the mean number of attacks from 1999 to 2010 and from 2011 to 2015, after the inception of the USG FID program, reported incidents of maritime piracy declined by 45 percent on an average annual basis. Other measures of maritime law enforcement efficiency improved significantly post-policy intervention, with criminal apprehensions increasing by 110.6 percent and the value of illicit goods seized by almost 14 times on an average annual basis. As a result of effective program planning and execution, maritime FID in Bangladesh significantly decreased the number of pirate attacks against international merchant ships and positioned the BCG as a far more adept maritime security force capable of securing key ports, anchorages and sea lines of communication.

the ODC planned and resourced security assistance for the BCG. Initially, the ODC was able to provide the BCG with five 25-foot patrol vessels delivered in 2010 under the auspices of the foreign military financing program. As the USG provided patrol vessels began to facilitate BCG operational success, the ODC and the Civil Military Support Element, consisting of SOF Civil Affairs Soldiers from the 97th Civil Affairs Battalion (Airborne), began an intense and fruitful collaboration working with other USG partners and the BCG to develop their capabilities as a maritime and coastal security force.

In addition to providing patrol vessels and operator training, using multiple funding sources, the ODC and CMSE worked with the BCG to designate more than two dozen locations across Bangladesh's remote coastline for the development of Coast Crisis Management Centers. Each CCMC was planned and designed to include a fresh water well, generator, solar power array and communications package. Additionally, some were equipped with Automatic Identification System receivers and base stations in order to improve BCG maritime domain awareness. These cyclone, tsunami and earthquake resistant buildings are used as staging areas for the BCG to bring law-enforcement coverage to previously under-governed coastal areas. Using CCMCs as their base of operations, the BCG began to more effectively counter maritime piracy and smuggling in the remote coastal terrain and peripheral areas where criminal groups had previously functioned with impunity.

## FID IN BANGLADESH: A WHOLE OF GOVERNMENT APPROACH

Once considered by many to be the "province of Special Forces" alone,<sup>05</sup> FID, the training and development of partner nation military and security forces to "free and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness, insurgency, terrorism and other threats to their security," is best realized as a whole-of-government effort. This approach to FID, detailed in the U.S. Department of Defense Joint Publication 3-22, means that SOF plays a leading role as the executor of FID; concurrently requiring the support of the DoS, the Department of Justice, the USAID, and other U.S. government agencies. In the case of maritime piracy and criminal activity in Bangladesh, DoD elements within the U.S. Embassy, Dhaka, including the Office of Defense Cooperation and the PACOM Augmentation Team, planned a response to a worsening maritime security situation on the Bay of Bengal as early as 2008. As these plans began to take shape, the entire U.S. Embassy country team swiftly stepped forward to support a comprehensive maritime FID program in support of the BCG.

Working under the guidance of the U.S. National Defense Strategy (2008), The Strategic Plan for the Department of State and USAID (2007), and the U.S. Embassy Dhaka's Mission Strategic and Resource Plan,

Figure 01  
Chittagong Anchorage  
and its Environs

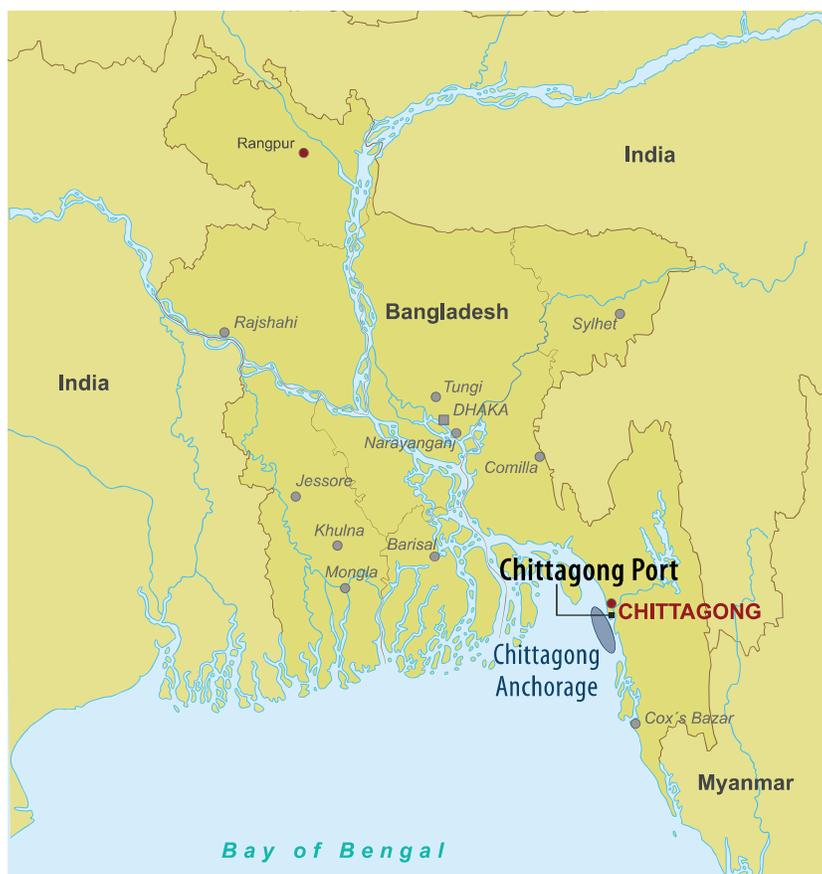


Figure 01



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CCMCs also doubled as humanitarian assistance nodes for remote coastal populations. In the event of a cyclone, a common event in South Asia, people in proximity to the CCMC can take refuge in the building until the storm passes. Across the coastal region of Bangladesh, cyclones have killed hundreds of thousands since independence. In some areas of coastal Bangladesh, the CCMC is the only hard-stand, cyclone-resistant building and the only viable refuge for local people during the almost yearly cyclones, storm surges and floods.

As the CCMCs were completed by the contractor and handed over to the BCG, SOF CA Soldiers from 97th Civil Affairs Battalion (Airborne) conducted training with BCG sailors, focusing on disaster response, emergency medical care and civil-military operations. During these training exercises, CA Soldiers worked with the BCG to understand and improve their relationship with remote communities that had previously experienced minimal contact with, and benefit from, the Government of Bangladesh. These civil-military operations training events also reinforced the importance of understanding the local human terrain in order to better recognize the underlying causes of instability and develop sound contingency plans for natural disasters, which so often impact Bangladesh's coastal region.

In addition to the development of CCMC infrastructure along Bangladesh's coast, the ODC resourced and oversaw the installation of integrated communications and AIS<sup>08</sup> monitoring stations in selected CCMCs, enabling the BCG to track the locations of international merchant ships on the Bay of Bengal. These capabilities enabled the BCG to vector patrol

vessels to aid merchant ships reporting suspicious vessel activity or pirate attacks.

These technical capabilities were significantly enhanced during Fusion Buffalo 2013, a counter-narcotics training developed in the U.S. Embassy Dhaka by the CMSE, the senior law enforcement official from the DoJ, and the Joint Interagency Task Force West, headquartered in Hawaii. This training brought Navy SOF operators to Bangladesh, including SEALs and Special Warfare Combat Crewmen to teach the BCG VBSS, small vessels tactics, weapons training, tactical first aid and ship clearing techniques. The training also brought members of the Naval Criminal Investigative Service and the Portland, Oregon, police department to Bangladesh to teach law enforcement techniques, ranging from the use of chemical drug identification kits to perpetrator arrest procedures. This whole-of-government approach to FID sought to significantly improve maritime security on the Bay of Bengal by reducing pirate attacks and clamping down on the volume of illicit goods smuggled into the country via the Bay of Bengal.

## THE RESULTS<sup>07</sup>

The integrated, interagency approach to FID, fully supported by the U.S. Ambassador, the Defense Attaché, ODC and multiple elements within U.S. Special Operations Command Pacific, had a significant impact on reducing piracy on the Bay of Bengal. The integration of a comprehensive security assistance program and training delivered by SOF operators resulted in a reduction of reported piracy incidents in the Chittagong Anchorage and Port area by more than 45 percent on an average annual basis. In January 2012, the efforts of the USG to train and equip the BCG were formally recognized by the IMB, with the removal of Bangladesh from its list of "high risk" piracy prone areas." It was a major victory for the country, which spent two decades on the IMB's piracy watch list.

As a result of stepped-up operations with highly capable USG-provided patrol vessels, SOF and law enforcement training, the BCG was able to make significant inroads against the tide of illicit goods flooding into Bangladesh's porous sea borders. These items included narcotics, alcohol and consumer products that fueled profits for organized criminal syndicates throughout Bangladesh. Prior to the transfer of USG provided patrol boats in 2010, the BCG's most successful year seizing smuggled goods was in 2007 when it seized more than \$16.5 million in contraband. The second most successful year, pre-intervention, was in 2008 when the BCG seized less than \$14 million in illicit goods. In 2011, the first full year after the FID program began, the BCG seized \$38.7 million in contraband. By 2015, the BCG had more than tripled this result, seizing \$124.8 million in smuggled and illegal

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A 97th Civil Affairs Battalion (Airborne) medic provides care to a child burnt in a kitchen accident. U.S. ARMY PHOTO

goods. The pre-intervention average annual value of illicit items seized was \$7 million; while the post-intervention average was \$96.8 million, an astounding increase of almost 14 times. Maritime FID, with US SOF and other agencies partnering with the BCG, had a significant impact on the success of smugglers and the ability of organized criminal groups to utilize sea infiltration routes for the transport of illicit goods.

Moreover, the additional capacity to rapidly cover sea-space in USG provided high-performance patrol vessels significantly increased the number of pirates and smugglers the BCG was able to apprehend. Prior to 2011, the BCG had never arrested more than 177 suspects in a single year; however, after the FID program began (2011-2015), the BCG made 255 or more arrests in four of five years. Another way to look at this considerable change in operational capacity is that the BCG made more arrests in the five years between 2011 to 2015 (1,409 arrests) than they had in the previous 10 years, from 2001 to 2010 (1,311 arrests). In the period following the FID program implementation, the BCG more than doubled the average number of suspects apprehended on an average annual basis, increasing arrests by 110 percent. This result, in addition to IMB piracy data and other indicators, provided the ODC, the U.S. Embassy Dhaka and other key stakeholders another indicator of encouraging FID program results.

## CONCLUSION

As defined by DoD Joint Publication 3-22, FID is a joint, interagency activity that works most effectively when conducted with a competent PN force. The maritime FID program partnership with the BCG was a success; not only because program planning included key SOF and U.S. Embassy stakeholders, but also be-

cause the BCG was effectively integrated into the planning process from the beginning in order to collaboratively map out its own organizational development. The close planning and development relationship, spearheaded by the ODC and the CMSE, significantly impacted security outcomes on the Bay of Bengal.

Reported attacks against international merchant shipping declined by 50 percent according to the International Maritime Bureau, when comparing data from the 2010 to 2015 (International Maritime Bureau, 2016). During the same period of time, indicators of BCG maritime policing efficiency also improved, with the average annual results for arrests and the value of illicit goods seized more than doubling and increasing by almost 14 times respectively. According to senior BCG officers, these outcomes resulted in reduced insurance rates for merchant vessels making port calls in Chittagong.<sup>08</sup> With U.S. partnership and support, the Government of Bangladesh could effectively

**THE INTEGRATED, INTERAGENCY APPROACH TO FID, FULLY SUPPORTED BY THE U.S. AMBASSADOR, THE DEFENSE ATTACHE, THE OFFICE OF DEFENSE COORDINATION AND MULTIPLE ELEMENTS WITHIN U.S. SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND PACIFIC, HAD A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON REDUCING PIRACY ON THE BAY OF BENGAL.**

## RESULTS — BY THE NUMBERS

**40%**

**DECREASE IN REPORTED PIRACY  
CHITTAGONG ANCHORAGE AND PORT AREA**

**1999 - 2010 (PRE-INTERVENTION):**  
20.5 - median number of reported incidents per year

**2011 - 2015 (POST-INTERVENTION):**  
11.0 - median number of reported incidents per year

**173%**

**INCREASE IN VALUE OF ILLICIT GOODS  
SEIZED BY THE BCG**

**1999 - 2010 (PRE-INTERVENTION):**  
\$7 Million - annual average

**2011 - 2015 (POST-INTERVENTION):**  
\$96.8 Million - annual average

**71%**

**INCREASE IN CRIMINAL APPREHENSIONS  
BY THE BCG**

**1999 - 2010 (PRE-INTERVENTION):**  
133.8 - annual average

**2011 - 2015 (POST-INTERVENTION):**  
281.8 - annual average

*\* ALL NUMBERS ARE APPROXIMATE. USG Material support to BCG began June 2010.*