



Kendriya Chhatra Sangram Parishad protesting the postponement of national assembly session on March 1, 1971 at Dhaka University.

PHOTO: RASHID TALUKDER



Protesting the postponement, agitated people of the then East Pakistan took to the streets of Dhaka on March 1, 1971. They also burned a Pakistan flag in protest.

PHOTO: AFTAB AHMED

Those turbulent first days of '71 March

“We shall continue our fight until we achieve the people’s demand for autonomy. The struggle for freedom must not stop even if I’m not here. Even if I die, 70 million people must see a truly independent Bangladesh,” declared Bangabandhu.

AHMAD ISTIAK

It was a tumultuous month when the inception of a new nation was taking shape, changing the course of the subcontinent’s history forever. In March 1971, Bangladesh’s masses joined the nation’s final struggle for freedom. In the first week of the month, it became apparent that Bangladesh would emerge as an independent nation. However, questions remained as to how and when it would happen.

On March 1, General Yahya Khan suddenly postponed the national assembly session that was scheduled to take place on March 3.

About a month earlier, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, chairman of Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), had a meeting with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, president of Awami League (January 27-28), where Bangabandhu demanded to formulate the state ordinance – based on the historic six-point demand – within February 15.

However, Bhutto wanted to continue the discussions and negotiations further. Against



On March 3, a huge mass gathering was organised by the student leaders of all parties at Paltan Maidan.

will not be possible for us to join the assembly.” When President Yahya Khan postponed the assembly indefinitely, agitated masses of the then East Pakistan took to the streets of Dhaka. All shops, businesses and offices were shut down. At that time a cricket match of BCCP was taking place at Dhaka stadium. Agitated audience stopped the match and protested the decision. All of a sudden, Dhaka became a city of protests, procession and demonstration – the air of which had been looming over the city for months. Even government officials participated in those processions.

Political leaders expressed their disappointment over the announcement and stated that the decision was completely against the people’s mandate. It was taken to sabotage the process of transferring the power to the elected representatives of the country’s citizens.

At one point, a mass procession reached Hotel Purbani at Motijheel, where members of Awami League’s parliamentary committee were writing the draft ordinance based on the six-point demand.

During a press conference after the meeting, AL President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman harshly criticised Yahya’s decision and said the assembly session was postponed just to appease a certain party. “We cannot accept this. The democratic process has almost been foiled by this decision,” he said.

He went on to say the people of Bengal have refused this Yahya’s decision. Mujib declared an all-out shutdown on March 2 in Dhaka and a half day (till 2:00pm) shutdown in the entire East Pakistan on March 3. He also announced that a mass gathering will be held on March 7 at the Racecourse Maidan, where he will declare the next course of action.

On March 1, Bangabandhu sent a delegation to discuss the matters with Maulana Bhashani. That night, political leaders met Bangabandhu at his Dhanmondi residence. Meanwhile, Abdul Qayyum Khan, leader of Pakistan Muslim League (Qayyum), declared his support for Yahya’s decision of postponing the assembly. In protest of this support, Khan A Sabur, general secretary of the party, announced his resignation from the party.

On that very night, Yahya appointed Lieutenant General Sahabzada Yaqub Khan, the then martial law administrator of zone B, as the governor of East Pakistan.

In the later hours of the night, Yaqub banned the publication or broadcasting of any news, opinion and photographs that are

directly or indirectly against the “interest and sovereignty” of Pakistan according to the Martial Law Ordinance 110. According to the law, any individual alleged of violating this order could be served with a maximum of 10 years of imprisonment with hard labour.

Amid such a situation, students of all parties organised a demonstration in front of the arts building at Dhaka University. At 11:00am on March 2, while ASM Abdur Rob, the then vice president of Dhaka University Central Students’ Union (Ducusu), was speaking at the demonstration, Sheikh Zahid Hossain, a leader of Chhatra League (BCL), brought a flagpole and Rob hoisted the first flag of Bangladesh.

Abdul Kuddus Makhon, Tofail Ahmed and Nur-e-Alam Siddique accompanied Rob at the gathering.

Many popular student leaders such as Makhon and Shahjahan Siraj delivered speeches at the demonstration where they proposed that Bangabandhu read out the manifesto for independence during the upcoming mass gathering on March 7. The student leaders pledged to continue their struggle until achieving independence and autonomy. They brought out a massive procession from Dhaka University that ended at Baitul Mukarram mosque.

On the same day, National Awami Party (NAP) and Jatiya League organised two demonstrations around 11:00am at Central Shaheed Minar and around 3:00pm at Baitul Mukarram respectively. After the demonstrations, protestors tried to form a procession, when police fired at the crowd and three students of Teigaon Polytechnic School – Aziz, Morshed and Mamun – were killed. Around 50 others were wounded.

Although Bangabandhu called for a strike at Dhaka on March 2, the strike was observed all over the country. Most of the major streets were controlled by the army at that time. On that night, the newly appointed governor of East Pakistan declared a curfew. Bangabandhu vehemently opposed the announcement and called for a nationwide strike on March 3-6.

At one stage, students and the people broke the curfew and brought out processions all over the country. They installed barricades in every major street of the city. When a procession was heading to the governor’s residence around 9:00pm, the army fired at the procession at the DIT intersection in front of the office of the Morning News newspaper.

On March 3, a half-day strike was observed all over the country and a huge mass gathering was organised by the student leaders of all parties at Paltan Maidan. The gathering was chaired by the then BCL president Nur-e-Alam Siddique.

Shahjahan Siraj read out the manifesto for independence in presence of Bangabandhu in front of the crowd. At that time, Bangabandhu was declared the supreme leader of free and independent Bangladesh. Paltan Maidan was bursting with crowds and their slogans. Bangabandhu called for a non-cooperation movement from that gathering.

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During that gathering, ASM Abdur Rob, the then VP of Ducusu; then general secretary Abdul Kuddus Makhon and then BCL president Nur-e-Alam Siddique and then general secretary Shahjahan Siraj pledged to commence the fight for independence.

The manifesto for independence

Bangladesh is the name of an independent and sovereign state comprising 54,506 square miles of land, which is home to 70 million people. Three under-mentioned goals have to be achieved by forming this state:

- ❏ Through forming a free and sovereign Bangladesh, a strong, powerful Bangalee nation has to emerge and its language, literature and culture have to be established in the world
- ❏ Socialist economy and politics of farmers and workers have to be established in all the districts to eradicate discrimination
- ❏ Freedom of speech, personal freedom, freedom of media and unadulterated democracy has to be established

Action plan to conduct fight for independence

- ❏ “Committee for the struggle for independence” has to be formed in every village, locality, thana, sub-district, town and district
- ❏ Cooperation of people from all walks of life has to be sought and people have to be united for the cause
- ❏ Liberation force has to be formed by organising workers and farmers in rural areas
- ❏ Communal sentiment between Hindu-Muslim and Bangalee-non Bangalee must be abolished and harmony has to be ensured
- ❏ Communication must be maintained and any anti-social, vindictive activity has to be stopped to move the struggle for independence forward

Action plan for the struggle for independence

- ❏ All laws promulgated by this foreign, colonial government have to be proclaimed unlawful
- ❏ West Pakistani, non-Bangalee army deployed by this regime has to be identified as an occupation force and must be eliminated
- ❏ Giving tax to this current foreign and colonial regime must be stopped
- ❏ Preparation of armed resistance and counter-attack must be taken to counter the forces deployed by this colonial regime
- ❏ All organisations have to be formed with scientific and democratic ideology
- ❏ “Amar Sonar Bangla, Ami Tomay Bhalobashi”, authored by Rabindranath Tagore, will be regarded as the national anthem of Bangladesh.
- ❏ All products of West Pakistan must be boycotted and an all-out non-cooperation movement has to be organised all over the country
- ❏ All flags of Pakistan must be burnt and those have to be replaced by the national flag of Bangladesh
- ❏ People must help the freedom fighters and cooperate with them to continue the struggle for independence



Shahjahan Shiraj reading out the manifesto for independence in presence of Bangabandhu on March 3, 1971.

Sources:

Books

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Bangladesher Shadhinota Juddho: Dalil Patra (part 2)

Newspapers

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The Daily People
The Daily Jugantor (Kolkata)
The Daily Azad



PHOTO: RASHID TALUKDER

this backdrop, Yahya announced March 3 as the date of the national assembly session when the power would be handed over to Bangabandhu’s democratically elected government.

Things changed when on February 15, Bhutto declared that PPP cannot participate in the assembly unless Awami League compromises on its six-point demand. When Yahya asked him about the next course of action on February 19, Bhutto clearly stated, “If Mujib does not comply with our conditions, it