



Global response to our War of Liberation

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THE War of Liberation of 1971 was fought not only by the brave Mukti Bahini within Bangladesh but also ably supported through the coverage it received in the international print and electronic media. Journalists brought home to the people of the world the story of the trials and sacrifices of the heroic people of Bangladesh, and the tribulations they were facing under the insensitive and brutal military administration of the occupying armed forces of Pakistan.

The first chapter of this international coverage had gained momentum from the end of December 1970 and continued through till the crackdown initiated past midnight of 25 March and into the early hours of 26th March 1971. The genocide that started at that time and continued till the surrender of the vanquished Pakistani forces on 16 December 1971 was monitored with courage by individual reporters at the beginning and then received detailed coverage as cover stories in different international publications as events unfolded over the next nine months.

The international response in the media in turn drew the attention of political leaders all over the world, motivated public opinion and led to editorial comments in diverse newspapers. It also influenced in some cases discussion within parliaments and elected bodies.

It sustained interest and sympathy and gave rise to concern about the deteriorating humanitarian situation that gradually exacerbated over the months of 1971. It was also this

anxiety that subsequently helped in the raising of funds for providing relief and rehabilitation to the millions of destitute refugees who returned from their sanctuary in India to the vast rural hinterland of Bangladesh after the war. Media interest also helped to generate resources for re-building the destroyed infrastructure within the country after our independence. So, I have no hesitation in acknowledging that the international media played an instrumental role both during 1971 and then later during the critical post-war period.

In this article I shall refer to a few journalists who helped to prevent the cover-up of a humanitarian crime and drew the attention of the world to the genocide committed by the occupying Pakistani armed forces. This lent perspective to the valiant Mukti Bahini as they fought to secure independence with their meager resources.

The first major expose of what had happened in the early hours of 26 March was done by Simon Dring, the young 'Daily Telegraph' reporter from London. He had flown into Dhaka on 6 March to cover the growing political tension and then eluded Pakistani search parties (that were entrusted with the task of expelling foreign correspondents). He managed to stay on and presented to the outside world his first-hand account of the fighting that had broken out in the stricken state. He left Dhaka on the weekend after 26 March and filed a special report on the sudden mass crackdown in Dhaka. He was the first to point out on 30 March 1971 that more than 7,000 Bengalis had been slaugh-

tered in Dhaka over 48 hours. It was also clear from his article that the army had struck without warning, under the cover of darkness and that these factors were responsible for enormous casualties.

The horror of the military action was given in detail but Dring made no mistake in his assumption. He wrote that the people of the then East Pakistan, after this heinous massacre, would not react quickly and that "it will take more than a generation before they live down the fear instilled in their minds" by the tragedy. Later events were to prove him wrong.

Dring's report was followed by an article on 3 April 1971 in the conservative British weekly 'The Economist'. True to form, it highlighted the events, cautiously discussed the probability of a guerilla warfare response from affected Bengalis and also speculated what might be the reaction of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. In this context, the magazine harped on the possibility of Indira Gandhi being careful of any emerging long-term nexus between East and West Bengal. It also interestingly stated that 'if Maoist propaganda came to replace Hindu-Muslim mistrust, it could lay the foundations of a united Bengal, independent of India.' In addition, it pointed out that Beijing was now confronted with the difficult choice between national and ideological interests.

Then came the 'Newsweek' cover story issue of April 5 1971. For the first time there was acknowledgement that the 'complex' Bengali was different from others in India and

Pakistan. As an entity, Bengalis were also identified as being dissimilar 'culturally, ethnically, linguistically and spiritually' (more humanistic and secular in approach). The interned Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was also acclaimed as a 'poet of politics.'

On the same date, 'Time' magazine also carried a story entitled 'Pakistan: Toppling over the brink.' It observed that 'the rupture in Pakistan stemmed from the country's first experiment with true democracy.'

They were right because the thirteen years preceding 1971 had been marked by military dictatorships and 'guided democracy' of various kinds. The article also hinted that the people of Bangladesh had displayed 'fighting spirit' in the past and were likely to undertake a freedom struggle in the future.

Colin Smith the first British journalist to reach Dhaka after the crackdown then sent his dispatch from Calcutta on 17 April to 'The Observer'. In that article he detailed how the second phase -- 'a classic guerilla operation' was slowly emerging within the occupied country and that the Pakistani army was adding a communal touch to their efforts - where men were being checked whether they had been circumcised and women and girls were being asked to recite passages from the holy book.

Similar articles appeared in the 'Wall Street Journal' on 21 April 1971 (written by Peter R Kann and the 'Time' Magazine on April 26, 1971. Both reports also highlighted the critical shortage of gasoline, diesel fuel and field communication

equipment vital for organized military activity by the emerging Mukti Bahini. The brutal killing of civilians continued to surface in newspapers all over the world. This led to the Pakistan government attempting to polish its 'tarnished image'. Their efforts were reported by 'Time' magazine in its issue of 24 May 1971. The 'Economist' on 29 May however binned these insidious efforts by Pakistan, went one step further, and clearly advised Pakistan President Yahya Khan 'to acknowledge realities'. This was an important statement that reflected that the world was not prepared to be fooled any further by spin.

Peter Hazelhurst, writing in 'The Times' on 4 June also indicted Pakistani President Yahya Khan for having perpetrated a 'holocaust' in Bangladesh and also took Mr Z Bhutto to task for his role in the events leading up to the massacre on 25-26 March.

The same month of June also saw another important article by J K Galbraith, former US Ambassador to India, in the 'New York Times' urging the stoppage of 'military assistance' to Pakistan in view of the abuse of human rights taking place in the then East Pakistan.

It was however the article by Anthony Mascarenhas entitled 'Genocide' in the 'Sunday Times' on 13 June that underlined most, the continuing horror of the situation. Written with authority and objectivity it drew the attention of world leaders.

As instability continued to grow, the strategic ramifications also found their way into Joint Statements and Joint

Communiqués issued after important meetings and visits abroad by the Indian leadership. These in turn received publicity through referral in opinion-editorials and also became the source for individual comments from international leaders (British M P Mr Peter Shore, US Senator Edward M Kennedy, Guyana MP Mr Bissember etc).

This snowballing of international resentment ran counter to the apathy being pursued by the US Nixon Administration and Pakistan. The weeks leading to the eventual outbreak of open hostilities between India and Pakistan in the first week of December 1971 also saw the unleashing of outrage in the world press and among musicians and artists. Civil society organizations involved in providing humanitarian support in the refugee camps (Oxfam) also used their own publicity linkages to focus on the travails of Bangladesh. All these factors coalesced to promote the cause of the Bengalis and later helped to garner support for the eventual recognition of the newly independent country.

I conclude this article by putting on record my humble thanks to all foreign media personalities who followed with interest what happened in Bangladesh in 1971 and had the courage to follow their conscience and speak out against inequity and for fundamental human rights and for democracy. That helped to mould public opinion and definitely assisted us to gain our independence.

The writer is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

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