

Echoes from the Archives

Rediscovering the Bangladesh Liberation War through Unexplored Archives

Writing the history of war, especially the history of a liberation war, is one of the most challenging tasks for historians. The Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 was no exception. Faced with the loss, destruction, or restricted access to potential archives, historians grapple with the task of finding alternative sources, often turning to oral

histories.

Several significant archives for filling the gaps in documents related to the liberation war of Bangladesh are located overseas. Among these, the National Archives in the UK stands out as one of the most crucial resources. During the Summer and Fall, I had the opportunity to

visit the National Archives at Kew Gardens in the UK and conduct around two months of archival research. The documents pertaining to the Bangladesh Liberation War are preserved under the Department of Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). Some of these documents, declassified most recently, remain

largely unexplored by historians of the Bangladesh Liberation War. The materials from the National Archives, UK provide valuable insights into both internal and external developments related to the Liberation War of Bangladesh.

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Martial lawlessness in DACCA

30th March, 1971

Australian High Commission, ISLAMABAD.

The long arduous road to democracy in Pakistan again came to a dead end late in the evening of Thursday 25th March. Ironically this was the date set by the President for holding the postponed inaugural meeting of the National Assembly.

2. The first which the large majority in Dacca knew that anything was happening was towards midnight, when they heard the rattle of machine guns, accompanied by the flashes and the clump of recoilless rifles. Obviously, something big had started, but there was no knowing its immediate cause. Firing went on throughout the night. The glow of several large fires lit the sky.

3. When morning dawned, telephones all over the city were dead (disconnected by the Military as we subsequently discovered); Radio Pakistan was off the air and no daily papers were delivered. We hesitated to move out, because the servants had "picked up" that there was a strict "shoot at sight" curfew in operation. The only other item of information available to us in Gulshan at the time was a telephone message the previous evening from our Head Clerk who had rung at 11 pm from his home in old Dacca to say that people were "putting up barricades all over the place". This was puzzling. Admittedly Mujib had called for a province wide hartal for Saturday, 27th March, and Thursday hartals are the usual excuse for creating barricades. But Thursday evening was much too early for erecting barricades which would not be required before Saturday morning. And why such big heavy barricades?

4. However, at 8am (26th March), Radio Pakistan suddenly came on the air with a newscast in Bengali, which began with the ominous item that the President had left Dacca the evening before and was now in Karachi; that an indefinite curfew had been imposed in Dacca and that listeners should stand by for an important announcement at 10 am. The rattle of machine guns and the explosion of grenades still went on. At 10 am a palpably inexperienced announcer, in what amounted to High School standard English, read out the 15 new Martial Law Orders.

5. Since some of these Martial Law Orders required citizens to take action immediately (eg deliver up guns, cyclostyling machines, etc), and since there was no mention during the course of the above announcement of any curfew, it was not illogical to assume that one could legitimately move straight away from one place to another in carrying out the Orders. I therefore drove off in the Mercedes, flying the Australian flag. The roads were empty; but near the airport I was stopped by a strong posse of some 30 soldiers bristling with Sten guns at the ready, who refused to let me pass. They could speak only Urdu and obviously did not know the significance either of a diplomatic number plate or of the flag of a foreign country. (When I had finished with them, in choice if not particularly chaste Urdu, their understanding was very much better). I could no doubt have obtained a pass from some military source but this would have taken much time and effort. In any event, there was little I could do, since at that time information concerning events was scanty and confused. Furthermore there was no means of communicating with the outside world.

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7. The first question was (i) When did the Army actually move out? (ii) Was any specific pretext given? (iii) Was any curfew announced?

8. On the question of "when", all evidence seems to agree

on "about 11.30 pm". (i.e. some two hours after the President's clandestine departure). (ii) On the question of "what pretext?", there seems to be no certainty. Admittedly students and other militants had started with extraordinary energy and speed to erect formidable barricades all over the city (see paragraph 3 above) - having got wind presumably that the Military were planning a move. (It is also possible that a story had come through from Chittagong that 3000 had been killed in the confrontation between the Army and the public over unloading ammunition from MV "Swat" and transporting it from the wharf to the cantonment). Without access to the Army's inner councils no one can be certain, but it's now seems reasonably clear that the Army's plan to take fire and sudden action had been taken some time previously. Pointers in this direction had been the following: (a) The removal of "sympathisers" like Governor Ahsan and MLA General Yakub at the beginning of March. (b) The appointment of Tikka Khan as Martial Law Administrator, Zone "B", in place of Yakub. This step was especially ominous. Tikka Khan was well known as Pakistan's toughest general indeed as "Butcher No. 1". (He earned this reputation in the early sixties when he subdued a movement for freedom in Baluchistan by the



simple expedient of massacring 50,000 Baluchis). (c) It was confirmed in the press on Thursday 25th March that the President had spent Tuesday 23rd March in the Cantonment. What was he doing there? Formulating/ approving the Army's plan of action? (iii) On the question of any announcement over the radio, e.g. curfew or anything else, so far as I can ascertain, no one is aware of any such warning announcement.

9. Thus, suddenly, at about 11.30 pm on Thursday, 25th March, without any warning of any kind, the Army moved out in full force in lorries, tanks, armoured cars, and jeeps, armed with automatic rifles, grenades and recoilless rifles. They spread rapidly throughout the city. They had one purpose and one purpose only -- to strike terror as widely and deeply as possible. This was to be done by killing as many Bengalis as they could find in what they regarded as "suspect" areas.

10. In the course of a night of savage indiscriminate murder over most of the city (see paragraph 11), the Military made special attacks on certain focal points.

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11. Gunfire was heard from time to time during the whole Friday, presumably to frighten everyone well and truly off the streets and indoors, so that as few as possible would see the scores of lorry loads of bodies being carted off, presumably to a mass grave within the garden confines of the Cantonment. Large fires could be seen both during Thursday night and on Friday. Firemen who came out from the Plassey Barracks to fight these fires were cold-bloodedly shot down.

12. In a long night of incredibly inhuman acts, the Army's most inhuman act was the way it dealt with many bustee settlements in Dacca. In these crowded tenements occupied by tens of thousands of simple, innocent poor people, the Army first set fire to the dwellings (mostly made of bamboo and thatch) with incendiary bullets and then machine-gunned the inmates down as they tried to escape from the flames --men, women and children. One such bustee area known as Tantipara (Weavers Quarter) contained a community of some 10,000 Hindu craftsmen. One inhabitant of Tantipara was an employee of the Indian Deputy High Commission. He turned up at the Indian High Commission on Saturday morning, crazed with terror and grief. Somehow he and his wife and their youngest child had managed to escape the hail of bullets and escaped in the darkness and confusion. But what had happened to their other three young children he did not know. He also said that some of the girls and young women were being taken away by the Military. He was dressed in a ragged soiled lungi (sarong), which was all he now possessed. Such tales could be multiplied a thousand fold.

13. One of the saddest sights, as soon as the curfew lifted each day, was that of the long lines of refugees streaming out of the city in their thousands in every direction, with their meagre remaining possessions and those members of their family which had survived the holocaust - everyone of them, particularly the poorer ones, the very picture of stunned panic, grief, misery and despair.

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18. And so ended two tragic days for East Pakistan, but particularly for Dacca. Many thousands, mostly innocent citizens, were brutally murdered in cold blood, and tens of thousands of others were subjected to extremes of terror, grief, hardship and loss of all their possessions. What the Pakistan Army did in Dacca during the long night of 25/26th March was absolutely monstrous. At any rate it could be said that Tikka Khan succeeded in justifying his appointment: the Butcher of Baluchistan added to the lustre of his laurels by earning the title of Butcher of Bengal.

19. Thus the first fortnight of March, which saw the rise of hopes that the long cherished dream of democracy in East Pakistan might be achieved before long, was followed by the second fortnight of March, which saw those hopes suddenly and savagely shattered.

(J. L. Allen)
Deputy High Commissioner
C.C. Department of Foreign Affairs, CANBERRA
Memo. No. 105

(This is an excerpt from the memorandum sent by J. L. Allen, Deputy High Commissioner at the Australian High Commission in Dhaka, to the Australian High Commission in Islamabad on March 30, 1971. The full text is available on The Daily Star's website.)

A letter to QUEEN ELIZABETH

SYED NAZRUL ISLAM, ACTING PRESIDENT OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF BANGLADESH

MUJIBNAGAR, April 24, 1971.

Her Majesty Elizabeth the Second, the Queen of United Kingdom and of Her other Realms and Territories, London.

Your Majesty, Upon the proclamation of the sovereign independent People's Republic of Bangladesh on March 26, 1971 a Government with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at its head has been established.

A copy of the proclamation of Independence, Laws Continuance Enforcement Order and a list of Cabinet members are enclosed and marked with the letters 'A', 'B' & 'C' respectively for favour of your perusal.

The Government of Bangladesh is exercising full sovereignty and lawful authority within the territories known as East Pakistan prior to March 26, 1971 and has taken all appropriate measures to conduct the business of State in accordance with custom, usage and recognised principles of International Law.

In view of the friendly relations that traditionally exist between the fraternal people of Bangladesh and that of the United Kingdom, I request your Majesty's Government to accord immediate recognition to the People's Republic of Bangladesh. The Government of Bangladesh will be pleased to establish normal diplomatic relations and exchange envoys with a view to further strengthening the ties of friendship between our two countries.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of our highest consideration.

Syed Nazrul Islam, Acting President.

Khandakar Moshtaque Ahmed, Foreign Minister.

