



March 25: A glimpse into the darkest of all nights



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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

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ILLUSTRATION:
MANAN MORSHED

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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.

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

