

THE WAR OF FOOTAGE

Representation of the Liberation War in US Media

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FOREIGN journalists began to write on the military clampdown as early as the end of March 1971, much before Mascarenhas' report was published, and many of the stories referred to the event as "massacre", "slaughter" and "tragedy". New Nation from Singapore and the Saturday Review from New York used the terms "holocaust" and "genocide".

However, it was Mascarenhas' eye-witness account that attracted the world press to the magnitude of the Bangladeshi crisis.

An interesting research shows that in Britain, from March to December 1971, The Times published 29 editorials, The Daily Telegraph published 39, The Guardian, 37, The Observer put out 15, and The Financial Times, 13. BBC broadcast at least eight episodes of Panorama, the investigative current affairs programme, on the war.²

But content wise, the reports neither focused on the humanitarian grounds of the war nor did they support the Bangladeshi people's struggle. A research cast light on the content of the reports of The New York Times and The Times (London). Analysing the front page reportage of these two, the research found that 34 percent dealt with military conflict dimensions of the crisis, 30.5 percent with its potential consequences, and only 16.8 percent focused on human interest stories relating accounts of the Bengali people, victims, and refugees. Nearly half of the reports had a neutral tone, 14.4 percent negative, and only 35.1 percent positive.³

However, we do not find much research on television coverage. Fortunately, I got access to footage of ABC, CBS and NBC prime time news from March 25 to December 25, 1971. The footages, along with transcripts, perhaps characterise the then US administration's stance on the Liberation War of Bangladesh, and show the response of the powers involved in the war and US media. However, the focus of this short write-up is how these three US television news channels represented the Liberation War in 1971.

Pakistan/Civil War!

The ABC Evening News for March 25

broadcast studio news on the military crackdown in Dhaka. Ted Koppel and Harry Reasoner reported:

(Dacca, E. Pakistan) Negotiations break down, results in Civil War; only West Pakistan has professional army; East Pakistan leaders speak of fighting Vietnam-style guerrilla war; those involved in training following British model for army know nothing about guerrilla warfare.

This 20-second news in fact says a lot. It not only termed the military crackdown of the Pakistan government on the unarmed people of Bangladesh in the dark of night a 'civil war', but it also highlighted the



supremacy of the professional army of Pakistan over the people's resistance to this oppression. It said that although East Pakistani leaders spoke about Vietnamese style guerrilla fighting, they in fact knew nothing about it. This first news after the massacre of the 25th in Dhaka thus distorted the truth of the cruel, premeditated killing by the Pakistani Army as civil war, and trivialised the people's resistance by saying "they know nothing about guerrilla warfare."

ABC Evening News for March 26 reiterated the situation in Bangladesh as civil war, mentioning that East Pakistan declared

independence. But interestingly, the accompanying commentary mentioned that "East Pakistan Leader Sheik Mujibur Rahman wants improved relations with India."

CBS and NBC similarly termed the massacre a "civil war" on the next day, March 26, and used a clip from French Television Film by Frank Mcgee that gave a background of the situation and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's recorded interview. As a result, news on the Liberation War was named, broadcasted and preserved as 'Pakistan/Civil War' in all the three channels. The name persisted for a long time, till it was replaced by the title 'India-Pakistan War'.

'Rebellions Crushed'/'Rebellions Not Totally Crushed'

Interestingly, both CBS and NBC claimed that "East Pakistan rebellion [has been] crushed" on March 28. The name of the news remained the same: 'Pakistan/Civil War'. On April 1, CBS Evening news reported, 'East Pakistan rebels capture Jessore'; they substantiate this information with the next line: "West Pakistan charges Indians crossing into East Pakistan to fight with rebels." NBC Evening News the same day reported, "West Pakistan radio continues to maintain East Pakistan rebellion crushed," while CBS Evening News on

April 2 broadcasted a very interesting short report:

(Studio) West Pakistan admits for 1st time East Pakistan rebellion not completely crushed.

It then went on to broadcast the report by Richard Lindley of the BBC:

(Jessore, E. Pakistan) Film shows Jessore villagers killed by West Pakistan army before retreating; West Pakistan now beginning counterattack; rebels living on coconuts; accounts on both sides exaggerated.

West Pakistan begins counterattack? Who were the attackers then? The same tone is in later reports as well:

CBS Evening News for 1971-04-11:

(E. Pakistan) West Pakistan army controls large East Pakistan cities... East Pakistan rifles are main rebel strength, but no match for West Pakistan army... rebels unorganised; refugees crossing into India by hundreds.

Indians crossing borders to help rebels!

After the dark night of March 25, people from East Bengal crossed over to take refuge in the border districts of India. Instead, from early April, ABC, CBS and NBC started to report on West Pakistan's claim of Indians crossing the border to help rebels.

Walter Cronkite reports: (Studio) West Pakistan charges India volunteers infiltrating into East Pakistan to aid rebels (CBS Evening News for 1971-04-05)

David Brinkly reports: (Studio) East Pakistan rebellion continues... Indians repeatedly crossing border to fight with rebels. (NBC Evening News for 1971-04-05)

Both sides involved in 'Execution of civilians'

NBC Evening News for April 6 reported: Both rebels and West Pakistan army involved in executions of opposition civilians, while the accompanying footage described:

(Teheran, Iran) Film shows plane load of Americans arriving in Teheran from East Pakistan. [Unidentified Americans say many Pakistani friends now dead; husband, father still there; many endanger lives if speak too freely.]

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