

An eyewitness to genocide: 6 spine-chilling days

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By Anthony Mascarenhas

Special from the Washington Post

It was Friday the 16th, not quite Black Friday but still unlucky enough for Abdul Bari. Like thousands of people in East Bengal, he had made the mistake of running within the sight of a West Pakistani army patrol. Now he was about to be shot.

"Normally we would have killed him as he ran," I was chattily informed by Maj. Rathore, the paunchy operations officer of the 9th Division, as we stood on the outskirts of a tiny village near Mudafarganj, 20 miles south of Comilla. "But we are checking him out for your sake. You are new here and I see you have a squeamish stomach."

"Why kill him?" I asked with mounting concern.

"Because he might be a Hindu or he might be a rebel, perhaps a student or an Awami Leaguer. They know we are sorting them out, and they betray themselves by running."

"But why are you killing them? And why pick on the Hindus?" I persisted.

"Must I remind you," Rathore said severely, "how they have tried to destroy Pakistan? Now with the cover of the fighting we have an excellent opportunity of finishing them off. Of course, we are only killing the Hindu men. We are soldiers, not cowards like the rebels. They kill our women and children."

Army wages genocide campaign

I was getting my first glimpse of the campaign of genocide that has spread like a red stain of blood over the otherwise verdant land of East Bengal. First it was the massacre of the non-Bengalis in a savage outburst of Bengali hatred. Now it was deliberate genocide, carried out by the West Pakistani army.

The pogrom's victims are not only the Hindus of East Bengal, who constitute about 12 per cent of the 70 million population, but also thousands of Bengali Moslems. These include university and college students, teachers, Awami League and left-wing political cadres and everyone the army can catch of the 176,000 Bengali soldiers and police who mutinied on March 26 in a spectacular though untimely and ill-starred bid to create the independent Republic of Bangla Desh.

What I saw and heard with unbelieving eyes and ears during my 10 days in East Bengal during April made it terribly clear that the killings are not the isolated acts of military commanders in the field. They are the result of deliberate, vengeful orders from the top.

Unnerved by the almost successful breakaway of the province, which has more than half the country's population, Gen. Yahya Khan's military government is engaged in its own "final solution" of the East Bengal problem.

Driving through the countryside one could see bodies of both Hindus and Moslems twisted grotesquely beside the charred remains of huts and between the coconut palms.

Hindus tracked down and shot

For six spine-chilling days as I traveled with the officers of the 9th Division headquarters at Comilla, I witnessed at close quarters the terrifying extent of the genocide. I saw Hindus, hunted from village to village and door to door, shot off-hand after a cursory inspection showed they were uncircumcised. I have heard the screams of men bludgeoned to death in the compound of the circuit house (civil administrative headquarters) in Comilla. I have seen truckloads of other human targets and those who had the humanity to try to help them hauled off "for disposal" under the cover of darkness and curfew.

I have witnessed the screaming brutality of "kill-and-burn missions" as the army units, after clearing out the rebels, relentlessly pursued the pogrom in the towns and the villages. I have seen whole villages devastated by "punitive action."

And in the officers' mess at night I have listened incredulously as otherwise brave and honorable men proudly talked over the day's kill: "How many did you get?"

All this is being done, as any West Pakistani officer will tell you, for the "preservation of the unity, the integrity and the ideology of Pakistan." It is, of course, too late for that. The very military action that is designed to hold together the two wings of the country, separated by a thousand miles of India, has confirmed the ideological and emotional break. East Bengal can only be kept in Pakistan by the heavy hand of the Punjab-dominated army.

Cleansing and rehabilitation

The bone-crushing military operation has two distinctive features. One is what the authorities like to call the "cleansing process," a euphemism for genocide. The other is the "rehabilitation effort." This is another way of describing the blatant moves to turn East Bengal into a docile colony of West Pakistan. These commonly used expressions and the repeated offi-

cial references to "miscreants" and "infiltrators" are part of the charade which is being enacted for the benefit of the world. Strip away the propaganda, and the reality is colonization—and killing.

The justification for the annihilation of the Hindus was paraphrased by Lt. Gen. Tikka Khan, the military governor of East Pakistan, in a radio broadcast on April 18. He said: "The Moslems of East Pakistan, who had played a leading part in the creation of Pakistan, are determined to keep it alive. However, the voice of the vast majority had been suppressed through coercion, threats to life and property by a vocal, violent and aggressive minority, which forced the Awami League to adopt the destructive course."

Others, speaking privately, were more blunt in seeking justification.

"The Hindus had completely undermined the Moslem masses with their money," Col. Naim, of 9th Division headquarters said. "They bled the province white. Money, food and produce flowed across the borders to India. In some cases they made up more than half the teaching staff in the colleges and schools, and sent their own children to be educated in Calcutta. It had reached the point where Bengali culture was in fact Hindu culture, and East Pakistan was virtually under the control of the Marwari businessmen in Calcutta. We have to sort them out to restore the land to the people, and the people to their faith."

'War between pure and impure'

Maj. Bashir, who came up from the ranks, boasts of a personal body count of 28. He had his own reasons for what has happened.

"This a war between the pure and the impure," he informed me over a cup of tea. "The people here may have Moslem names and call themselves Moslems. But they are Hindus at heart. You won't believe that the head of the cantonment mosque here issued an edict during Friday prayers that the people would attain janat (paradise) if they killed West Pakistanis. We sorted the bastards out and we are now sorting out the others. Those who are left will be real Muslims. We will even teach them Urdu."

Everywhere I found officers and men fashioning imaginative garments of justification from the arbitrary fabric of their own prejudices. Scapegoats had to be found to legitimize, even for their own consciences, the dreadful Nazi-style solution to what in essence was a political problem: The Bengalis won the election and wanted to rule. The Punjabis, whose ambitions and interests have dominated governmental policies since the founding of Pakistan in 1947, would brook no erosion of their power. And they had the army to back them up.

It is clear that Lt. Gen. Tikka Khan played the pivotal role in the program. I was privately informed that Tikka Khan began planning the "sort-out" when he took over the governorship from the gentle, self-effacing Adm. Ahsan, and the military command from the scholarly Lt. Gen. Sahibzada Khan.

That was at the beginning of March, when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's civil disobedience movement was gathering momentum. President Yahya Khan, it is said, went along with Tikka Khan rather than buck the tide of resentment caused in the top echelons of the military establishment by the increasing humiliation of the West Pakistani troops stationed in East Bengal.

Liquidation lists

When the army units fanned out in Dacca in pre-emptive strikes against the rebels on the evening of March 25, many of them carried lists of people to be liquidated. These included the Hindus and large numbers of Moslems, students, Awami Leaguers, professors, journalists and those who had been prominent in Sheikh Mujib's movement.

The charge, now publicly made, that the army was subjected to mortar attack from the Jaganath Hall, where the Hindu university students lived, hardly justifies the obliteration of two Hindu colonies in the heart of the old city. Nor does it explain why the sizable Hindu populations of Dacca and the neighboring industrial town of Narayanganj should have vanished so completely during the round-the-clock curfew on March 26-27. There is similarly no trace of scores of Moslems who were rounded up during the curfew hours.

Touring Dacca on April 15, I found the heads of four students rotting on the roof of the Iqbal Hall Hostel. The caretaker said they had been killed on the night of March 25. I also found heavy traces of blood on the two staircases and in four of the rooms.

Behind Iqbal Hall a large residential building seemed to have been singled out for special attention by the army. The walls were pitted with bullet holes and a foul smell still lingered on the staircase, although it had been heavily powdered with DDT. Neighbors said the bodies of 23 women and children had been carted away only hours before. They had been decomposing on the roof since March 25. It was only after much questioning that I was able to ascertain that the victims belonged to the nearby Hindu shanties. They had sought shelter in the building as the army closed in.

Sitting in the office of Mag. Agha, martial law administrator of Comilla City, on the morning of April 19, I saw the off-hand

manner in which sentences were meted out. A Bihar sub-inspector of police had walked in with a list of prisoners being held in the police lockup. Agha looked it over. With a flick of his pencil, he casually ticked off four names of the list.

"Bring these four to me this evening for disposal," he said. He looked at the list again. The pencil flicked once more. " . . . And bring this thief along with them."

It is hard to imagine so much brutality in the midst of so much beauty. Comilla was blooming when I went there toward the end of April.

Only man was missing. In one of the most crowded areas of the world — Comilla district has a population density of 1,900 to the square mile — people were eerily nowhere to be seen.

"Where are the Bengalis?" I had asked my escorts in the strangely uncrowded streets of Dacca a few days earlier. "They have gone to the villages," was the stock reply. Now, in the countryside, there were still no Bengalis. Comilla city, like Dacca, was heavily shuttered. And in 10 miles on the road to Laksham, past curiously silent villages, the peasants I saw could have been counted on the fingers of both hands.

There were, of course, soldiers — hundreds of unsmiling men in khaki, each with an automatic rifle. But there were no Bengalis.

The Bengalis have good reason to be afraid. The roads are constantly patrolled by tough, trigger-happy men during the daylight hours. Wherever the army is, you won't find Bengalis.

Martial law orders, constantly repeated on the radio and in the press, proclaim the death penalty for anyone caught in the act of sabotage. If a road is obstructed or a bridge damaged or destroyed, all houses within 100 yards of the spot are liable to be demolished and their inhabitants rounded up. "Punitive action" is something that the Bengalis have come to dread.

Grim evidence of this was available when we were approaching-Hajiganj, which straddles the road to Chandpur, on the morning of April 17. A few miles before Hajiganj, a 15-foot bridge had been damaged the previous night by rebels who were still active in the area. According to Maj. Rathore, an army unit had been sent out to take punitive action. Long spirals of smoke could be seen on all sides up to a distance of a quarter of a mile from the damaged bridge. And as we drove over a bed of boards, with which it had been hastily repaired, we could see houses in the village on the right beginning to catch fire.

We turned a corner and found a convoy of trucks parked outside the mosque. I counted seven, all filled with javans in battledress. At the head of the column was a jeep. Across the road two men, supervised by a third, were trying to batter down the door of one of more than a hundred shuttered shops lining the road.

'We are on kill and burn'

"What the Hell are you doing?" Rathore roared.

The tallest of the trio, who was supervising the break-in, turned and peered at us. "Mota" (fatty), he shouted, "what the Hell do you think we are doing?"

Recognizing the voice, Rathore grew a watermelon smile. It was, he informed me, his old friend "Ify" — Maj. Ifrikhar of the 12th Frontier Force Rifles.

Rathore: "I thought someone was looting."

Ifrikhar: "Looting? No. We are on kill and burn." Waving his hand to take in the shops, he said he was going to destroy the lot.

When I chanced to meet Ifrikhar the next day, he ruefully told me: "I burn only 60 houses. If it hadn't rained, I would have got them all."

The agony of East Bengal is not over. The army is determined to go on until the "cleanup" is complete.

There is also the grim prospect of famine, because of the breakdown of the distribution system. Seventeen of the 23 districts of East Pakistan are normally short of food and have to be supplied by massive imports of rice and wheat. This will not be possible because of the ravages of the civil war. Six major bridges and thousands of smaller ones have been destroyed, making the roads impassable in many places. The railway system has been similarly disrupted.

Grain hoarded in fear of famine

Two other factors must be added. One is large-scale hoarding of grain by people who have begun to anticipate the famine. The other is the government of Pakistan's refusal to acknowledge the danger of famine publicly.

The entire government machinery has been used to suppress the fact of the food shortage. The reason is that a famine, like the cyclone before it, could result in a massive outpouring of foreign aid — and with it the prospect of external inspection of distribution methods. This would bring the "foreign interference" that the government does not want.

The crucial question now is, will the killing stop?

I was given the army's answer by Maj. Gen. Shaikat Raza, commanding officer of the 9th Division.

"You must be absolutely sure," he said, "that we have not undertaken such a drastic and expensive operation, expensive both in men and money, for nothing. We've undertaken a job. We are going to finish it, not hand it over half done to the politicians so that they can mess it up again. The army can't keep coming back like this every three or four years. It has a more important task. I assure you that when we have got through with what we are doing, there will never be need again for such an operation."

Background to the failure of the negotiations between Shaikh Mujib and the leaders of West Pakistan

Secret catalogue of guilt and disaster over East Pakistan

Within the space of a few short weeks both East and West Bengal have suddenly become international trouble spots. Millions of people have been uprooted by civil war, thousands have been killed, famine and disease are already beginning to stalk the countryside and a full scale war between India and Pakistan threatens to break out at any moment.

But even more disturbing is the fact that the situation can only deteriorate. World leaders are, of course, talking glibly about the hope that East Bengalis and the West Pakistanis will come to a "political settlement". But even the most naive student of Pakistani affairs knows that a political settlement is out of the question now.

In the coming months the legal aspects behind this man made holocaust will be hotly debated in the capitals of the world and on international platforms. But many of the issues which precipitated this convulsion have been clouded by the cries of "secession" or "genocide" and other accusations and counter accusations and if an accusing finger is to be pointed at any single Pakistani leader then one must, at this juncture, take a judicious look at the chronological sequence of events leading up to the rift.

It is worthwhile picking up the threads in January, 1970 when President Yahya Khan, who had promised to hand over power to a popular government, lifted the ban on political activity in both East and West Pakistan as the prelude to election of a constituent assembly. To hasten the constitution making process and to assuage the fears of West Pakistanis who believed that integrity of Pakistan might be jeopardized by imagined East Bengali separatists the President had earlier issued a legal framework order (LFO) which gave him the right to ratify or reject the constitution.

It was already obvious that the former Foreign Minister, Mr Bhutto, would emerge as the most popular leader in West Pakistan and the fiery East Bengali leader, Shaikh Mujibur Rahman had already demonstrated his strength on the streets of East Pakistan.

Political activity began in earnest the moment the ban was lifted and as both of the leaders began to barnstorm their respective provinces Pakistanis began, for the first time, to look forward to their first taste of democracy.

But as the two leaders launched their campaigns it soon became clear that they were fighting the elections on rigid and diametrically opposed grounds and that there would be hardly any common meeting ground in the assembly. Mr. Bhutto, whose whole political base is essentially founded in the militant Punjabis' obsession over the Kashmir dispute, began stomping up and down the western province talking of a thousand-year war with India. And to maintain this attitude he assured his voters that he stood for a strong central government, a strong army and a new offensive to liberate Kashmir.

As millions of Pakistanis went to the polls in the country's first free elections last year General Yahya Khan and his aides waited for the results with bated breath. President Yahya certainly intended to hand over power but he had hoped that the results would force East and West Pakistani leaders into an alliance which would preserve the integrity of the country. But the generals had not counted on two factors. At the last moment the Awami League's major political opponent, the left wing National Awami Party, decided to boycott the elections leaving the field open to the Awami League. At the same time the West Pakistani administration's alleged failure to come to the timely assistance of cyclone victims was used to conjure up more votes for the Awami League and in terms of preserving the integrity of the country the results were disastrous.

Almost every Bengali endorsed the Shaikh's six point programme which turned the election in to a

referendum. The Awami League swept the polls and claimed 167 of the 169 Bengali seats and with the support of the anti-Punjabi regional parties in the western province, Shaikh Mujibur Rahman was confident of obtaining the support of more than two-thirds of the 313 members of the Constituent Assembly. In West Pakistan Mr Bhutto and his People's Party won 82 of the 138 seats allocated to the western wing. The Punjab recoiled in horror for it became blatantly obvious that the Bengalis would be able to draw up their own constitution the moment the assembly met.

But Mr Bhutto, who knew that he could never become the Prime Minister of an undivided Pakistan was thinking of the future within hours of the election. He suddenly discovered that he had a vested interest in the President's legal framework order. The clause which gave the President the right to veto or reject the Constituent Assembly's document had become the Punjab's veto.

On the night after the elections the flamboyant lawyer revealed part of his plan to me: "What do you think I will do. The Shaikh will push his constitution through with his brute majority and the responsibility will lie on the President's shoulders. I doubt whether he will sign a document which is unacceptable to West Pakistan."

In other words Mr Bhutto had a vested interest in keeping the LFO in force but he had told me that he had heard disconcerting reports that the Shaikh was planning to declare that the Constituent Assembly was sovereign body the moment it met. In other words the LFO and the Punjab's veto would disappear.

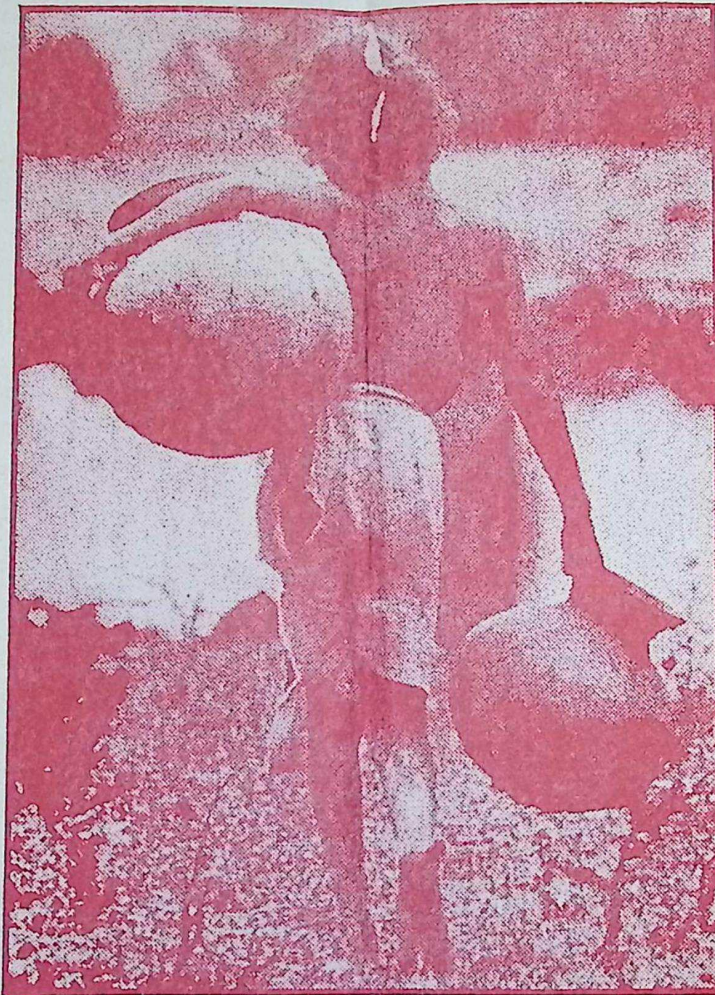
In the meantime the Bengalis were in a festive mood and there had been no moves towards secession. On December 24 President Yahya had described Mujibur Rahman as "our future prime minister" and had agreed that the constituent assembly would sit in Dacca. The Bengalis began to decorate the city and assembly house and the mood in Dacca had relaxed. The slogan Bangla Desh had not

been raised and no one was talking of independence.

But Mr. Bhutto had other ideas. At first he tried to oppose the early sitting of the Assembly but on February 13 President Yahya announced that Assembly would meet on March 3.

The actual point of no return which precipitated the present crisis came two days later on February 15. Mr. Bhutto announced that his party would boycott the Constituent Assembly and at the same time he threatened any other West Pakistani politicians who were planning to travel to Dacca. In short Mr. Bhutto began to pile up pressure on President Yahya.

At the same time Mr Bhutto had met several of President



A refugee on the road to the Indian border.

The President made his first mistake. He succumbed to Punjabi pressures and without consulting Shaikh Mujib, as the leader of the largest party, he postponed the Constituent Assembly on March 1.

The Bengalis who saw the move as a conspiracy went wild and the Army was called out to quell disturbances in Dacca. The Bengalis had lost their faith in the President and the first cries of Bangla Desh were heard on the streets of Dacca. Hawks in the Awami League began to call for independence and the Shaikh promised to make a dramatic announcement at a mass rally on March 7. On March 6 the President attempted to retrieve the position and announced that the Assembly would meet on March 25. But things had gone too far. On the next day the Shaikh, staving off militant cries for independence, announced four preconditions for future talks. The most important was the withdrawal of martial law itself (this would eliminate Mr Bhutto's veto in the form of the LFO).

But one thing was clear at this juncture: the Shaikh, facing tremendous pressure, was still prepared to participate in the union of Pakistan.

He would certainly not compromise the Kashmir issue by resuming trade ties with India (as the Bengalis advocated) and he opposed all of Bengal's demands for autonomy which would strip the central government of all effective power. The Punjab sighed with relief. The Bengalis had been allocated an inbuilt majority in the Constituent Assembly the virtue of their large population but every Punjabi believed they had found a leader who could stand up to the Shaikh.

But across India in the impoverished eastern wing the fiery Bengali leader and his Awami League lieutenants were adamant that they would not concede one inch of their six point programme for autonomy. The Shaikh had made it plain that when he talked of autonomy he did not mean secession. "I want constitutional guarantees which

will end this economic exploitation for ever. We have the larger population so how can a majority secede from a minority", he told me at the time.

To give weight to his demand for the immediate withdrawal of martial law the Shaikh launched a massive civil disobedience movement. Life in the entire province was disrupted and as the cries of Bangla Desh became louder the President flew to Dacca on March 16 with two alternative offers. (1) He said he was willing to restore power to the elected representatives of the people immediately if the Shaikh was willing to form a provisional national government at both centre and at provincial level or (2) He would restore power to provinces and an interim government led by the President himself would administer the day-to-day needs of the country until a constitution was framed.

At the time the two leaders said there was room for optimism. But in the meantime Mr. Bhutto had heard of the proposals and had publicly declared that West Pakistan would go up in smoke if the People's Party was not included in the proposed coalition Government. To prove his point he launched a massive and violent campaign in the Punjab and flew to Dacca on March 21 to join the talks with other West Pakistani leaders.

When President Yahya asked the Shaikh whether he was prepared to take Bhutto, the leader of the largest West Pakistani party, into a central coalition government, the Shaikh cited democratic precedents and said that as the leader of the single largest party he must be allowed to select his own partners. Again his willingness to participate in the central affairs of Pakistan does not suggest that the Shaikh was planning secession.

But the President succumbed to Mr Bhutto's strident threats again and the proposal for a national government was dropped.

As time began to run out the Shaikh and Yahya Khan agreed to the second compromise formula: immediate restoration of power at provincial level. The

Shaikh asked the President to issue an immediate proclamation withdrawing martial law, and restoring power to East Pakistan and the four provinces of West Pakistan. The Shaikh agreed to the suggestion that the President could continue to administer an interim central government until a constitution was framed.

But in the meantime Pakistan's future was being decided by other forces. Mr Bhutto had met the hawks in the army, and mass movement on the streets of Bengal had slipped out of Mujib's control.

As the soldiers slipped into battle dress in the barracks angry and frustrated Bengalis began to raise the flag of Bangla Desh in Dacca. It was Bhutto who finally brought the President to take the decision which set East Bengal on fire. When the President put the Shaikh's proposal to the West Pakistan leader Mr Bhutto pointed out that if martial law was withdrawn Pakistan would be broken up into five sovereign states the moment the President restored power to the provinces. He expressed the fear that Mujibur Rahman was trying to liquidate the central government. Because the President withdrew martial law he had no sanction to carry on as the head of state.

Half convinced the President went back to Mujibur Rahman and expressed these fears. He promised Mujib that he would withdraw martial law the moment the National Assembly met and gave a central government some form of validity. Shaikh Mujib reiterated his demand for the immediate withdrawal of martial law and President Yahya, now fully convinced that he was dealing with a traitor, turned to his generals.

Taking events to their logical conclusion there is no doubt that the present holocaust was precipitated by President Yahya Khan when he postponed the Assembly without consulting the Bengalis, but even more so by Mr Bhutto's deliberate decision to boycott the Assembly on March 3.

Peter Hazelhurst