

VII THE FATEFUL NIGHT

March 25, 1971, Thursday. I was as usual in my office at 7 in the morning and found Major Iqbal (a West Pakistani officer) sitting in my office. "Rafiq, you look so tired and overworked. Why don't you go to Cox's Bazar and rest for a few days? If you want you can go today. I will persuade the Commanding Officer." True, I had not taken any leave for a number of years and 'rest' I needed badly. Yet Major Iqbal's insistence on my taking leave that very day deepened my suspicion. Politely I replied, "Thank you, sir, but you know all leave has been cancelled since January."

"I can talk to the Commanding Officer. I think he will agree," he insisted.

We all knew Major Iqbal was a pet of the Commanding Officer. But Major Iqbal's persistence to keep me out of Chittagong (in fact, out of touch with my troops) really puzzled me. I decided not to dance to his tune.

"You know, yesterday troops fired on the mob in the port area and many people were killed," I told him in a bid to divert his attention to a different topic.

"Not many," he tried to minimise. "Only one or two were injured." And then with a curious smile he said, "I hear Sheikh Mujibur Rahman has called for a general strike on March 27 to protest against army action."

"I do not know as yet." But we knew that in the port area army went on firing at random and we could hear

that from our office. Major Iqbal kept shadowing me wherever I moved within the lines of EPR HQ until I left my office at 2 pm.

A rumour was afloat that a settlement had been reached. There was no confirmation from any reliable quarter. Official radio broadcasts hinted at a political solution but this could not be relied upon. From my house, I rang up my HQ and asked the troops to remain on full alert. Then I kept pacing the lawn of my house restlessly.

At 11 am that day (March 25) an army helicopter flew to Rangpur. It carried on board Major General Janjua, Major General Mitta Khan, Major General Nazar Hussain Shah and one more general (probably General Omar). Brigadier Abdul Ali Malik, commanding 23rd Brigade stationed at Rangpur, received the generals at the helipad and they drove straight to the Brigadier's residence. Colonel Staff of HQ 14 Division carried a sealed packet. Others were empty-handed. After a few minutes they returned to the helipad and departed. The sealed packet was missing this time. It had been delivered to the Brigadier at his residence.

As the helicopter flew away, Brigadier Abdul Ali Malik called various unit commanders for a conference at the Brigade HQ. All the unit commanders were West Pakistani officers. EPR was represented by a Bengali officer, Capt Nawajesh, assistant wing commander of 10 Wing. The Brigadier did not like the presence of a Bengali officer in the conference. "Nawajesh," he told him, "you are not required in this conference.

We are going to discuss purely army affairs. You need not waste your time here. Better go and look after the internal security measures in the city.”

Nawajesh left the Brigade HQ, suspicious of what he had watched at the helipad and at the HQ.

From Rangpur the helicopter flew to the cantonments at Rajshahi, Jessore, Chittagong, Comilla and finally back to Dacca in the evening. By then it was known that M.M. Ahmed, chairman of the Planning Commission and Yahya's chief negotiator, had slipped out of Dacca in the morning. Yahya left the President's House in the city and moved to Dacca cantonment. The EPR troops on duty in the city were withdrawn and concentrated at Peelkhana. They were asked to deposit their arms in the kote. The troops became suspicious but they had no alternative. Peelkhana was being controlled by 22 Baluch Regiment (all West Pakistani personnel). By dusk that day as all the EPR troops deposited their arms in the kote, 22 Baluch quietly took over the EPR signal communication centre and put non-Bengali signals personnel on duty. Troops of 22 Baluch started manning the gates and no one was allowed either to enter or to leave Peelkhana. In the city of Dacca there were whispers that the talks had failed. People rushed back home expecting curfew at any time. All that the people apprehended was tougher martial law, violations of curfew and some butchery by the Pakistan Army. But no one could imagine that they were to face a genocide. It was impossible for anyone except the senior West Pakistani army officers at different stations to know

anything about the plan. The blueprint for 'Operation Genocide' had been delivered in sealed packets by the generals who flew in that special helicopter from Dacca. The packets contained the operational orders for 'genocide' up to the minutest details—signed by the Chief of General Staff, General Hamid Khan, and authenticated by Yahya Khan. Soon after receiving that sealed packet hectic activities started in every cantonment.

In Chittagong, Dr Zafar came to my house at 4-30 pm. Sitting on the lawn of my house we discussed all possibilities. But we could not receive any reliable information regarding the situation at Dacca. At 8 pm Dr Zafar left for the Awami League office to find out if they had received any information from Dacca. I went in to have an early dinner with a friend, Capt Muslimuddin. We had just started taking our meal when Dr Zafar returned with an Awami League worker. It was 8-30 pm.

"Pakistan Army has started moving out from Dacca cantonment with tanks. The talks have apparently failed." They could speak no more. Both were tense and excited.

"Are you giving me the correct information?" I asked Dr Zafar.

"Yes. We are just coming from Mr Siddiqi's place where a closed door session of our party is being held. Mr Siddiqi received that information from Dacca and asked us to convey it to you immediately. It is your show now."

I was still nibbling at rice. For a while, I remained indecisive and absorbed in deep thought while my visitors kept their eyes fixed on me with eagerness and expectation.

If the army had started moving to the city with tanks surely they meant some serious business. We should expect the worst. From March 3 they had been killing our people indiscriminately. On March 24 alone they killed more than 20 civilians in Chittagong port. Besides, we had confirmed reports of such killing from all over Bangladesh—Dacca, Khulna, Jessore, Rangpur, Saidpur, Rajshahi. And that evening (March 25) something very strange had happened. Both the EPR wireless sets at Chittagong lost contact with the control station at Peelkhana, Dacca. This never happened earlier and it deepened my suspicion.

These thoughts crossed my mind in quick succession. Having served in the Pakistan Army I knew the atrocities those people were capable of committing, once let loose anywhere. With the news of the army's moving on to the scene, Yahya's sudden departure from the President's House and failure of the talks, we apprehended that a massacre would start at any moment and on an unprecedented scale. We suspected that even the Bengali army personnel might not escape their wrath.

Something from within gave me immense courage and strength. Something from within demanded of me that to save my life as well as the lives of our people we must meet that evil force with strength and determination.

I took the most difficult and nerve-wrecking decision which could lead me to freedom or to the firing squad.

I told Dr Zafar, "I along with my troops of EPR will fight the Pakistan Army to save our people and to free them. Move to Sholashahar and the cantonment and tell all Bengali soldiers to join us. Meet me in my tactical HQ on the Railway Hill."

Immediately, I dialled Haliashahar EPR HQ where the Bengali JCOs were awaiting my orders. "Just now send the second code message to all stations. Control the kote. Do not allow the West Pakistani soldiers to come out of their rooms. Put some troops in defence against naval HQ. I am coming shortly."

Thereafter, I instructed my batman Sattar to remove certain important documents to a friend's house and asked him to remain available on telephone. Ahmed, my old cook, asked innocently, "Sir, you have not eaten at all. Was it bad cooking?" Before I could say anything, I saw Sattar winking at Ahmed to move back to the kitchen. As a soldier he could understand that we were heading for something big and difficult.

It was 8-45 pm. I left my house on Sarson Road in Chittagong for the last time. Ahead of me was a dream—a dream that I had cherished like others for a long time. A dream full of uncertainty. "Will the other army personnel join in the fight? Will the Sheikh manage to escape from Dacca? Shall I ever be a free man? Can I ever come back to see a free people?" These and many such thoughts kept haunting me ceaselessly.

A gentle breeze was blowing from the Bay of Bengal. We drove down to the Wireless colony, the first target for action. My driver Kalam and the two escorts in the rear seats were all tense and biting their lips. The streets were all deserted. As we came close to the Wireless colony, tension drew sharper. The jeep negotiated a narrow railway crossing with a jerk and my thoughts were interrupted. I could see the antenna of the wireless station protected by barbed wire fencing all around. I asked the driver to slow down. No one should sense anything unusual. Success there in the Wireless colony was vital. Four of us were to tackle and neutralise a platoon of EPR on internal security duty commanded by Capt Hayat and Subedar Hashmat (West Pakistanis). There were three other West Pakistani soldiers in that place as per my record and the rest of the troops were all Bengalis. Similarly there were other EPR platoons at various parts of the city. But the one at the Wireless colony was the only platoon on duty with a West Pakistani officer in command.

My jeep halted at the gate and the Bengali sentry allowed the jeep to move in. We finally stopped in front of Capt Hayat's room where a sentry was standing on guard outside.

I moved to Hayat's room cautiously. In a few minutes something serious was going to happen. Either success or a bullet through my head. If the latter happened there was no other Bengali officer in EPR Chittagong to lead the troops. This thought perplexed me.

I knocked at the door gently and talked in a very friendly and sober tone, "Hello Hayat, are you sleeping?"

"I had just gone to bed, sir." He recognised my voice and put on the light. Through the curtains I could see him taking out something from under the pillow and hiding it under his sleeping suit. "How is everything?" I asked as I waited for him to open the door. "Sab thik thak hai (everything is O K)," he replied and opened the door.

"Please come in, sir, and...", he wanted to say something when I interrupted pointing my sten gun at his chest. "I am sorry, Hayat, I have to arrest you," I said in a low voice. Quickly he tried to bring out his pistol. Driver Kalam darted out and hit Hayat on the head. We tied his hands and mouth, cut the telephone line and sent for Subedar Hashmat who was sleeping in a barrack close by.

Subedar Hashmat came dozing and hardly had he finished saluting me when Kalam and other escorts jumped on him. Hashmat was arrested and his hands and mouth tied in no time.

The sentry outside Hayat's room was watching the mysterious events bewildered. Suddenly he ran towards a hillock. "He is a West Pakistani," Kalam whispered and immediately a bullet whizzed past. We ducked down. The troops started running out from their barracks.

"The sentry has fired by mistake," I spoke with all the normalcy and ease that I could gather. "Fall in, everyone."

The other three West Pakistani soldiers surrendered. The sentry who had fired left his weapon and disappeared. From that platoon I sent ten persons to go and protect my would-be tactical HQ on the Railway Hill. Others were to join me at Halishahar. A few messengers were sent in different directions to contact the isolated platoons so that everyone could join me at Halishahar for final instructions without wasting much time.

A difficult task was completed with great success, thanks to driver Kalam and the two escorts who risked their lives to save me. I shall ever remain grateful to those brave soldiers.

As we drove out of the wireless station I looked at my watch. It was 9-10 pm. "Drive fast now," I asked Kalam and looking backward I told the escorts in the rear seat, "very well done." They smiled and said, "Insha Allah, we will win, sir."

We reached Halishahar area at 9-30. "Now switch off the lights and drive slow," I signalled.

At Halishahar the JCOs and the NCOs were all awaiting my arrival. There were three kotes and all very well under our control. All the Bengali troops had gathered in front of respective kotes to be issued with arms and ammunition. Only a month back we had received a huge quantity of Chinese arms and ammunition to replace 303 rifles. This created a surplus stock for us and was of great help at a later stage.

My office was kept open. There was a retiring room adjacent to it. The curtains were pulled down and four

soldiers with arms were put in the retiring room. The drama was about to begin.

The task at Haliashahar was of vital importance. There were about 300 West Pakistani EPR soldiers, mostly senior JCOs and NCOs. We had to arrest them maintaining maximum silence and secrecy. Moreover, the area surrounding my HQ was thickly populated with non-Bengalis and we had confirmed reports that a large number of commandos were residing with them. These commandos as well as a large number of non-Bengali civilians were fully armed. Thus any noise at the HQ would create suspicion and could lead to a fiasco.

With the kotes under our firm control we were in an advantageous position. The only danger was that anyone could leak out the secrecy and that could bring retaliation from the army at Chittagong cantonment or from the troops concentrated at the naval HQ.

We cordoned the entire area so that no West Pakistani could escape. Thereafter, we set out to arrest all of them in the shortest possible time.

During the second week of March, many Bengali JCOs and NCOs had been sent to the borders and the West Pakistanis had been transferred to EPR HQ in Chittagong. Lt Col Abdul Aziz Sheikh, at that time commander of EPR in Chittagong, did this on instructions from Dacca, obviously to consolidate their own position. These movements troubled my mind initially but as the operation started such changes came as

a blessing in disguise. I got the maximum catch at one place.

To keep the Bengalis as kote guards, I had taken recourse to trickery. During daytime I used to check only the Bengali troops for improper haircut, dresses, saluting and so on. As punishment or corrective action, I used to give them extra guard duties in the kotes, mostly at night.

Thus, I eliminated almost with complete success the possibility of any West Pakistani being present on guard duties. This action paid me great dividends.

It was now around 10 pm. I loitered in the verandah of my office. I was hungry and tension increased my thirst. I asked for a glass of water and then for a second glass. The troops had been supplied with weapon and ammunition. Two platoons had already moved to a temporary defence position towards the naval HQ to prevent any sudden attack from that direction. I waited for Subedar Major Itbar, the seniormost West Pakistani JCO.

Unsuspecting, the Subedar Major entered my office room. I asked him to take the chair and said, "Subedar Major Saheb ? You have been sleeping but do you know what is happening in the city ?"

"No, sir !" he replied with absolute simplicity. Rightly he did not know anything. He had known that the troops were getting armed but he thought it was part of a preparation for some internal security duties for which I was the overall commander. And to maintain absolute

secrecy, the lowest level in the military echelon that was taken into confidence about 'operation genocide' was that of brigadier rank and at some places up to the rank of Lt colonel. This overdoing of secrecy went in our favour to a great extent.

The Subedar Major rubbed his eyes and from the retiring room out came four Bengali soldiers with bayonets fixed on their rifles. His eyes became wide with fear and before he could utter a word a bayonet was close to his throat.

"Subedar Major Saheb, you are under arrest. If you try to shout or escape, you will be killed," I told him firmly.

He was tied with a rope and taken to the retiring room. In similar fashion we arrested all the West Pakistani JCOs maintaining absolute secrecy. We had to, else we would have been the victims. It was purely a question of survival of the fittest—a question of hitting the enemy before being hit.

Soon afterwards Subedar Mobin, another non-Bengali JCO in charge of EPR signal company, was called to my office. By then the West Pakistani EPR troops had sensed something wrong but were helpless since the area was cordoned and they had no arms.

This Subedar entered my office. I could see he was panicky. As ill luck would have it, in came a telephone call from Major Iqbal. I picked up the telephone.

"Hello Rafiq, what are you doing there at this hour of the night?" he asked me.

"I just came to see if the guards are alert."

"I see," he replied, paused for a moment, and then abruptly asked, "Where is Subedar Mobin?"

"He might be sleeping in his room. Do you want to talk to him?"

"Yes, please get him to the telephone."

"I am sending a runner to get him here. He will ring you back," I replied calmly and continued conversation in an effort to remove any suspicion from his mind.

"I visited all the troops on duty at different places. Everything seemed to be all right."

To my utter surprise he asked me abruptly, "But there is no reply from Capt Hayat's telephone?"

"Oh well, the telephone is out of order. I just visited him. He offered me a very good tea." To this Major Iqbal said, "Yar, kabhi hamko bhi le chalo chaye piney ke liye (take me at times for such tea)."

"I will take you tomorrow," I replied. During this conversation, Subedar Mobin was tied by the four sepoys. No one outside knew who were entering my office, what was happening and where they were being taken away.

I asked for a bayonet and bringing it close to Subedar Mobin's throat I said, "You have worked under me for quite some time and you know my nature. You will now talk to Major Iqbal and give those replies which I dictate. If you do not follow my instructions I will kill you. Do you understand?"

He nodded shivering. I dialled Major Iqbal's telephone number and brought the receiver close to Subedar Mobin's ears. I bent my head so that I could also hear the questions that were asked.

"Hello sir, Subedar Mobin speaking."

"Mobin Saheb, anybody with you?" Major Iqbal asked. I put my hand on the transmitting end to give my dictation, "You say there is no one." Subedar Mobin complied with.

"But Capt Rafiq was there. Where has he gone?" Major Iqbal inquired.

Again I dictated and he replied, "Capt Rafiq has just gone out with Subedar Major Itbar to check the guards."

"Is there any garbarh (trouble)?"

"No sir, sab kuch thik thak hai (everything is OK)," Subedar Mobin replied very obediently.

"That is good. You stay with the telephone for my instructions. You are the duty officer for the night. Remain very vigilant."

"OK, sir," was the dull reply from Subedar Mobin. I was relieved of a great anxiety. Subedar Mobin was kept there along with a Bengali JCO so that nothing could leak out over the telephone.

Around 10-45 pm Subedar Zainal, the seniormost Bengali JCO, gave me an OK report. We had by then arrested all the West Pakistani troops of EPR in Chittagong. All border posts had acknowledged the receipt of my coded message and acted upon it. They had moved

out to join me in the city. Isolated platoons in the city had been informed and they moved to their respective battle locations. Only the platoon at the airport could not be contacted. This was nerve-wrecking for me. This platoon was supposed to prevent the airport facility being used and protect that area for an ultimate build-up of troops to enable us to attack and take over the entire complex including the airport, the seaport and the naval HQ. The telephone exchange at the airport normally remained open up to 8 every night. To keep in constant touch with the troops, I had given secret instruction to the exchange operator to keep that line operating twentyfour hours. But just after dusk on March 25 troops from naval HQ stealthily moved to the airport and arrested the entire platoon.

That was a great loss for me.

Two platoons were moved to take up defence against any enemy troop movement along the coastal embankment. One company was sent to the Railway Hill to take up defence. About 100 men were sent in batches of two to three to occupy vantage points along Agrabad Road and other important areas preparatory to the street battle. The rest of the troops were kept at Haliashahar as reserve to reinforce any threatened area. Troops at Ramgarh were sent a message to deploy a company in defence near Shubapur bridge on the Feni river after demolishing the bridge. The rest of the troops at Ramgarh were to move to the city along the main highway.

Before leaving Halishahar I gave instructions to keep the prisoners in a building with strong guards and "to fight to the last."

By 11-45 pm I was in my tactical HQ on the Railway Hill. I waited for the troops from the border areas to join me so that I could attack the naval HQ, the port areas and the airport. The cantonment could be captured by the Bengali troops of the East Bengal Regimental Centre under Colonel Chowdhury and the troops of 8 East Bengal Regiment stationed at Sholashahar under Major Ziaur Rahman. The total strength of Bengali soldiers at those two places were about 3000 as against hardly 400 West Pakistani soldiers.

At about 11-30 pm that night troops of 20 Baluch Regiment moved out of their barracks and suddenly attacked their Bengali comrades in the EBRC. First, they captured the kote and killed the kote guards. All other troops were at that time sleeping. Having captured the kote, troops of 20 Baluch went into a wild frenzy of killing. On that night they killed more than one thousand Bengali soldiers. Then they moved to the family quarters of the troops and indiscriminately killed anyone within the range of their weapons. Women and children were simply bayoneted to death.

Those Bengali soldiers who managed to escape this butchery ran away in different directions. Some of them reached my HQ to narrate their harrowing tales. Others moved to 8 East Bengal Regiment stationed at Sholashahar. This Regiment had all Bengali soldiers in its strength and most of its officers were Bengalis.

The escapees from the cantonment fervently appealed to 8 East Bengal Regiment to attack the cantonment and save the remaining Bengali soldiers from butchery. One officer who managed to escape from the cantonment narrated to me in complete despair: "From 11-30 pm that night till the morning of March 26, 20 Baluch haunted every ground within the cantonment to kill any Bengali. Soon after the attack a few of our soldiers ran to 8 East Bengal Regiment requesting for help." His eyes became moist as he continued in a choked voice, "If only they had moved to the nearby hills which are very dominating areas and fired a few shots the troops of 20 Baluch would have gone into defence. This would have enabled the Bengali soldiers to escape."

On the Railway Hill, the platoons were quickly organised for defence. The mortars were laid and the civilians were asked to vacate the area and move to safer places. It was about 11-45 pm. Just across my tactical HQ on that hill was the naval communication centre and some movement of the enemy was visible from my position.

At that time a vehicle belonging to the navy slowly passed by, moving to the direction of Chittagong port. My mortar JCO, Subedar Aizuddin, came running from his position. "Sir, there are some naval troops in this. Should we not destroy it?" "No, not now. This is probably making a reconnaissance for the main body. We will hit the main body."

But the main body of troops did not come. In another 10 minutes the same vehicle moved back to the canton-

ment. I came to know much later that the vehicle was carrying Major Ziaur Rahman. He was deputed to get arms and ammunition unloaded from the ship and shift those to the cantonment. He survived miraculously. My own troops in the Railway Hill and those occupying vantage points along the road controlled their fire. But it was another Bengali officer of 8 East Bengal Regiment, Capt Khaliquzzaman Chowdhury, who rushed in a separate vehicle and stopped Major Zia at Agrabad area. "If you go there for ammunition duty you are likely to end up in arrest," he cautioned him.

He changed his mind from going to the port, took the decision to revolt and moved back to his HQ at Sholashahar. The officers and troops of 8 East Bengal Regiment had by then learnt of what was going on inside the cantonment. Some of them had also learnt that we had revolted and that we had the whole city and the EPR HQ under firm control and that I had sent them a request through Dr Zafar and Mr Kaiser to join us in the ensuing battle.

An officer of 8 East Bengal Regiment later confessed: "There were differences of opinion. Some of the younger officers of the Regiment wanted to go to the rescue of EBRC troops and later join in the city battles. Others argued that it was more important to get the troops properly organised before going into battle. Finally it was decided that the entire regiment would be taken to a safe place for purposes of reorganisation. Accordingly, we left Sholashahar and started moving towards Patiya on that very night."

I remained ignorant of this move till Dr Zafar, whom I had sent to contact 8 East Bengal Regiment and EBRC, returned.

“Could you contact them?” I asked Dr Zafar impatiently.

“Your message has been delivered to 8 East Bengal Regiment. But they are moving out of the city. The EBRC troops could not be contacted.”

“Please go and stop them. Everything is now under control and together we can capture the rest of the places. Tonight is the vital night.”

That was the most vital night for everyone. In Dacca, all the West Pakistani troops had been ordered compulsory rest up to the evening of March 25. Loading of essential stores was completed the previous night. At 5 pm on March 25, the battalion commanders were given final orders for “Operation Genocide.” Soon after dusk hectic movements started within Dacca cantonment. Troops in battle dress lined up in front of their respective unit kotes to be issued with arms and ammunition. Some special detachments were issued with jerricans of petrol. In the name of Islam and Pakistan, they were allured with offers of looted booty and quicker promotions on the basis of the rate of their killing and destruction. Imbued with that spirit, troops started leaving their barracks by 8-30 pm on the night of March 25. By 9-30 pm firing started near the airport. People had already started setting up barricades everywhere in Dacca.

Further north in Rangpur area, 23 Field Regiment (artillery) had by then moved out of Saidpur, their peace location, and camped near Rangpur station.

It was about 10-30 pm when the 3rd East Bengal Regiment under a West Pakistani commanding officer passed through Rangpur en route to Bogra clearing the road blocks.

Capt Nawajesh watched all those movements and could realise that something serious was in the offing. At that time he received a faint wireless message transmitted from my HQ after I had consolidated my position in Chittagong. Decoded, the message read: "We have started. You too must start."

Capt Nawajesh made up his mind. With the Bengali troops of EPR he moved out of Rangpur town and took up defence across Teesta Bridge. Hardly had he left the town when the West Pakistani troops started firing and killing. A curfew was imposed immediately.

The population in the tiny district HQ at Kushtia had retired on that night as usual. But in the cantonment at Jessore there was an unusual activity and all the troops were tense. 1st East Bengal Regiment had been moved out of Jessore cantonment prior to March 25 and this 'all Bengali' regiment was tactically camped at Chougacha, only a few miles away. The presence of any organised battalion of Bengali troops within the cantonment area was considered by the West Pakistani senior officers as a security risk and a possible hazard in the execution of an unnatural military operation. Just after dusk

on March 25 a company of 27 Baluch Regiment—a mechanised and mobile unit—was despatched and by 10-30 pm, Delta Company of 27 Baluch Regiment was in front of the police station at Kushtia. After disarming all the policemen the company moved out to capture other vital areas and key points in the city. A curfew was imposed immediately without announcement.

In Comilla cantonment things were not different. 4 East Bengal Regiment was ordered by commander of 53 Brigade, Brigadier Iqbal Shafi, to move to Brahmanbaria and Shamshearnagar to check what the Brigadier called 'Indian infiltration.'

By 11 am on March 25 part of this regiment was in Brahmanbaria and the rest at Shamshearnagar and realised that the so-called Indian infiltration was a bogey. But Brigadier Iqbal Shafi had achieved his aim. Without any fear of organised resistance, his West Pakistani units rounded up all Bengali army personnel, including their families. By 10-30 pm West Pakistani troops moved out of the cantonment for Comilla city and attacked the police HQ with infantry and artillery. A curfew was imposed there too.

A sick policeman under treatment at the police hospital moved out to the verandah on hearing unusual explosions. But before he could realise what was happening he received a buist from a machine-gun. In another few minutes artillery fire was lifted and the West Pakistani soldiers reached the police lines. Finding the sick policeman groaning and still alive, two soldiers

charged him with bayonets and put an end to his useless struggle with death.

At Kaptai, north of Chittagong, there was no army unit. For a long time it had been a quiet tourist resort. Towards the end of January 1971 a new wing of EPR established its HQ at Kaptai in order to prevent the tribal people from burning down the forests in the adjoining areas. Capt Haroon was a junior officer in that wing of EPR and he was the only Bengali officer at Kaptai. Since the beginning of March he had been visiting me just to keep in touch and he attended the conference that I had in the university area on March 17. At about 10 pm on March 25 the Bengali signal operator rushed to him with my message. Haroon knew what the message meant. Swiftly he, along with his trusted Bengali JCOs, took over the armoury, arrested all the West Pakistanis and started moving with all his men towards Chittagong to join me in the battle.

The streets in Dacca were deserted by 10 pm in anticipation of a curfew. Heavy troop movements along the main city roads heightened tension and the initial sound of firing forced the people to believe that a severe type of martial law was in the offing. But by 11-30 pm when the sounds of guns, tanks and rifle fire came from all sides, the people were thrown into absolute confusion. An unknown fear gripped the whole population.

A large contingent of foreign journalists staying in Hotel Intercontinental in the heart of the city knew

that Yahya Khan had slipped out of the President's House and that Mr Bhutto staying at the Intercontinental was also preparing to leave for West Pakistan. When the firing started all around most of them thought that the curfew was being violated as it had been during the 1969 movement. But a curfew was not even announced. Some of the journalists telephoned Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to know what was happening.

By 12-30 that night the telephones went dead and the whole city was aflame with fire.

31 Field Regiment artillery was tactically deployed in the Second Capital area. This unit had been in East Pakistan for quite some time. Since the hijacking of an Indian aircraft in January, Yahya's government had raised the bogey of an Indian army build-up along the border and conveniently kept pushing out most of the Bengali troops to the borders for deployment. But like all other non-Bengali Army units, 31 Field also remained stationed at its peace location. This unit did not even send an officer to carry out reconnaissance of likely areas for deploying artillery guns, selection of observation posts or the selection of likely targets. These were all military requirements which the Pakistan Army had been fulfilling three to four times every year along the West Pakistan borders.

However, from the last week of February this unit, like other army units, was collecting city maps of Dacca which were specially prepared to suit the artillery's re-

quirement. A top-secret target list was prepared at Eastern Command HQ. The list started with EPR HQ at Peelkhana, Rajarbagh police lines, Dacca University students' halls and the Hindu populated areas in the old city. By 1 o'clock in the morning of March 26 the first artillery shells were landing on and around the main targets.

The bursting of artillery shells shook the whole city. Bullets were flying in all directions. People took shelter under their beds. Children started crying in fear, but those cries were lost in the louder rattling of weapons. Older people started offering prayers and reciting from the Holy Quran. But it seemed God Himself was benumbed and became a silent spectator for some time at least.

By 1-30 am on March 26, one tank, one armoured personnel carrier (APC) and a truck-load of troops moved towards Dhanmondi residential area. Soon they were in front of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's house. For a short period every soldier was firing at that single house. A bewildered Sheikh Mujib shouted, "You can arrest me; but stop this firing." The troops were happy that they got the man they wanted. And the leader of a nation who had asked his people only a fortnight back 'to fight Yahya's army with all they have' ironically met the fate of a prisoner and was moved to a prison more than a thousand miles away from his people and his land. Meanwhile, as the artillery continued shelling different parts of the city, truck-loads of troops were moving to-

wards Peelkhana, Rajarbagh police lines and the University campus. Near Hotel Intercontinental a defiant group of 10 to 15 men raised their clenched fists and shouted 'Joi Bangla'. The army did not understand that language but replied with bursts from automatic weapons. A small detachment moved to a side lane and set the office of the daily "The People" on fire. There was almost no resistance anywhere in Dacca except at the EPR HQ at Peelkhana and at the police lines at Rajarbagh. At both these places the Bengali personnel put up stiff resistance. The initial attacking waves of Yahya's army failed to make any headway and suffered heavy casualties. Then tanks were ordered to assist the infantrymen. A fierce battle continued till dawn. By then the Bengali personnel at Peelkhana and Rajarbagh had suffered very heavy casualties and exhausted all their ammunition. And they were surrounded from all directions. Incendiary tank shells and liquid fire from flame-throwers lit up a big bonfire of the police barracks. Many were roasted alive along with their families and children. Few could escape. Pakistan army finally captured these two places. They found very few prisoners. There were some wounded personnel and all other Bengalis had died fighting the army for over six hours.

Troops from a Punjab Regiment (probably 32 Punjab) were given the task of clearing the Dacca University area. During the non-cooperation movement the universities were closed and the students had left for their homes. Mostly the examinees were staying in the halls

and when they woke up on hearing noise they found themselves trapped, surrounded by the army. Under cover of darkness a few managed to escape to the nearby slums and take shelter. Others were hunted out and killed on the spot. A large number of university teachers of repute were killed brutally without any discrimination of age, sex or religion. Soldiers were not told to discriminate. Every Bengali was their enemy. Within the first 24 hours, many professors and departmental heads of the University were slaughtered.

The people in the slums were the worst victims of army actions. No political movement, demonstration or meeting was ever complete without participation by these unambitious, downtrodden people whose fate had never changed in living memory.

Yet, they had to bear the maximum brunt of every movement or upheaval, directly and indirectly. It was not different for Habib who lived in one of these slums with his wife and five children. Habib was a rickshaw puller and had to work hard for 8 to 10 hours a day to earn his living. The month of March was bad since his income had dwindled owing to frequent hartals and curfews. Yet Habib was dreaming of a better future. He had voted for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's party and thought his fate would change very soon. That dream was shattered when before dawn on March 26 the soldiers surrounded his area and set the hutments on fire. Habib escaped with a bullet wound ; his family was devoured by the engulfing fire like many other victims

in those slums. That was only the beginning of a tragedy that lasted nine cruel months—a man-made tragedy as is evident from the boasting remark of a Pakistani officer to the foreign journalists: “We can kill anyone for anything. We are answerable to none.”

That was an honest confession. The radio broadcast at 8 am on March 26 announced that Yahya Khan had reached West Pakistan leaving East Pakistan at the mercy of Tikka Khan. At 8-30 am Bhutto left Hotel Intercontinental under army escort to go to the airport en route to West Pakistan. Tanks and troops were patrolling the empty city streets shooting at anyone in sight. All foreign newsmen staying at Hotel Intercontinental were told to be prepared to leave East Pakistan. “We want you to leave because it would be too bloody and dangerous,” a colonel of the army hinted to the newsmen.

By noon, troops moved to old Dacca. This time it was another Punjab regiment (18 Punjab). The leading column moved ahead shooting at anyone trying to escape. Bengalis were lined up and shot. The leading elements were followed by small detachments who carried petrol cans and flame throwers. As they moved forward, the houses behind were ablaze. Amidst painful dying cries of the Bengalis, proud soldiers of the Pakistan Army marched away. They had saved Pakistan. By dusk on March 26 Dacca was almost empty except for the dead left to rot and the army left to guard. At 8-30 pm army vehicles were in front of Hotel Intercontinental to take away the foreign newsmen to the airport. Next morning a PIA Boeing took them all out of East Pakistan.