

Bangladesh: Justice sought for 1971 victims

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On the night of March 25, 1971 the Pakistani army began a campaign to murder and rape thousands of Bengalis in an attempt to curb the rise of the Bengali national independence movement in what was then East Pakistan — Bangladesh today.

“Kill three million of them”, Pakistani President Yahya Khan had stated at a press conference in February, according to Robert Payne’s book on the events entitled *Massacre*. Payne records that death squads roamed the streets of Dhaka, now Bangladesh’s capital, killing some 7000 people in a single night. Within a week, half the population of Dhaka had fled, and at least 30,000 people had been killed.

It was estimated that in April some 30 million people had become refugees within East Pakistan in an attempt to escape the carnage, with 10 million fleeing to India alone. The population of Bangladesh was around 75 million.

Pakistan had been formed as an independent state in the aftermath of India’s fight for independence from British rule. To ensure an independent India would remain weak, Britain’s parting gift to its former colony was to divide it into two states along ethnic and religious lines in 1947 — one Hindu-dominated (India), the other Muslim-dominated (East and West Pakistan). This act caused much bloodshed, with hundreds of thousands killed in sectarian violence.

The new Pakistani state was divided geographically, with East Pakistan being hundreds of kilometres away from West Pakistan, with India in between. From 1958, when Pakistani was ruled by a military dictatorship, opposition to West Pakistani domination grew among the Bengali population in the East.

The Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rahman, developed mass popular support when catastrophic floods struck Bangladesh in August 1970, and the Pakistani regime abandoned the region. The League demanded regional autonomy and an end to military rule. In national elections held in December, the League won an overwhelming victory across Bengali territory.

According to a 1997 volume of the *Pakistan Defence Journal*, Pakistan’s plan envisioned taking control of the major cities and eliminating all opposition. In *Witness to Surrender*, Salik Siddiq writes that the Pakistani military expected to only take a month to put Bengali resistance down.

The subsequent campaign of genocide caused the surviving leadership of the League to declare Bangladesh independent on April 17, 1971, and a successful armed struggle was waged against the Pakistani military, which surrendered in December.

Bangladesh’s first post-independence prime minister, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, claimed that at least 3 million people had died at the hands of the Pakistani military. Both Pakistan and its ally — the US — deny the genocide allegations. However, the 2007 Guinness Book of Records lists the atrocities as one of the top five genocides in the 20th Century.

An international campaign is being waged to bring the war criminals and their collaborators to justice, and an action of around 50 Bangladeshi people and supporters was held in Sydney on December 1. Dr Abul Hasnat Milton, the convenor of the Australian-based Justice for Bangladesh Genocide 1971 inc., spoke to Green Left Weekly about the campaign. "In Australia, it's just more than a year since we started this movement. In Bangladesh, it has been there on and off for more than 15 years.

"We are trying to involve international voices with us", Milton said. "We are planning to organise our next even on March 25, along with organisations such as Socialist Alliance and an Armenian group working on genocides. Currently, the demand for prosecution of war criminals has again been very popular by many organisations in Bangladesh. They have brought the issue into surface again."

P.S.

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