

HIS-103: Emergence of Bangladesh

Lecture 18

Role of the United Nations, Superpowers, and the Muslim World



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Role of the United Nations

- On 11 March 1971, when the UN Secretary General decided to evacuate UN staff from Dhaka, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman commented that the responsibilities of the Secretary General did not end there. There was still the threat of genocide and denial of the fundamental rights guaranteed by the UN Charter. People of Bangladesh really put their courageous faith in the purposes of the UN as set forth in Article 1 of its charter.
- Unfortunately, none of the organizations under the United Nations did anything for Bangladesh. The Commission on Human Rights and its Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities could act. In fact, the non-governmental organizations and International Commission of Justice requested the Sub-Commission in August to initiate action.
- The Economic and Social Council could take note of violation of human rights. It confined its deliberations to a consideration of the report on refugee relief alone.
- The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination could act as well. In April, they asked Pakistan to submit a supplementary report on the situation in East Pakistan, but the matter was not pursued further.
- The Special Committee on Colonization could investigate the situation. But in September when the question was raised the Special Committee refused to get involved. The Security Council, of course, could act. So could the General Assembly when it met in September.

UN Response

- The Secretary General of UN offered humanitarian assistance to relieve suffering in East Pakistan. His lame duck offer was made public on 1 April 1971. Pakistan refused to accept any UN role in the matter. They even disallowed a Red Cross plane from off-loading medical supplies in East Pakistan. In early May, the UNHCR got involved in the refugee relief operations in India. In late May, presumably under American pressure, Pakistan requested the UN to provide humanitarian relief in East Pakistan.
- Almost four months after starting of the genocide in East Pakistan, the Secretary General submitted a memorandum to the President of the Security Council.
- Unfortunately, however, the response that it got is a sad commentary on the effectiveness of the world body. No one wanted to discuss the subject in the hope, probably, that time would resolve the crisis in due course.
- When the General Assembly of the UN began its session in September 1971, the crisis was still very much there. A number of delegations referred to the crisis in Bangladesh in their general Statements on the world situation. But most of them highlighted it as a refugee relief crisis.

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- Some of the smaller countries like New Zealand, Luxembourg, Belgium, Madagascar, Norway and Sweden expressed great concern. France and United Kingdom were quite clear in their views that Pakistan must act to restore popular government in Bangladesh. The Soviet Union warned that the crisis was no longer internal to Pakistan. But the USA maintained a hesitant position.
- However, the General Assembly did not want to go into the Bangladesh crisis in any detail. The general references made in statements of delegations, of course, indicated clearly to Pakistan to seek a political solution of the crisis and seek it very rapidly.
- **Moves in the Security Council**
- Activities in the UN circle were intensified once the thrust of the freedom fighters became more deadly and the Pakistan army had to remain confined to its bases. The USA wanted to go to the Security Council on 21 November when the three forces of Bangladesh Army carried out combined operations in Bangladesh territory. But at that time, no other country showed any interest.
- Pakistan asked for UN observers to be deployed along the eastern frontier and the request was sent on 30 November to the Security Council. Pakistan, however, was reluctant to request a meeting of the Security Council. It was assumed by the press that such request might result in a ceasefire in Bangladesh and might demand a negotiation with the Bangladesh authorities.

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- When the war broke out between India and Pakistan with the attack of Pakistan Air Force on Indian targets on 3 December 1971, then all superpowers displayed their cards in the game. Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin placed the blame for war on Pakistan while the USA and China held India responsible for everything.
- The USA decided to seek a meeting of the Security Council within the 24 hours of the attack to discuss the breach of peace. They were joined by eight other countries namely Argentina, Belgium, Burundi, Italy, Japan, Nicaragua, Somalia and the United Kingdom.
- In the meeting, China called for outright condemnation of Indian aggression and demanded that India immediately withdraw its troops from Pakistan. The USA sponsored a resolution which the Soviet Union termed as “one-sided and unacceptable”. This was a clear simple ceasefire resolution. It called for an immediate ceasefire and withdrawal of troops. It authorized the Secretary General to place observers along the India-Pakistan border at the request of either government. It also called on India, Pakistan and others concerned to work for “creation of a climate conducive to voluntary return of refugees to East Pakistan”.
- Soviet representative Jacob Malik pointed out that such a resolution could in fact release Pakistani troops for more atrocities. The resolution did not refer to the basic question of a political settlement which would make the condition of making conducive climate for return of refugees meaningless. Thus, Soviet Union vetoed the resolution. Poland also voted against this resolution while France and the UK remained abstained.

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- ➡ The Security Council then started considering three other resolutions. Argentina, Burundi, Nicaragua, Somalia and Sierra Leone proposed a ceasefire resolution that called for a simple ceasefire and troop withdrawal and nothing else. Another one was by Belgium, Italy and Japan that called for ceasefire, voluntary return of refugees to their homes and remaining silent about the withdrawal of troops. The third one was a Soviet draft calling for a political settlement in East Pakistan that inevitably result is a cessation of hostilities. It also called for an end to acts of violence by Pakistani sources in East Pakistan that had led to the deterioration of the situation.
- ➡ On 5 December, the resolution asking for immediate ceasefire and pull-out of the troops by the two parties was put to vote again and for the second successive time Soviet Union exercised veto. China also came with their own resolution, but it was not put into vote. As per them, all parties to withdraw troops from each other's territory.

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- In the meantime, the General Council adopted a resolution calling India and Pakistan to cease hostilities and withdrew their armed forces to their sides of the border. It also asked for return of refugees to East Pakistan. The vote was 104 in favor, 11 against and 10 abstentions. The resolution asked the Security Council to take appropriate action in the matter. India made it clear that the resolution could not be effective unless it was accepted by the government of Bangladesh. India by then had recognized Bangladesh and expected that Bangladesh would be invited to participate in the debate.
- On 8 December, Pakistan agreed to abide by the UN resolution provided it was also accepted by India. For Pakistan such a resolution provided an easy escape route. This became very obvious three days later when the Pakistani command in Dhaka offered to the UN representatives there the terms of a surrender. In simple terms, they wanted guarantee of evacuation for West Pakistani armed and civilian personnel and were prepared to handover the administration of the country to Awami League. This offer of surrender made by General Rao Farman Ali Khan on 10 December with the approval of General Yahya Khan and Paul Marc Henry (UN Representatives) sought confirmation from the Governor before transmitting it to New York. But General Yahya withdrew the approval due to US President Nixon and Kissinger.
- On 12 December under the directives of President Nixon, Ambassador Bush asked for a session of Security Council with the same resolution passed in the General Council. India viewed that this resolution needed to hear the opinions of Bangladesh side. This US resolution came to a vote again on 13 December and as expected Soviet Union exercised veto. During this a move was there to hear the Bangladesh representatives but could not make it due to Pakistan and allies.
- ZA Bhutto who was the head of the Pakistan delegation torn up the resolution and left the room.