



March 25: A glimpse into the darkest of all nights



Shahnoor Wahid is a senior journalist.

SHAHNOOR WAHID

DATELINE: March 25, 1971. 11am. Some of us were having tea at the canteen of Mohsin Hall, Dhaka University when a batchmate of ours came inside and warned us of a possible police/military action later in the evening. He was politically active, so sensing the urgency in his voice, we immediately got up and left the hall. I went to Wari, where I used to live those days, and informed everyone about the development.

In fact, when the talk between Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Pakistan President Yahya Khan ended abruptly without any solution, it was feared that the army might crack down on political and student leaders in East Pakistan any time. The news spread fast, and unease descended on the entire city of Dhaka. Dreading that something ominous was going to happen, people rushed back to the safety of their homes.

While the Bengalis in Dhaka were bolting their main gates, a grimmer drama was being scripted in some other parts of the city. A large group of bloodthirsty hyenas donning the Pakistani military uniforms were gnashing their teeth, sensing human blood. Those animals were kept on a leash for a last moment signal from their high command to launch the infamous Operation Searchlight. Everything was in place. The top army brass were in town. And don't forget that politician Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, one of the masterminds behind the planned genocide, was also in the city—at the

Hotel Intercontinental, to be precise—waiting for the orgy of killings to begin.

The nefarious plan, hatched throughout the months of February and March, was to move fast and arrest or kill Awami League leaders, student leaders and Bengali intellectuals. It also included disarming the Bengali officers and jawans in the military, paramilitary and police forces, and capturing the armoury, radio station and telephone exchange. The last two places were important to establish control over the province of East Pakistan.

Historical sources tell us that Lieutenant General Tikka Khan and Lieutenant General AAK Niazi decided to strike before the Bengalis could put up strong barriers on their way to the interiors of Dhaka. Major General Khadim Hussain Raja, general officer commanding (GOC) of the 14th Division, Major General Rao Farman Ali, GOC of the 57th Division, and General Abdul Hamid Khan, chief of staff of Pakistan Army, had approved the plan of Operation Searchlight. It is said that Rao Farman Ali himself prepared the five-page operation plan, and along with General Hamid Khan, General AO Miththi and Colonel Sadullah, he had visited different cantonments by helicopter to inspect the preparation of the operation.

The plan elaborated that on the night of March 25, General Rao Farman Ali would lead the operation in Dhaka, and General Khadim Hussain Raja would lead the operation in other regions of East Pakistan. To reinforce their strength, two more senior officers, Major General Iftikhar Khan Janjua and General Miththi, had been asked to join them in Dhaka.

The heavily armed Pakistani soldiers, in full battle gear, rolled out of Dhaka Cantonment at 11:30pm to launch a full attack on unarmed Bengalis. At the Farm Gate area, they killed dozens

ILLUSTRATION:
MANAN MORSHED

In Wari, we went to the roof of our house to look for any sign of the police/military operation. It was around 12am when a loud explosion shook our building. It seemed something had happened nearby on the road but, as we learnt later, military tanks had blown up the office of Daily Ittefaq newspaper, located on Hatkhola Road.

of demonstrators. Some of the army units launched an attack on Pilkhana headquarters of the East Pakistan Rifles (EPR), and another group attacked the Rajarbagh Police Line. The brave policemen in Rajarbagh resisted with about 200 rifles, and laid down their lives for their motherland. Pakistanis also faced resistance at Pilkhana. But they could not hold the fort for long because of a shortage of ammunition.

From "Witness to Surrender" by Brigadier General Siddiq Salik of Pakistan Army intelligence, we have come to know that it was around 1:30am when a contingent of commandos went into the residence of Bangabandhu and arrested him. Salik wrote that the commando leader was instructed specifically to bring Bangabandhu alive. Around that time, the Pakistan Army brutally attacked some residential quarters of the teachers of Dhaka University, and then attacked Iqbal Hall, Jagannath Hall and Rokeya Hall, killing hundreds of students and some senior teachers.

Other units of the Pakistani troops went to the old part of Dhaka all the way up to Sadarghat to kill Bengalis indiscriminately. Striking maximum fear in the minds of Bengalis was their main intention.

In Wari, we went to the roof of our house to look for any sign of the police/military operation. It was around 12am when a loud explosion shook our building. It seemed something had happened nearby on the road but, as we learnt later, military tanks had blown up the office of Daily Ittefaq newspaper, located on Hatkhola Road. The shell had killed about a dozen workers in the printing machine room and set the building on fire. The loud explosion was followed by heavy machine gun fire. We learnt later that pedestrians in and around Thatari Bazar had been gunned down. A number of rickshaw pullers and

shop owners who could not run to a safer place were killed there that night. Then we saw the sky on all sides turning red as houses were set on fire.

It was well past 2am when we could still hear the sound of gunfire and heavy army vehicles moving in the distance. We jumped at any sound of footsteps outside on the road. By 4am, it became quiet and we dozed off wherever we were sitting surrounding the radio. Suddenly, the radio crackled back to life, and we heard a voice saying that curfew had been imposed for an indefinite period of time. Anyone violating the curfew rules would be shot to death.

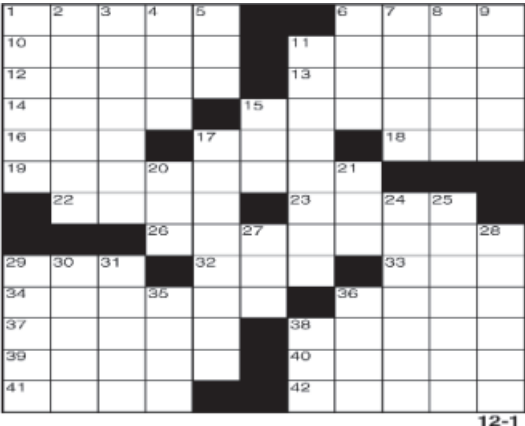
Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was happy with what he saw from the window of his hotel. A satisfied man, he boarded a plane for Karachi at dawn. He had to execute some of his heinous plans now that Sheikh Mujib was out of the way. Reaching Karachi, he said, "Thank God, Pakistan has been saved."

There were no signs of life outside on March 26 as units of the Pakistan Army patrolled the streets of Dhaka menacingly. On March 27, the leaders of some political parties that supported the army action managed to convince the army generals to lift the curfew for about half a day so people could buy essentials and the homeless could board a train or a bus to go out of Dhaka.

Dhaka University had been at the centre of our fight for total liberation from the illegitimate Pakistani military rule since the Language Movement. The teachers and students of this iconic institution provided the moral and intellectual support for the social and political leaders to continue their mission at all fronts until achieving total victory. In 1971, teachers, students and the general staff of Dhaka University gave their blood for the independence of the country. The history of this brave nation is written in golden letters in our hearts.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Spits out
6 Parting tool
10 Dutch bloom
11 Opera's Callas
12 Game setting
13 Milky stones
14 Donate
15 Hurry
16 Seventh Greek letter
17 Yoga need
18 Twisty turn
19 Waited patiently
22 German denial
23 Metal sources
26 Vicious dispute
29 Fitting
32 Field worker
- 33 "Aw, shucks!"
34 Like ice
36 Singer McEntire
37 Namely
38 Greedy king
39 Makes smooth
40 Be penitent
41 Went by horse
42 Hunger signals
- DOWN**
- 1 Play places
2 Prudish one
3 Lift
4 Cellar supply
5 Mud bath site
6 Tube tops
7 Give an address
8 Flour factories
- 9 Army sites
11 Complain loudly
15 Chips buy
17 Mosque towers
20 Quirk
21 Numerical prefix
24 Goaded
25 Caboodle's kin
27 Wallet bill
28 Taunts
29 Following
30 Utah city
31 Took to impound
35 Fan publication
36 Meter maid of song
38 Travel aid



SUNDAY'S ANSWERS



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CAREER OPPORTUNITY

Essential Drugs Company Limited (EDCL) is a 100% state owned Pharmaceutical Industry will recruit the following positions in its Dhaka Factory.

Sl. No.	Post	Qualification	Experience & Other Qualification
01.	Assistant Engineering Officer (Mechanical) Post-02	Post Graduate or Graduation degree in 04 (four) years in Mechanical Engineering.	01 Minimum 03 (three) years experience in the post of repairs & maintenance works in pharmaceutical industries. * Experience may be relaxed depending on academic and professional record. 02 Conversant with the latest Engineering and technological development in the relevant field. 03 Computer literacy of the candidate is essential. 04 Minimum age limit 28 years.
02.	Jr. Engineering Officer (ETP) Post-01	Diploma in Environmental Technology.	01 Minimum 02 (two) years experience in ETP operation and maintenance in pharmaceutical industries/Chemical industries. 02 Computer literacy of the candidate is essential. 03 Minimum age limit 27 years.
03.	Jr. Mechanics (ETP) Post-01	S.S.C	01 Minimum 03 (three) years experience in ETP operation and maintenance. 04 Minimum age limit 25 years.

Please send the applications to the following address with complete CV, copies off attested relevant certificates and three copies of recent passport size colour photographs by 05 April, 2022.
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