


**BY YESH KHANNA**



# 1971

## THE BLOODIED LEGACY OF THE UNITED STATES IN SOUTH ASIA

### **BACKGROUND**

In 1971, South Asia saw one of the most horrific genocides in modern history. It took place in East Pakistan (now known as Bangladesh) under the oversight of General Yahya Khan. This genocidal campaign was named Operation Searchlight; its primary objective was to 'suppress' the members and sympathizers of the Awami League – the Bengali nationalist political party, led by Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rahman – protesting for greater autonomy of East Pakistan. Later, they started demanding complete secession and the creation of 'Bangladesh'. The military crackdown began

on March 25th in Dhaka and neighboring areas with the Pakistani army killing civilians, firing indiscriminately at unarmed university students, and raping women. Even though the U.S. consulate in Dhaka witnessed these horrors and reported each and every update to Washington, the Nixon administration not only chose to turn a blind eye to the atrocities being committed by the Pakistani army in East Pakistan but secretly approved of Yahya's crackdown.



## UNITED STATES REMAINS COMPLICIT

The Nixon administration's inaction (and support) towards Yahya's genocidal campaign can be traced to three core reasons: Nixon's personal bias towards Yahya, his hostility towards India, and the fact that Pakistan was the secret channel to unlocking the door to China. The Nixon administration was almost certain that a civil war would break out between the eastern and western wings of Pakistan. Archer Blood, the American Consul General to Dhaka, and Samuel Hoskinson, the White House's South Asia expert, were the first two people to alert the White House of an impending civil war in Pakistan. Nixon, however, was completely confident that Yahya could handle the political turbulence in East Pakistan. Clearly, his confidence was misplaced. On March 5, Harold Saunders, a senior White House official, explicitly warned Henry Kissinger about the worsening situation in East Pakistan and came up with a possible solution to prevent a full-blown crisis: threaten to cut economic aid to Pakistan. The next day, during Kissinger's situation room meeting to discuss the situation in Pakistan, another official warned that the ratio of West Pakistani troop presence to the population of East Pakistan would most certainly lead to a bloodbath. However, Kissinger ignored these concerns, put forth Nixon's friendship and regard for Yahya, and decided on a course of 'massive inaction'. He told the State Department to instruct Archer Blood to refrain from dissuading Yahya Khan from shooting, and advised Nixon to cater to Yahya Khan's agenda, dismissing the situation as a Pakistani internal affair. Clearly, Kissinger believed that appeasing the 'highly emotional atmosphere' of Pakistan was far more important than 75 million East Pakistani lives.

## THE COVER UP

On March 25, 1971, the crackdown began. As Pakistani troop columns led by American supplied M-24 tanks marched into the streets of Dhaka, the whole city was lit up in gunfire and detonations. As an attempt to cover up the atrocities being committed in East Pakistan, all communications in and out of the region were shut down. Blood, however, was in possession of a secret wireless transmitter that allowed him to transmit to the American embassy in Islamabad. However, this information channel was soon discovered by Pakistani forces. Since Blood's cables were being aired on Voice of America radio for the whole world to listen to, the Pakistani government lodged a strong protest against Blood. The State Department assured Yahya that from that moment onwards the U.S. embassy in Islamabad would keep all the reports from Dhaka to itself. This way, the United States actively helped Yahya cover the atrocities being committed in East Pakistan and nullified any hopes of international intervention.

## LOGISTICAL SUPPORT TO PAKISTAN

During the massacre, a majority of the weapons and logistics used by the Pakistani army were supplied by the United States. The C-130 planes were used to shuttle in troops from West Pakistan, F-86 jets fired rockets and guns on civilians, M-24 Chaffee light tanks led the troop columns on the streets of Dacca, and American supplied jeeps mounted with 0.50 caliber machine guns patrolled the city. It is worth noting that the Bengalis appealed to the United States not to allow the weapons to be used for the 'mass murder'.

*Layout and design by Sommer Farber*

However, not only did the Nixon administration avoid doing anything to prevent the use of these weapons against the Bengalis, they also actively dodged press questions about American weaponry being used against the civilian population in East Pakistan.

## SECONDARY MOTIVATIONS

Needless to say, Pakistani forces were also to blame. Under the guise of a crackdown, Pakistan directed its genocidal campaign towards the Hindu population of East Pakistan; this can be linked to Pakistan's disdain for India, where a large percentage of the population is Hindu. A suitable example to substantiate this would be that of Dacca University, where the worst killings took place in a Hindu dormitory; a Pakistani Brigadier later testified that the troops acted out of 'revenge and anger'. Moreover, Desaix Myres, a Foreign Service Officer in Dacca, observed: "The Army continues to check, lifting lungis (a kind of sarong worn by Bengalis), checking circumcision (practiced by Muslims but not Hindus), demanding recitation of Muslim prayers. Hindus flee or are shot."

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, the massacre in East Pakistan was, to a certain extent, supported by the Nixon administration. Reports and recommendations of several U.S. government officials were ignored, and the United States decided to pursue a course of 'massive inaction'. The American consulate in Dacca was rebuked for exposing the atrocities to the world and the Nixon administration didn't object to the use of American weaponry to kill civilians. On the ground, however, the genocide was exclusively conducted by Pakistani forces by selectively hunting down the Hindu population present in East Pakistan. ■

Scan here for sources

