

## Why Pakistan should apologise to Bangladesh

It was reported in the media recently that the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina Wajid, turned down an official invitation to visit Pakistan for the D-8 summit, and instead sent someone else to represent her. The reports said that this was done because Bangladesh was unhappy, that after all these years, Pakistan had yet to issue a formal apology for the events of 1971.

Whether or not Sheikh Hasina did the right thing is something that only time will tell. However, in my view, she should have come to Pakistan. Since the 1980s, five Pakistani heads of government have made official visits to Bangladesh and when president Pervez Musharraf visited Bangladesh in August 2002, he actually came very close to offering an apology. After laying a wreath at the National Martyrs' Memorial outside Dhaka, dedicated to those killed in the war, he wrote in the official visitors' book "Your brothers and sisters in Pakistan share the pains of the events of 1971. The excesses committed during the unfortunate period are regrettable". However, this obviously was not enough.

I am not sure whether the state of Pakistan will ever formally apologise to Bangladesh considering that there were two horrors committed during the Bangladesh tragedy and by that account there are not one but two reciprocal apologies that seem to be due.

This seems to be amply stated in his article by Anthony Mascarenhas, who at that time was an assistant editor with the Morning News of Karachi, a villain for most Pakistanis but for the world, an honest journalist credited for the role he played in exposing the genocide in Bangladesh and for encouraging India to play a decisive role in ending the war. On June 13, 1971, Mascarenhas wrote an article titled "Genocide" in the Times. In the article, he pointed out that there were in fact two horrors to the Bangladesh tragedy. One was committed by Bengali troops and paramilitary personnel stationed in East Pakistan who mutinied in early March 1971 and put to death many non-Bengalis and Biharis. The second horror, he wrote, was committed by Pakistani forces that in a punitive response to the killings of non-Bengalis at the hands of the mutineers and their accomplices, initiated a military operation codenamed 'Operation Searchlight' on the night of March 25, 1971.

However, it was the rebels who initiated the violence in March of 1971 and what happened in the ensuing months speaks of a sorry tale of killing and mayhem. In the seven months that followed, hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives.

The conventionally accepted death toll agreed by most researchers is between one and two million. The fact is that many innocent people died in deliberately executed acts of genocide and blame for this lies on both parties to the conflict. The Mukti Bahini targeted the West Pakistanis and Biharis and the Pakistani army's military operation targeted the Hindus and the Bengali civil population. Both sides committed war crimes that warranted state apologies and not general amnesty; not yesterday and not even today.

As a Pakistani, I feel no shame in suggesting that we must apologise to Bangladesh but before we do that we must first as a state apologise to the people and the land we used to refer to as East Pakistan. An apology to them is due on two accounts. The first is that we showed wilful intent to keep the eastern wing militarily exposed, defenceless and vulnerable to India, courtesy our military strategy which was based on the reasoning that the battle of the east will be won in the west. The second has to do with the shameful manner in which the eastern wing was neglected when it was part of Pakistan.

Both these did little to allay the fears of Bengalis, and in fact, added to their insecurities and distrust that resulted in creating momentum towards a point where many started demanding secession and a separate homeland. Yes, we must apologise to Bangladesh for not doing enough for it and for being unable to guarantee the safety and security of its people when it was a part of our country.

The military solution that the government of General Yahya Khan favoured may have been in line with the principle of preservation of national unity, integrity and ideology and if better executed, may even have prevented East Pakistan's secession from the rest of Pakistan. However, clearly it wasn't the only solution that could have kept Pakistan united, as the events of 1971 showed. No army can hold a country together by force and it was this mistake by the military government of General Yahya Khan that made us lose half of our

country. In that regard, we must also apologise to the lost Eastern Wing for using a military solution against its people and not one based on dialogue and democracy.

In a war that we lost, the minimum the state could have done was not to benefit the military leaders; in fact, they should actually have been retired and allowed to fade away. General Yahya Khan was a beneficiary of two pensions, one as Chief of Army Staff and the other as president of Pakistan. Lt Gen Yaqoob Ali Khan, who resigned and was removed from his post of Commander Eastern Command on March 1, 1971, was instead rewarded by being made ambassador to France and America and later was even appointed as Pakistan's foreign minister. General Tikka Khan, who took over the military command from him and who initiated the infamous military operation in Dhaka on the night of November 25-26, was rewarded with the post of army chief. His generals who supervised and executed this operation in Dhaka included General Farman – he was appointed chairman of the Fauji Foundation on his return to Pakistan and Brigadier Jahanzeb Arbab was eventually promoted to lieutenant general. All these were benefits given to generals returning from a defeated war theatre.

Apologising to Bangladesh may be difficult and may take a long time in the coming but is repatriating 250,000 stranded Biharis – who call themselves Pakistanis – from Bangladesh a difficult thing as well? At the very least Pakistan should accept them.

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