

Amidst the Present Turmoil in Bangladesh, a Time to Recall the Tragic Events of 1975. The Assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman and his Family

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Amidst the ongoing turmoil in Bangladesh, it is important to remember the extremely important and at the same time extremely tragic events in Bangladesh in 1975.

When Banglabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, the first President of Bangladesh, also called the Father of the Nation and revered by millions as such, was assassinated on August 15, 1975 as a part of the wider efforts to overthrow his popular government, there were several aspects of this murder most foul which had shocked the world.

All the family members present in the house (together with servants) were killed, including Mujib's wife, a motherly figure for many beyond the family, daughters in law, three sons, including a 10-year-child, each one shot separately. Another minister with family members was also killed. Other senior-most leaders were sent to prison and killed there. When an army officer involved in the assassination was asked why the 10 year old child was killed, he replied that the idea was to kill the entire family and spare no one.

Sheikh Hasina (daughter of Mujibur Rehman, later Prime minister of Bangladesh for a long time, ousted now) with one sister could escape because in August 1975 she was in W. Germany and from there she came to India.

No killer was punished and no action was taken against them for 21 years. Instead the killers—mostly junior army officers at that time—were given lucrative civil service jobs, several of them in the more prized foreign services. So they could spread out to other parts of the world and lived a life of luxury. Neither the national legal system did anything, nor was anything effective done internationally for ensuring the due punishment to them for so heinous a crime.

It was only after Sheikh Hasina was elected Prime Minister in 1996 that the process of justice started moving. Some of the killers could be been punished. Even then the entire truth could not be uncovered, or at least stated officially. So it is unlikely that the complete truth of the killing of Banglabandhu will ever be known for certainty. The reason is that the complete story has important international aspects which were difficult even for the government led for several years by the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman to state openly.

In his widely discussed book 'Trial of Henry Kissinger' Christopher Hitchens has stated clearly regarding those times of Bangladesh, " (USA) Ambassador (in Bangladesh)

Boster became convinced that his CIA station was operating a back channel without his knowledge. Such an operation would have been meaningless, and pointlessly risky, if it did not extend homeward to Washington where, as is now notorious, the threads of the Forty Committee and National Security Council, were very closely held in one fist." This fist, as this book explains, was that of Henry Kissinger.

Due to the investigative writings of Lawrence Lifschultz, Kai Bird, Christopher Hitchens and others published in reputed newspapers and journals of Bangladesh, India and several other countries as well, some basic aspects of this heinous crime are now fairly well known.

1. It is fairly well-recognized that some influential persons of Bangladesh establishment, particularly in the army, had outwardly aligned themselves to liberation forces of Mujibur Rehman but had kept their links to Pakistan and religious fundamentalist forces intact, waiting for an opportunity to oust Mujibur Rehman. Ziaur Rehman, a senior army officer, was the most manipulative, shrewd and cruel among these persons and could go to any length to advance his interests.

2. Kissinger who was all powerful in the USA had seen the liberation of Bangladesh as a humiliation for his diplomacy that had to be avenged by ousting Mujib. Therefore he had instructed the CIA Station Chief in Dacca regarding a plan to oust Mujib. As per his mandate the CIA station chief in Dacca, who of course kept his actual assignment hidden under the officially stated designation of being a political officer, had started exploring who can be useful in ousting Mujib and contacts had been established with various persons including Ziaur.

3. Around 1974-75 these attempts had started taking a more definite turn. The role of Ziaur Rehman was to be the important behind-the-scene role of managing the army at higher levels so that the actual killers could be reassured that no action will be taken against them after the killings and actually they will be rewarded with better opportunities. Talk of such planning was in the air.

4. The USA Ambassador in Dacca Davis Eugene Boster was a man of principles. Hearing these rumors he had given strict instructions that embassy staff is not to be involved in any coup or killing effort and should keep away from any such plotters and plot that may come to their notice. However he had very uneasy feeling that his instructions were not being followed and some sinister work was being done by the CIA station head bypassing him, on the basis of direct contacts at a very high level in the USA. Due to this duality there was a lot of tension in the USA embassy at that time.

5. Hence just a few days before the assassination when the CIA head in Dacca wanted to have a detailed secretive talk with Ziaur Rehman, he avoided a direct meeting and instead shrewdly arranged to meet at a dinner to be hosted by a prominent businessman who was also close to the Mujib family. As the dinner had just these two guests they could find enough time to talk separately in the garden. The businessman did not know the real identity of his American guest of course and later, after the assassination, when he could add two and two together, he deeply regretted the hosting of the dinner (at the prompting of the American guest), but by then it was too late to make any amends.

To this we may add the well-known history of post assassination days—the speedy rise of Ziaur to become the President of Bangladesh, the strong steps taken by Ziaur to move close

to the USA and its western allies while distancing Bangladesh from India and the Soviet Union, the strengthening of fundamentalist forces within Bangladesh who had collaborated with Pakistan to kill so many people, the definite moving away from secularism.

The Sheikh Hasina government was fully committed to punishing those persons who were involved in the actual killing, but what is ultimately more important is to know who all were involved in planning the killings and in giving the go-ahead to the killers, for they would not have moved for such a shocking crime without some reassurance of their own safety and reward from higher levels. But as a complete exposure of this has strong international ramifications concerning very powerful forces, it was not possible even for the Bangladesh government led by the daughter of Banglabandhu to acknowledge all the known aspects officially.

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