



Indira Gandhi: Mujib Must Be Freed

On December 16, 1971, just a few hours after the surrender of the Pakistan army, then Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi gave her first exclusive interview to journalist Nicholas Carroll, published in The Age on December 20, 1971. Here we publish the whole interview.

Nicholas Carroll

In the first exclusive interview she has given since the Indo-Pakistan war began, Mrs. Gandhi told me yesterday that she has no doubt that India and Pakistan will establish a friendly relationship. She is convinced that there can be stability in the Indian sub-continent "if outsiders didn't interfere."

There were my questions and her replies:

Carroll: You have carried out your declared objectives regarding Bangladesh. You have made it clear that India has no territorial ambitions. How long will it be before the last Indian Army unit will be withdrawn from Bangladesh?

Mrs. Gandhi: It is very difficult to say at this stage. It depends largely on the Bangladesh Government. We certainly hope it will be very soon.

You are thinking in terms of weeks or months?

I cannot say anything at this stage because things are too chaotic just now. There is also the question of the safety of many people there. We have no obligation in that regard, to non-Bengalis, and so on. I think the Indian Army can help in this at this moment.

Can you repeat categorically that India has no wish to acquire any territory from West Pakistan?

I thought I had said it very categorically in my public meetings and in statements to Parliament, that we do not have any territorial ambitions there.

And this applies also to territory which Pakistan occupies and which you consider belongs rightly to India?

We have said that we will not take that by force. But, as you know, we not only believe, but it has been proved, that the cease-fire line is rather erratic, and has not helped to keep the peace. But this Government hasn't considered this matter afresh, or anything like that.

Bangladesh needs her leader, Sheikh Mujibur, very badly. What is India doing to secure his release? What pressures can you apply?

I don't think we can put many pressures. We have appealed to all the world governments through our embassies, and I have written personally to everybody, I think. We sincerely hope that they will exert some pressure. I saw this morning that the American Government is claiming some credit for the cease-fire, so I hope that they will look at this aspect also.

But you do hold a kind of hostage for him, in the form of the Pakistani prisoners of war in the East. Is this likely to play some part of the negotiation?



Prime Minister Indira Gandhi with Bangabandhu.

I really can't say anything about negotiations, because we just don't know how they will take place or what will happen.

What kind of relationship do you think India can eventually establish with West Pakistan?

I have never had any doubt that we will establish a very friendly relationship. I think it is unfortunate that they have had certain governments that have come in the way of such friendship. But I have no doubt that amongst the people of

As soon as the people of Pakistan realise what is in their own interest – I am not saying that friendship with India is in their interest in that sense, but it is in their interest to be involved in what is happening in our country, in its development – once they look at it from that angle, if we co-operate, then both of us are that much stronger and more capable of dealing with our very difficult problems.

You sound reasonably hopeful.

I am just an optimistic person, I think.

In India you will have seen there is no hatred whatsoever for Pakistan, none at all. There, of course, they do have a hate campaign in the newspapers, and, I am told (though I can't

Pakistan there is friendly feeling for us. Whenever anybody has gone for any purpose - they allow the Sikhs to go sometimes for something, and in the past a sports team has been very warmly welcomed – we can see this.

In India you will have seen there is no hatred whatsoever for Pakistan, none at all. There, of course, they do have a hate campaign in the newspapers, and, I am told (though I can't vouch for it), even their educational programmes.

You have reproached Mr. Nixon for his failure to understand India's position with regard to Bangladesh and the refugees, and as a result your relations with the United States are very strained. Assuming that you want to see them improved as quickly as possible, what specific action would you like to see Mr. Nixon take?

Well, you mentioned one of them – the release of Sheikh Mujib. They have to accept the reality of the situation in

Bangladesh. They have to accept the reality of the situation in Pakistan, too. A distant country cannot bolster up, or interfere in, the internal affairs of other countries. It may suit you to support any particular government, but the question is: does it suit the people of the land concerned? And if it doesn't, then that government can never be a strong government, not matter how many armies are behind it. It is not our affair; it is their affair. It is Pakistan's affair.

India's relations with Britain appear excellent at present. Is there anything in particular you feel Britain could do, either with regard to the United States, the United Nations, the Commonwealth, or in Asia, to help stability in this region?

As I said before, I am convinced that there would be stability and peace if outsiders didn't interfere. Britain has not interfered recently, but you have interfered previously. Part of this situation arose because of that – not just your interference, but other people's interference generally.

Do you believe that we are well aware of your anxieties on this point?

Yes, I think you are aware of them.

Would you welcome early recognition by us of Bangladesh?

The Bangladesh people would welcome it.

Do you feel it would help things internationally for us to recognise them?

Yes, I think it will. It is a good thing for Bangladesh to feel they have friends.

Did you discuss Soviet recognition of Bangladesh with Mr. Kuznetsov when he was in Delhi this week?

No, we didn't discuss that kind of thing. But we certainly hope that more and more countries will recognise Bangladesh.

Would you think it undesirable for there to be a rush of the Socialist countries only to recognise Bangladesh with the rest of us lagging behind?

Well, I wouldn't put it that way. I think the more that other countries recognise them, the more self-confident they will feel, and the easier it will be for them to go ahead in dealing with all the problems that face them now. They will need a lot of help, not only from India, but from all around.

We know from our own experience that freedom opens a door, but the main task comes afterwards.

Nicholas Carroll footnote: Mrs. Gandhi was speaking to me in the administrative buildings in Delhi, known as South Block, where she has one of her two offices.

Source: Bangladesh Genocide and World Press, compiled and edited by Fazlul Quader Quader