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*“Achieving SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) in line
with the 2030 United Nations agenda.”*



Committee: Historical United Nations Security Council

Agenda Item: The Bangladesh Liberation War

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Introduction

March 26th and December 16, 1971 marked the duration of the Bangladesh Liberation War, a short-lived conflict between India and Pakistan that established the People's Republic of Bangladesh from the territory of the former province of East Pakistan. Although the war is best remembered for its dramatic alteration of South Asia's geopolitical landscape, it also bears a more complex and lesser-known set of legacies for how we think about Cold War international relations, twentieth-century genocidal and sexual violence, and the limits of international law in post-conflict societies.

The province East Pakistan was created during independence from the British empire in 1947. At that time, the South Asian subcontinent was partitioned into two countries: India (including lands with a Hindu majority) and Pakistan (lands with a Muslim majority). The people and territory of East Bengal became East Pakistan.

East and West Pakistan were geographically, culturally, and ideologically distant and distinct. An independence movement for East Pakistan grew up based on Bengal ethnic concerns, the right to use the Bengali language, and a desire for local political control and self-rule.

The legacy of the Liberation War continues to shape civic life in Bangladesh today. As trials have been conducted in recent years, there have been violent protests by both their opponents and by those demanding harsher sentences for those convicted. Since 2013, there have been a series of murders of prominent secularists and human rights activists by Islamists in what appears to be retaliation for the trials.

Definition of Significant Terms

Guerrilla Warfare:

Guerilla warfare is a form of unconventional or irregular warfare in which small, mobile groups of combatants (often called guerillas or partisans) use hit-and-run tactics to fight a larger, less-mobile traditional army.

Bengali:

An ethnic and linguistic group native to the Bengal region of South Asia, primarily in Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal.

Self-determination:

The principle that peoples have the right to freely choose their political status and to pursue their economic, social, and cultural development without external interference.

Repression:

This is the use of force, control, or oppressive measures by an authority to restrict, silence, or punish individuals or groups, especially to prevent political opposition, dissent, or the exercise of rights and freedoms. It can include; censorship and suppression of speech, arbitrary arrests or imprisonment, violence, intimidation, surveillance, denial of political, civil or cultural rights.

Political marginalization:

The process by which individuals or groups are excluded or pushed to the edges of political power and decision-making.

Majoritarian rule:

A system of governance in which decisions are made based on the preference of the majority of the population, typically through voting. While majoritarian rule promotes popular decision-making, it can also risk overlooking or disadvantage minority groups if their rights are not protected by laws or institutions.

Insurgency:

Insurgency is a movement, revolt or a rebellion within the country where the aim is to overthrow the government. An example of this is when in the 1990's Pakistan started an insurgency by sending its newly formed militias to Kashmir to combat against the Indian government present in the region.

Asymmetric warfare:

Asymmetric warfare is the type of warfare where belligerents of the war have significantly different strategy and tactics which enemy combatants acquire irregular military forces of nation-states. After World War II, the occurrence of interstate wars that were fought by regular forces became rare with the presence of evident power differences between opponents. These forces can include terrorist groups or militias. Pakistan's tactic for the first Indo-Pakistan war can be an example for Asymmetric warfare as Pakistan had mostly deployed non-state actors near to Indian forces.

Secession:

The act by which a region or group formally withdraws from an existing country to form a new, independent state or to join another state.

Awami League:

A major political party in Bangladesh founded in 1949 as the East Pakistan Awami Muslim League. It played a leading role in the Bengali Language Movement and the Bangladesh Liberation war (1971). It advocates secularism, democracy, nationalism, and social justice.

Operation searchlight

A military crackdown launched by the Pakistan Army on 25 March 1971 in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Its purpose was to suppress the Bengali nationalist movement, particularly supporters of the Awami League, after they won a majority in Pakistan's 1970 general elections. It targeted students, intellectuals, political activists and civilians.

Detailed Background of the Issue

The seeds of the political crisis that led to the Liberation War were planted on December 7, 1970. The Awami League won a substantial victory in Pakistan's elections. The League was a political party led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who had campaigned for autonomy for East Pakistan. However, they encountered immediate opposition from General Agha Muhammad

Yahya Khan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of the Pakistan People's Party, which attempted to prevent the Awami League from forming the next government.

After months of fruitless negotiations, the Pakistani army was deployed in East Pakistan on March 25, 1971. It pursued a policy of reprisal, targeting supporters of Bangladesh liberation and perceived enemies of the state like the significant Hindu minority. Deploying weapons such as fighter jets, tanks, and napalm—and creating radical religious militias to participate in the systematic murder and deportation of the populace—the army of Pakistan committed war crimes that reached the level of genocide.

What began as a regional conflict soon became an international one. A Bangladesh independence militia called the Mukti Bahini, which drew support from the government of India, often engaged in guerilla operations in East Pakistan from bases on the Indian side of the border. With as many as 15 million refugees crossing into its territory by autumn 1971, India decided to intervene militarily in the autumn for “purely humanitarian reasons” according to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Pakistan preempted Indian action, however, by attacking northern India from West Pakistan on December 3.

Although the fighting lasted for only two weeks before a Pakistani surrender, the war became a flashpoint within the wider Cold War. Fearing that an Indian victory would pave the way for Soviet domination in the region, the United States did what it could to buttress Pakistan from the outset. The Nixon administration had, for example, dispatched the aircraft carrier *Enterprise* into the Bay of Bengal as a deterrent to Indian military intervention. It also refrained from criticizing the ongoing humanitarian crisis, publicly declaring between March and December that the conflict remained a Pakistani internal matter.

Even as American diplomats at the consulate in Dhaka futilely sounded the alarm over the ongoing “selective genocide,” the White House illegally transferred weapons to Pakistan in direct violation of a Congressional sanction. The U.S., in other words, was complicit in an unfolding humanitarian crisis of astounding magnitude. Estimates of the death toll vary, stretching from hundreds of thousands to some 3 million. Furthermore, the Pakistani army used rape as a weapon of war. At least 200,000 women were assaulted and some 25,000 children resulted from those attacks.

The memory of those events remains contested. The government of Pakistan has never acknowledged that any atrocities were committed during the war and continues to insist that only a few thousand people were killed. In the slim literature on the subject, scholars have debated whether the Pakistani army's actions qualify as genocide and who should be held responsible.

In Bangladesh, the political consequences of the Liberation War continue to resonate. Awami League governments led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (known as Mujib, 1973-75) and Sheikh Hasina (1996-2001; 2009-present) have sought to punish those who collaborated with Pakistan and enacted the 1973 International Crimes (Tribunal) Act and the 2009 International Crimes (Tribunals) (Amendment) Act (ICTAA). By 1975, some 752 people had been convicted and imprisoned. But, despite their names, these tribunals remained solely Bangladeshi in scope and have never been affiliated with the International Criminal Court, leading some observers to claim that the trials have not met international standards. At times, justice has appeared more distant than ever.

Individuals who aided the Pakistani army, or who were involved in the assassination of Mujib in 1975, have served in the governments of General Ziaur Rahman (1975-81), General Hussain Muhammad Ershad (1982-90), and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party led by Khaleda Zia (1991-1996; 2001-2006). General Ziaur Rahman halted the war crimes trials and they did not resume until 2010 under the ICTAA.

Timeline of Key Events

1947	The partition of British India occurred. Thus, Pakistan was created with East and West Pakistan separated geographically.
1952	The Language Movement began in East Pakistan
November 1970	A huge cyclone which is the Bhola Cyclone devastates the East Pakistani region and insufficient federal response decreases legitimacy

December 1970	In the general elections Awami League wins majority but is denied power
March 7th, 1971	Sheikh Mujibur Rahman delivers independence-oriented speech to fight for Bengali rights, before becoming the Prime Minister
March 25th, 1971	Mass repression begins as Operation Searchlight was launched by Pakistan
March 26th, 1971	The Declaration of Independence of Bangladesh
March - November 1971	Guerrilla war was led by Mukti Bahini, a force who trained the Indian army, and the refugee crisis in India unravels
December 3rd, 1971	Pakistan attacks Indian airbases which results in India formally entering the war
December 16th, 1971	Pakistani forces surrender in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, which deems Bangladesh effectively independent
1972	Bangladesh obtains international recognition and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman becomes Prime Minister and President.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

India

India first responded to the crisis cautiously but as the situation escalated around its borders, with the massive influx of refugees from East Pakistan, and the firing across the border, the Indian government decided to get more directly involved. India provided all kinds of support to the Mukti Bahini, the Bangladeshi guerrilla fighters, and used all diplomatic channels to rally international opinion over to its side. India portrayed the move as the only way to stop the atrocities but was also quite aware that it would result in the changing of the whole balance of power in South Asia.

Pakistan

Pakistan treated the turmoil mostly as a challenge to its sovereignty and rejected the demands for more autonomy or secession in East Pakistan. The central government and military leadership depicted the demand of the Awami League as the most significant threat to the unity of the country and therefore they used force to regain control. Pakistan opposed the international community's involvement at any time and argued that an intervention by the outsiders would be a violation of its territorial integrity.

Bangladesh

The Bengali leaders framed their fight as a demand for self-determination as they were politically excluded, economically exploited, and culturally repressed. When power was denied after the 1970 election and the army opened fire, the idea of Bengali independence was the only way out. The government, in exile, appealed for diplomatic recognition and aid, and at the same time, they delivered the narrative of the conflict as one of human rights violations.

United States of America

The US was on the whole in favor of Pakistan's territorial integrity which was largely affected by the Cold War alliances and Pakistan's role as a go-between in US-China relations. Though the US was not oblivious to the human rights abuses, it chose to refrain from condemning them vehemently in public and disapproved India's military intervention. Its stance was a reflection of its strategic priorities taking precedence over humanitarian ones.

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)

The Soviet Union chose to side with India and Bangladesh. It considered the war from the perspective of maintaining peace in the region and the ongoing Cold War rivalry. India's intervention was made possible by the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and thus, the US and Chinese influences were neutralized. The USSR not only cheered the birth of Bangladesh but also stood as a barricade against any ill-fated moves in the UN Security Council.

China

China provided Pakistan with diplomatic support and underscored the ideal of non, interference and state sovereignty in her arguments. She was against Bangladesh's independence at the United Nations and considered India's intervention as a move for regional expansion. Nevertheless, China refrained from direct military action.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Six-Point Programme - February 6th, 1966

It is a political charter demanding legal autonomy for East Pakistan and is seen as the most serious attempt to resolve inequity within Pakistan without the use of violence. This programme directly frames the constitutional dispute and legitimizes the Bengali's autonomy claims long before open conflict arose. Without the Six-Point programme the independence movement would most likely have not gone as far as it did.

1970 General Elections - December 7th, 1970

Pakistan's first nationwide election took place and even though the Awami league won a clear majority, it was blocked from forming a government which created a constitutional crisis. This was not a direct attempt to solve the issue but it was the most concrete democratic opportunity to resolve conflicts within Pakistan's political system.

Negotiations between Yahya, Mujib and Bhutto - January-March 1971

A series of talks that happened between Yahya Khan, the President of Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the leader of the Pakistan People's Party and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leader of the Awami League. Yahya was the military ruler who oversaw the 1970 elections and delayed the transfer of government to the Awami league or in other words to Sheikh Mujibur. He also authorised Operation Searchlight. Bhutto opposed Mujib regarding power sharing decisions, therefore these negotiations did not reach any solutions.

United Nations Security Council Resolution 307 - December 21st, 1971

This UN resolution called for a ceasefire and the withdrawal of forces during the final phase of the war. Although it was created with good intentions, it arrived too late to halt the war and had a limited impact on the conflict.

Simla Agreement - July 2nd, 1972

A treaty was signed between India and Pakistan after the war. It normalized relations and committed both nations to resolving bilateral disputes. At the same time, it included Bangladesh's recognition as a government. It acted as more of a peacemaking action after the war.

Indo-Bangladesh Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace - March 19th, 1972

It is a 25-year-long treaty that promotes cooperation between the states of India and the newly independent Bangladesh.

Alternative Solutions

A pivotal non, violent intervention could have been the imposition of deep and meaningful political reforms within Pakistan instead of resorting to military repression. A genuinely federal or confederal Pakistan, with East Pakistan having significant legislative, financial, and administrative autonomy especially control over taxation, trade, and internal security would have resolved the problems of political discrimination and economic exploitation at their roots. Incorporating the Six, Point Programme demands into a new constitution would have safeguarded Pakistan's territorial integrity while granting East Pakistan the right of self, governance.

Another major solution was the immediate and unconditional recognition of the 1970 election results followed by the peaceful transfer of power to the Awami League. Letting Sheikh Mujibur Rahman establish a central government or working out a power, sharing agreement based on electoral legitimacy would have saved democratic trust from collapse and thus, there would have been no need for armed resistance. This move would have strengthened the rule of law and the supremacy of the civilian government over the military.

International mediation could have been a realistic alternative early on and throughout the period as well. The United Nations or any other neutral third parties would have been able to help facilitate dialogue between the warring parties, oversee the human rights situation, and coordinate humanitarian aid, thus, they might have been able to stop the large, scale

displacement and the violent escalation of the conflict. Alongside this, the introduction of targeted economic reforms and the provision of development guarantees which included a fair allocation of the budget, industrial investment in East Pakistan, as well as equitable military and civil service representation could have slowly decreased the regional economic disparities. In fact, the interventions alone may have had the power to transform the violent armed struggle of the people into a negotiated political settlement, thereby saving widespread human suffering.

Useful Links

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