HIS-103: Emergence of Bangladesh

Lecture 16
Operation Searchlight, Declaration of Independence & Genocide of March 26

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Operation Searchlight

▶ Operation Searchlight is 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 Bangalees 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 Bangalee intellectuals in the main cities of the then East Pakistan including Dhaka, to disarm the Bangalee personnel 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 on the night of March 25, Bangalees created resistance in various places of Dhaka. Major Siddique Salek, the public relation officer of Lt General Tikka Khan and AAK Niazi commented that before the Bangalees could create strong resistance to 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.

- Major General Khadim Hossain Raja, General Officer Commanding of 14th Division and Major General Rao Farman Ali Khan, GOC of 57th Division came to a decision regarding an army expedition, Operation Searchlight by name, on 22 February 1971.

- As per instruction of the Chief of Staff General Abdul Hamid Khan on 17 March, General Khadim Hossain Raja finalized the plan of the Operation Searchlight. General Rao Forman 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 on the preparation of the operation. It was decided that at 13 hours of 25 March General Rao Forman 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 progress of the operation having his post with 31 field command.

- Besides, for making this operation a success, two close officers of Yahya Khan, Major General Iftekhar Janjua and Major General AO Miththi, were 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 armory, and the control of the armory 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 Bangalee EPR soldiers and capture their radio center.

➥ 2. 32-Punjab Regiment shall disarm one thousand Bangalee 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 Bangalees in the Farm Gate area, and thus initiated the Operation Searchlight. Then as per schedule they launched simultaneous attacks on Peelkhana and Rajarbagh.

➡ At 1:30 am they arrested Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from his residence. At the 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, Indira 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 People were set on fire for their support to the movement of the Bangalees. A good number of journalists, media personnel were burnt to death.

March 25 and Declaration of Independence

- On the eve of the genocide on 25 March, President Yahya Khan left Dhaka for Karachi. But Zulfiqar 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 at Dhaka. On the next day, during 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'.

- In the meantime, right before the arrest of Sheikh Mujib, he declared the independence of Bangladesh through EPR radio communication system using VHF. The message was like this:

  - This may be my last message, from today Bangladesh is independent. I call upon the people of Bangladesh wherever you might be and with whatever you have, to resist the army of occupation to the last. Your fight must go on until the last soldier of the Pakistan occupation army is expelled from the soil of Bangladesh and final victory is achieved.

- MA Hannan, General Secretary of District Awami League, also broadcasted the declaration of independence by Sheikh Mujib several times in the afternoon of 26 March 1971. Later, on 27 March Major Ziaur Rahman of 8th East Bengal Regiment declared the independence.

  - I, Major Zia, Provisional Commander-in-Chief of the Bangladesh Liberation Army, hereby proclaims, on behalf of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the independence of Bangladesh.

  - 'I also declare, we have already framed a sovereign, legal Government under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, which pledges to function as per law and the constitution. The new democratic Government is committed to a policy of non-alignment in international relations. It will seek friendship with all nations and strive for international peace. I appeal to all Government(s) to mobilize (sic) public opinion in their respective countries against the brutal genocide in Bangladesh. The Government under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is sovereign (and) legal Government of Bangladesh and is entitled to recognition from all democratic nations of the world.

- On 30 March, he made the call again and said that that the Pakistan army, air force and navy had launched a combined operation against the civilian and killing people indiscriminately. He announced,

  - "I once again request the United Nations and the big powers to intervene and physically come to our aid. Delay will mean massacre of additional millions".

Genocide 1971

➤ Genocide, 1971 is the mass killing of the people in East Pakistan by the then Pakistan occupation army and their collaborators during the war of liberation in 1971. No definite survey has yet been made to ascertain the exact number of people killed by the Pakistan army. Immediately after the War of Liberation, it was estimated to be as high as three million. The genocide committed by the Pakistan army is one of the worst holocausts in world history.

➤ Genocide started with the army crackdown in Dhaka at midnight of 25 March 1971. Pakistani forces surrounded Dhaka city with tanks and other military vehicles. Truck loads of army men spread out through the city streets for stamping out all civil resistance. Various parts of old Dhaka, including Hindu majority Mahallas such as Shankhari Patti and Tantibazar came under mortar shells. Hundreds of inmates were gunned down. It was estimated that more than 50,000 men, women and children were killed in Dhaka, Chittagong, Jessore, Mymensingh, Kushtia and other cities within the first three days of the genocide beginning from 25 March 1971. Soon the Pakistan army spread out into the remotest parts of the country.

➤ In retaliation the Bangalee nationalists began to organize resistance with effect from 26 March following the declaration of independence of Bangladesh. This further intensified the military action of Pakistan government. The Pakistan army started an undeclared war against the unarmed civilians of Bangladesh. They used warplanes and gunships to contain the nationalist forces. Men, women and children of hundreds of villages, cities, and towns were killed and maimed indiscriminately. Arsoning, raping and looting knew no limit. Out of fear and intimidation, millions of Bangalees left their home and took shelter in various refugee camps set up by the Government of India along the border areas.

➡ Initially, the world could hardly know the extent of genocide due to very strong press censorship. However, from July 1971 foreign electronic and print media started reporting various aspects and ramifications of the genocide. The United Nations also expressed their deep concern about the holocaust.

➡ In containing the freedom fighters the Pakistan government had raised paramilitary forces with the designations of Razakar, Al-Badr and Al-Shams. These armed forces joined the army in killing and terrorizing the people. Many people, including intellectuals of the country were lifted by them from their residence for interrogation and only a few of them returned home. They were tortured and brutally killed mostly by bayonet charges and gun-shots at the genocide camps. All these savageries were resorted to for exterminating the *Mukti Bahini* and their supporters. No international action was taken against the perpetrators of this most barbarous genocide according to UNO convention on genocide and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The genocide continued till the surrender of the Pakistan army on 16 December 1971.

➡ **Documentary:**

➡ Stop Genocide: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ggr9Zzr-Ots

➡ Massacre at Jagannath Hall, University of Dhaka: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUD9sNkt2RI

➡ Genocide in Village: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8GrYfw-Q1EI