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Operation Searchlight

- বাংলা

Operation Searchlight The ruthless and brutal armed operation undertaken by the Pakistan army on 25 March 1971 in order to curb the movement of the freedom loving Bangalis against the autocratic rule of the Pakistani rulers. It was termed as 'Operation Searchlight' by the military authority. The purpose of this operation was to arrest or kill the distinguished Awami League leaders, student leaders and Bangali intellectuals in the main cities of the then East Pakistan including Dhaka, to disarm the Bangali personnel's of military, para military and police forces and to capture armory, radio station and telephone exchange, thereby to take over the control of the province of East Pakistan by ruthlessly curbing the non-cooperation movement headed by Bangabandhu SHEIKH MUJIBUR RAHMAN. Military operations were being taken under 'Operation Searchlight' on and from 11-30 pm of 25 March to middle of May in all the big towns of the province.

The Operation Searchlight was scheduled to be launched at 13 hours of 26 March. But in the evening of 25 March the Awami League chief Sheikh Mujibur Rahman having no positive and tangible result in his discussion with President Yahya Khan had a clarion call to the people

to prepare themselves for an all out struggle. On that very night freedom loving Bangalis created resistance in various places in Dhaka. Major Siddique Salek, the public relation officer of Lt General Tikka Khan and AAK Niazi commented that before the Bangalis could create strong resistance the Pakistan forces in order to reach various places of Dhaka changed the schedule of the operation one day ahead i.e at 11-30 pm of 25 March. But in a White Paper published on 5 August by the Government of Pakistan, it has been mentioned that Awami League had a plan to stage an armed revolution at dawn of 26 March. This information in the white paper may be a contributory factor for bringing the operation ahead by one day.

Major General Khadim Hossain Raja, General Officer Commanding of Fourteenth Division and Major General Rao Farman Ali Khan, GOC of Fifty Seventh Division came to a decision on 22 February 1971 regarding an army expedition, Operation Searchlight by name. As per instruction of the Chief of Staff General Abdul Hamid Khan on 17 March, General Khadim Hossain Raja finalised the plan of the Operation Searchlight on the day following in the office of the GOC in the Dhaka Cantonment. Rao Farman Ali himself prepared this five pages operation plan. For the implementation of the plan, General Hamid, General AO Miththi, Colonel Sadullah had a visit to the different cantonments by helicopter on 24-25 March for inspection of the preparation of the operation. It was decided that at 13 hours of 25 March General Rao Farman Ali will give lead in Dhaka expedition. General Khadim Raja will give lead to operations in other regions of the province. Lieutenant General Tikka Khan will observe the 1 progress of the operation having his post with 31 field command. Besides, for making this operation a success, two intimate officers of Yahya Khan, Major General Iftekhar Janjua and Major General AO Miththi, were by this time summoned to Dhaka.

The following measures were scheduled to be taken under Operation Searchlight:

1. The operation shall be started simultaneously in the whole of East Pakistan.
2. Maximum number of politicians and student leaders, teachers and extremist activists of cultural organizations shall have to be arrested.
3. The operations in Dhaka shall have to be made a cent percent success. To that end the Dhaka University shall have to be captured.

4. The security of the cantonment must be ensured.

5. All sorts of domestic and international communications must be disrupted. Telephone exchange, radio, TV, teleprinter service, transmitter in the foreign consulates must be disrupted.

6. The soldiers of the EPR must be disarmed and in their places West Pakistani soldiers shall be deputed to patrol the armoury, and the control of the armoury shall be vested upon them.

7. In the first phase, the operational zones will be Dhaka, Khulna, Chittagong, Comilla, Jessore, Rangpur, Syedpur and Sylhet. The operation planning in Chittagong, Sylhet, Jessore, Rangpur and Comilla shall be implemented by air, if necessary.

The Pak military authority took the following decisions for implementing the aforesaid program by giving utmost importance to their control over the Dhaka city.

1. 22-Baluch Regiment stationed in Peelkhana shall disarm the five thousand Bangali EPR soldiers and capture their radio centre.
2. 32-Punjab Regiment shall disarm one thousand Bangali policemen in Rajarbagh Police Line which is the main source of armed strength of the Awami League.
3. 18-Punjab Regiment will launch attack on the Hindu majority areas of Nawabpur and in other parts of old Dhaka.
4. A group of selected soldiers from 22 Baluch, 18 and 32 Punjab Regiment will attack Iqbal Hall (Zahurul Haq Hall), Jagannath Hall and Liaquat Hall of BUET, which are known as centers of strength of the Awami League rebels.
5. One platoon of commando soldiers of special service group will attack the house of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and will arrest him.

6. The field Regiment will control the Second capital and the adjoining settlements (Mirpur-Mohammadpur).

7. In order to show strength, a small squadron of M 24 tanks will be plying on road and will start shelling, if necessary.

8. The above mentioned soldiers will destroy any kind of barricade or resistance on the road, and will launch operation in the houses of listed politicians.

The Pakistani soldiers came out of the cantonment at 11-30 pm, launched indiscriminate attack on the demonstrating Bangalis in the Farm Gate area, and thus initiated the Operation Searchlight. Then as per schedule they launched simultaneous attack on Peelkhana and Rajarbagh. At 1-30 am they arrested Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from his residence. At dead of night they launched operation at the residential quarters of the teachers of Dhaka University including the then Iqbal Hall, Jagannath Hall, Rokeya Hall and killed a huge number of students including nine teachers. Under the same planning, serious attack was made on old Dhaka, Tejgaon, Indra Road, Mirpur, Mohammadpur, Dhaka airport, Ganaktuli, Dhanmondi, Kalabagan, Kathalbagan etc. In the same night many people were killed and injured in Chittagong by the firing of the army. The Pak army launched indiscriminate attack and created havoc within the very month of March under the 'Operation Searchlight' having their post at the cantonment. The offices of the dailies like the Ittefaq, Sangbad and the Peoples were set on fire for their support to the movement of the Bangalis. A good number of journalists, media personnel's were burnt to death.

On the eve of the genocide on 25 March, President Yahya Khan left Dhaka for Karachi. But Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the president of the Pakistan People's Party, who came to Dhaka for having a dialogue with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, observed the operation from the Hotel Intercontinental of Dhaka. On the day following on the eve of his departure, Bhutto highly appreciated the action of the army on the previous night and commented, 'Thanks to God that Pakistan could have been saved'. All the army officials including Yahya Khan expressed ovation to the army action. Even in the White Paper published by Pakistan Government on the following 5 August, the military operation on 25 March was termed as 'inevitable'.

The accurate figure of casualty under the operation searchlight on the night of 25 March could not be estimated. The foreign journalists were compelled to leave the country before the operation of 25 March. Because of strong censorship on the newspapers at home nothing

substantial could be gathered about the operation. From the report of three foreign journalists, Arnold Jeltine, Michael Laurent and Simon Dring, who remained in hiding at a risk, some news can be gathered about the ruthless brutality of that fateful night. From the report of Simon Dring published under the caption Dateline Dacca in the Daily Telegraph of 29 March it was revealed that 200 students of Iqbal Hall, teachers and their family members numbering 12 in the University residential area were killed on that night. In old Dhaka 700 people were burnt to death. Information gathered from various home and foreign sources reveal that on that fateful night seven thousand Bangalis were killed in Dhaka city itself.