

ROHINGYA REFUGEE CRISIS

Putting the pieces of the puzzle together

LT GEN MD MAHFUZUR RAHMAN (LPR)

ONE of the most puzzling questions that has yet to be answered is, how did the Myanmar Army get away with such large scale atrocities against the Rohingyas? To solve this conundrum, one needs to go back to the military's deliberate and planned strategy that led to the horrific clampdown that forced thousands of Rohingyas to flee the place they called home.

The dominant elite in Myanmar's polity share the belief that the Rohingyas are recent migrants, and therefore, are not part of Myanmar's ethnic citizenry. The majority population is therefore hostile towards them. They are seen as a community that has a high fertility rate and are resented for intermarrying with ethnic locals. An accepted narrative is that the presence of the Rohingyas will result in large scale Islamisation from the west border. Such notions have shaped the collective perception of Rohingyas being a security threat that justifies military operations to "free Myanmar" of them.

In 2011, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing took over as Chief of Defence, Myanmar. In one of his strategic directives, he categorically mentioned, "We have an unfinished job". Following his takeover, hate speech against the Rohingyas increased. Myanmar's media started demonising the Rohingyas and building aggressive public opinion against them, saying that they were Bengalis who had migrated to Rakhine state in the recent past. Some Buddhist militant monks, under the leadership of Ashin Wirathu and the 969 (Anti-Muslim) movement, rekindled the issue by professing that in the future, there will be Islamisation in Myanmar from the west (Rakhine/Bangladesh).

In 2014, a group of our senior officers from Bangladesh was attending a strategic level international course in Beijing, and in one of the discussions, a very senior Chinese General asked one of our officers about the importance of the Rohingyas in Bangladesh's domestic politics. If there is a situation, was Bangladesh serious enough to go into armed conflict with neighbours on the Rohingyas issue? (We know the answers to both these questions).

In 2013-14, the Myanmar-China gas pipeline was commissioned from Kyaukphyu (Sittwe-Rohingya dominated area in Rakhine) to Kunming (China). China has spent billions of dollars for this project. Energy is the "Centre of Gravity" for China, so energy security is very

important for the rising state (there was a similar situation in Yadana Gas Pipeline from offshore of Myanmar in the south overland to Thailand). In that episode, thousands of Karen were tortured and expelled by the Myanmar military from around the gas pipeline site—they were either internally displaced or took shelter in refugee camps in Thailand). Along with the gas pipeline, a multi-billion dollar oil pipeline project in Rakhine was under construction and completed in 2014-2015 awaiting commission.

In 2016, in the name of a "clearing operation" in the hills of Rakhine, Myanmar Security Forces carried out atrocities on Rohingyas civilians, and around 90,000 Rohingyas refugees took shelter in Bangladesh. As I understand, this was a preliminary operation to observe the reaction and study the pulse of world bodies, and especially Bangladesh.

In April 2017, two Myanmar senior generals came to Dhaka for a discussion with their defence wing at their embassy in Dhaka. They kept it low key.

In May 2017, the oil pipeline—the more important of the two pipelines—was commissioned (running parallel to the gas pipeline). In July 2017, information of a military build-up in Rakhine state was coming to our intelligence community. Bangladesh's security concern was expressed to Myanmar. Myanmar's government was also reminded of the 2016 incident during which, in the name of clearing operations, Rohingyas civilians were targeted and there was an influx of refugees into Bangladesh. However, in the second week of August 2017, it was confirmed from the Myanmar counterpart that there would be a security forces operation on the Mayu Range against dissident groups and insurgents. It was also mentioned that it had nothing to do with civilians and there would be no repetition of the 2016 situation.

In June 2017 and July 2017, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing visited Russia and India respectively, meeting with strategic leaders and holding discussions on various issues.

The Myanmar military build-up was completed by the third week of August 2017. The Kofi Annan Commission Report was published on August 24, 2017. A number of issues related to the Rohingyas were addressed in the report. It included how the Rohingyas were waiting for decades for their civil and political rights to be recognised. Despite this positive development,

Myanmar claimed that the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) carried out attacks on over 30 security forces camps simultaneously in the early morning of August 25, 2017, where some members of the security forces were killed. Following this, Myanmar Forces, who were already concentrated there, carried out massive "ethnic cleansing" campaigns against Rohingyas civilians in the name of operations against Islamist terrorists. There are four issues that arise from this so-called ARSA attack.

Firstly, why did ARSA wait to attack Myanmar Security Forces' camps till their full build-up had been completed?



PHOTO: MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN/REUTERS

Rohingya refugees helping each other after cross the Bangladesh-Myanmar border after fleeing the Myanmar military's atrocities.

Secondly, why did ARSA launch its attack against well equipped regular forces' positions with machetes and locally made guns (ARSA weapons were exhibited by Myanmar Security Forces in the media)?

Thirdly, Myanmar claimed they had a number of casualties. However, it was never followed by military funerals. The media did not cover such events in Myanmar at the time (in April 2021, the media covered a customary military funeral ceremony of casualties from the Myanmar Security Forces inflicted by a Karen group in the Thailand border).

Fourthly, ARSA conducted attacks very early in the morning of August 25, 2017, and the Myanmar military conducted their large scale coordinated operation in the same morning of August 25, 2017 (in the military, we understand such a large scale operation

takes quite some time for planning, preparation and logistics build-up). After this so-called ARSA attack on the morning of August 25, Myanmar was very quick to come on record saying, "Since, the situation is unstable in Rakhine, so Kofi Annan Report cannot be materialised now". At the same time, they convened a national committee to prepare their own report.

In the first week of September 2017, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Myanmar. He appreciated Myanmar for measures taken towards peace and national reconciliation, and also expressed concern about the various incidents of terrorism and

This is a positive gesture, but we have to remember, the UG is offering this under the present circumstances and in exchange of support from Muslim countries, as well as the secular communities of the world. We also need to remember who is calling the shots in Myanmar. As long as the two permanent members of the UN Security Council support the junta in Myanmar, they are going to continue there. Bashar al-Assad in Syria is a case in point. In the foreseeable future, it will not be surprising that when the dusts settle down in Myanmar and the junta is stable, the remaining Rohingyas (may be 400,000 to 600,000) in Myanmar, especially in Rakhine State, shall be expelled in due course.

So what can Bangladesh do to prevent this? At the outset, we need to remember that we are dealing with a very smart and cunning set of professionals, and an organisation like the Tatmadaw (Myanmar Armed Forces). We cannot treat the Rohingyas issue as a routine matter. We need to activate unified political, economic, diplomatic and military lines of operation to prevent the junta from expelling the rest of the Rohingyas population.

Being a student of Security Studies and a follower of the Structural Realism school of thought, I understand that the international system is quite anarchic, and it is imprudent to entrust one's security in others. From that perspective, here I would like to discuss only a part of the preventive military line of operation. We need to develop a credible deterrence force, with appropriate punitive power to deter potential threats. When we say a credible deterrence force, besides other things, some of the equipment used should be more effective than that of the potential adversary. I want to end by citing Singapore's example. When President Lee Kuan Yew was developing Singapore, his number one agenda was "stability, development, economic emancipation and better life for people". Same as ours. However, Lee Kuan was also developing a credible deterrence through the armed forces. People questioned Lee Kuan's strategy as being contradictory for a small developing country like Singapore. Lee Kuan answered, "If we have a credible deterrence force, we would be left alone, and if we are left alone, then we can go ahead with our number one agenda." In August 2017, we (Bangladesh) were not left alone.

The writer is Lieutenant General (LPR).

An accepted narrative is that the presence of the Rohingyas will result in large scale Islamisation from the west border. Such notions have shaped the collective perception of Rohingyas being a security threat that justifies military operations to "free Myanmar" of them.

The Kissinger-Yahya plot against Bangladesh's liberation

BRIG R P SINGH, VSM (RET) and HITESH SINGH

THE Pakistan Army's genocide in Bangladesh, launched as part of Operation Searchlight on the night of March 25-26, 1971 was supported by US President Richard Nixon, whereas the media and majority of Congress were critical of the administration's stand on the issue. US Ambassador in Islamabad Joseph S Farland was supporting Yahya, whereas his assistant Archer Blood had to sacrifice his job for telling the truth openly. India tried its best, diplomatically, to pressurise Nixon to compel Yahya Khan to stop atrocities on innocent Bangladeshis and hand over power to people's representatives at the earliest. But all this did not make the US President see reason.

Against this backdrop, in July 1971, US National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger visited India before going to Pakistan and secretly flying to China from there. Indira Gandhi invited Kissinger for breakfast on July 7. The previous night, she personally telephoned Indian Army Chief General SHFJ Manekshaw, asking him to join her for breakfast, and specifically asking him to wear his military uniform. Manekshaw reached the PM's house at the appointed time. After some time, Henry Kissinger arrived.

At the breakfast table, Indira Gandhi told Kissinger to tell President Nixon to prevail upon Yahya Khan to stop genocide in Bangladesh and hand over power to Sheikh Mujib without delay. But he was quite circumspect in his response. She insisted again and again for the US President to exert pressure on Yahya Khan, but Kissinger was evasive. After failing to get a satisfactory response from him, Indira Gandhi said that if the US did not do anything, she herself would do something. Ironically, Kissinger asked what she intended to do. Indira Gandhi got up from her chair and said if the US President could not control the situation, then she was going to ask General Manekshaw, pointing at him decked out in his

military attire, to do the same. There was apparently pin drop silence in the dining hall. Everyone was surprised by her candid statement and Kissinger said to have believed her.

From New Delhi, Kissinger went on to Islamabad. Though he gave the impression that he and Yahya Khan would discuss the Bangladesh issue, that was a farce. On July 8, he had dinner with Yahya, where Kissinger apparently told him that for a dictator, he ran a lousy election. After dinner, false information was spread that Kissinger had fallen ill and doctors had



Henry Kissinger with President Yahya Khan in Rawalpindi, Pakistan. PHOTO: AP

advised him two days' rest. Kissinger then apparently went to Nathiagali, a hill station near Islamabad, and rumours were engineered that he would meet Kamal Hossain, close confidant of Sheikh Mujib, lodged in a nearby jail, to reach a settlement in East Pakistan. But Kissinger was driven off in a car incognito to Rawalpindi Airport and flew to Beijing, where he held extensive discussions with Chinese PM Zhou Enlai from July 9-11. This was the first visit by a high-up US official to Beijing after the installation of a communist

regime on Mainland China on October 1, 1949, when the Kuomintang Government led by Chiang Kai-shek fled to Taiwan after losing the American-assisted civil war against the communists led by Mao Zedong. The US had not recognised the Communist Government in Beijing and maintained its diplomatic relations with the KMT Government of Taiwan, terming it the only legitimate Chinese government. It accordingly had a seat as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

After capturing power, Mao had very

cosy relations with the USSR till Stalin's death in 1953. Thereafter, differences started emerging between the two countries' communist parties, till they finally broke off in 1964. Tension kept building up, which led to the 1969 border skirmishes between the USSR and China over the Ussuri River, when Moscow threatened to use nuclear weapons and Chinese leaders had to function from underground shelters. The US saw a golden opportunity to woo China, as Nixon wanted to use the China card to bargain with the USSR.

On the other hand, Mao was keen to use the US card against the USSR to avoid danger on its borders.

The US tried different channels to get in touch with Chinese leadership. Ultimately, Nixon and Kissinger found the best option would be to utilise Yahya Khan's close connections with Beijing. The plan was chalked out during Yahya's visit to the US in October 1970. In November 1970, Yahya visited Beijing, where he discussed the proposal with Mao. After getting the green signal, he told Kissinger to go ahead with his plans. Kissinger undertook a tour to many countries of Asia, including India and Pakistan, under a secret plan codenamed Operation Marco Polo-I in July 1971 to quietly slip off to Beijing from Islamabad.

During Kissinger's China visit, both sides discussed a variety of issues. Kissinger found Zhou Enlai, who had studied in France and Germany from 1920 to 1923, to be a very articulate person who could converse even in German, Kissinger's mother tongue, with ease. Both leaders agreed on recognising Communist China as the only China and allotting a permanent seat in the UNSC to Beijing instead of Taiwan. The situation in the Indian subcontinent was discussed in detail, on which they had similar views, with both expressing their unwavering support to Pakistan. Zhou briefed Kissinger about the Indo-Chinese border skirmishes and blamed India for provocations. Both leaders had complete convergence of views on Yahya's stand on the Bangladesh issue. Kissinger flew back via Paris and reached Washington on July 13. On July 15, 1971, a mutually decided date by Kissinger and Zhou, US President Richard Nixon announced to the world the diplomatic coup accomplished by his National Security Advisor.

The KMT regime in Taiwan was enraged over Nixon's announcement and the Indian government was aghast at this unimaginable development. The Sino-US détente had caused a fundamental change in international

strategic equations. Its impact on the Indian subcontinent was more immediate and tangible. There was euphoria in West Pakistan, people were jubilant over the master stroke of their President in facilitating Sino-US rapprochement. Yahya Khan was now fully convinced that he could bulldoze his way into Bangladesh after winning the gratitude of both China and the US. The Sino-US détente had grossly undermined India's position in the region. President Nixon called a meeting of the National Security Council on July 16. Kissinger briefed the council on his Asian trip and his parleys with Zhou Enlai and Indira Gandhi. Nixon also told the council that he wanted to help his friend Yahya Khan on the Bangladesh crisis.

On October 25, 1971 the People's Republic of China was admitted to the UN as a permanent member of the UNSC in place of KMT's Taiwan. The most interesting outcome of the Sino-US friendship was witnessed when the PRC's delegation was ushered into the UN. The permanent representative of PRC fired the very first salvos on the "American imperialists and their running dogs". However, this was not taken seriously and termed as "firing by empty cannons". The Taiwanese were unceremoniously escorted out of their permanent seat at the UNSC. An old friend was sacrificed by the Americans at the altar of the Sino-US détente.

During the December 1971 Indo-Pak war, both the US and China had jointly tried to stall the liberation of Bangladesh through UNSC resolutions, and also worked against the interests of India and Bangladesh. New Delhi then went into over-drive to neutralise the effects of the newly formed US-China-Pakistan axis. However, none of their machinations could stop the eventual establishment of the independent nation of Bangladesh.

Brig RP Singh, VSM, is a retired Brigadier of the Indian Army. He is a veteran of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, in which he was involved in different capacities from day one till the surrender of the Pakistan Army on December 16, 1971. Hitesh Singh is a defence scholar and analyst.

The US tried different channels to get in touch with Chinese leadership. Ultimately, Nixon and Kissinger found the best option would be to utilise Yahya Khan's close connections with Beijing. The plan was chalked out during Yahya's visit to the US in October 1970.