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### **Remembering the Bangla Desh Genocide 1971**

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In two years we shall celebrate the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh independence. This year Bangladesh, the country that earned the verdict of the then US Foreign Security Advisor to be nothing more than a basket case, already exists since 48 years, twice as long as United Pakistan did. The country has developed into a success story, as *The Economist* tells us, doing better than what remained of Pakistan, and in some ways as India, the country that helped Bangladesh to free itself from the shackles of a more and more unloved twinning with the ‘western wing’. It is an opportunity to look back, but also to take stocks and to look into the future,

The topic of our discussion is the ‘international recognition’ of the cruelty and violence of the perpetrators what began with the ‘Operation Searchlight’ and led to mass killings and rape, ten million women, men and children fleeing the country, to hunger and disease that all makes it so difficult to assess the misery, i.e. what we now call the Bangladesh Genocide.

Certainly, we do not have to discuss any national recognition of what happened. It always will be part of the collective memory of the Bangladeshi, and – as we know now – such traumata live on, passed on to the next generations, even unknowingly, almost genetically. It also has become a matter of politics, especially in the context of international relations with shifting perceptions of friends and adversaries.

So do we need more ‘international recognition’? And if we do, recognition by whom and in what way? Wikipedia has a ‘List of genocides by death toll’, where one finds Bangladesh at position number 15. Is such a ranking not trivializing the horrors of genocide?

The number of people outside of Bangladesh who were old enough to remember the developments of 1971 is shrinking. To be honest, most people would have difficulty to locate Bangladesh on a map. They no longer associate Bangladesh with hunger, poverty and natural calamities. They rather know that garments they wear have been Made in Bangladesh, albeit under miserable working conditions and that the low lying country is threatened by global warming and a rising sea level.

Personally, my dealings with that part of the world was just coincidentally. I had just earned my Diplom-Volkswirt (MA economics), when a friend rang me up and told me of a young professor looking for people for a consultancy project of programming German development aid for Pakistan. Absolutely clueless I joined the South Asia Institute of Heidelberg University in early 1971, just in time to follow the horrors that developed over the next months. It was the time of the student revolution, the war in Vietnam and much sympathy for the nations of the ‘Third World’. It was Anthony Mascarenhas’ article in the *Sunday Times* with a huge headline reading ‘Genocide’ that really alarmed people around the world. With the Concert for Bangladesh in the Madison Square Garden world famous stars like George Harrison of the Beatles and Ravi Shankar started a trend that was followed by the Concert for Africa and others. In Heidelberg University there were discussions on Bangladesh in the biggest lecture hall, filled to the brim.

However, the war over and independence won, other catastrophes caught the attention: The Middle

East, the Oil Shock, the Vietnam endgame, the Genocide in Cambodia, later the Islamic revolution in Iran, the Iran-Iraq and the Afghan wars. All of them with mass violence, millions of internally and internationally displaced persons.

As for our project, the emphasis shifted to look at the causes and consequences of Pakistan's partition, and to find out, how to divide the debt of United Pakistan between the two follow-up states. After analysing the material, we came to the conclusion that around two thirds of all projects were located in West Pakistan and a bit less of one third in now Bangladesh. Some projects could not be attributed. Pakistan refused to take liability for all credits and loans of United Pakistan, and since no new funds were flowing, declared a unilateral moratorium and refused to honour any debt. After the unconditional surrender of the Pakistan Army in East Pakistan, General Yahya Khan handed over powers to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who became the new Martial Law Administrator. He released Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from prison, who then became the first President of Bangladesh. While Bhutto was propagating an Islamic Socialism and successfully carried favour with the new rich oil states around the Gulf, Mujib faced the problem of little support coming from outside: It took until the Islamic Summit in Lahore in early 1974 that Bhutto accepted Bangladesh's independence. The Muslim states slowly followed, Saudi-Arabia and China started diplomatic relations only after the murder of Mujib. As we know, Yahya had helped the United States to establish diplomatic relations with the Peoples Republic of China and, thus, allowed the US to withdraw from Vietnam. Mujib had to rely on Indian support at a time, when Indira Gandhi started a new wave of nationalization of industries, after having aligned with the Soviet Union before entering into war with Pakistan. South Asia, no longer was in the focus of US, nor of the rebellious youth and civil society in the west. President Nixon famously abhorred all South Asian leaders of the day. Bangladesh became a synonym for poverty and hunger and natural catastrophes. With the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan, Pakistan again became a close ally of the USA, and again after 9/11. The roller-coaster-relationship always has been the result of mutual misunderstanding, in any case with no place for sentiments for past actions.

I was reminded of all that, when I listened to a talk on 'The Forgotten Holocaust'. Zoni Weisz is one of the last survivors of the Holocaust, and – befittingly since we meet in Den Haag – is a Dutch citizen from Zutphen, not so far from here. Toni Weisz escaped the transport to the concentration camps as a child, survived somehow German occupation, became the leading florist in the Netherlands and worked, as he proudly tells, for four Queens of the Netherlands. He wrote a book, titled "Zoni: De vergeten holocaust. Mijn leven als Sinto, ondernemer en overlevende", i.e. Zoni: The forgotten Holocaust. My life as Sinto, entrepreneur and survivor. It is available also in German (Toni Weisz: Der vergessene Holocaust), but not in English. He had accepted the invitation by the Rector of Heidelberg University, not only Germany's oldest and one of the most esteemed universities, but also one with a deep brown Nazi past (Josef Goebbels got his doctorate here). He talked in the Alte Aula, after also having talked to the Deutsche Bundestag and the United Nations. He lost most of his family, for no other reasons than that they were 'gypsies', despite being a Dutch citizen and belonging to the 'Aryan race'. What touched me so much was that he talked not only of his happy childhood and the dark past, but also about people who helped him and his love for flowers and music. He is proud of his achievements and despite his age gives public talks also in Germany, especially to the younger generation.

For our Conference in Heidelberg in 2013, I prepared a review of genocides in Bengal history that was published by the Liberation War Museum. There were a number of events during the last three centuries that earned the attribute 'genocide', a term that has been defined as 'deliberate extermination of a nation or race of people' by the Oxford and Webster dictionaries. Similarly the UN conditions for 'genocide', as

(a) Killing members of the group;

- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

The 1971 genocide stands out in Bengal history. But its singularity bears also the danger of being qualified as ‘accident of history’. To the contrary: Genocides are not a once-in-a-lifetime events. Mass killings happen again and again in all parts of the world, even today. If we really want to avoid genocides to happen, we have to study their history in detail. There are examples enough to prove the danger of victims turning into perpetrators. An easily overlooked point is the dynamics of any developments and their unintended consequences. In the Bangladesh example: Even if Operation Searchlight was a limited project, as described by Pakistani press officer Siddiq Salik, the ‘selective genocide’ as initially described by US General Consul Blood, was a monstrous crime. But it was facilitated by bystanders and opportunists, who always would insist that nobody could have seen it coming, that they only obeyed orders, that they could not have done anything without risking their lives and endangering their families, that they did not know anything, or that simply things never happened.

Such denial is the last of the eight stages of genocide presented by Gregory H. Stanton, the founder of Genocides Watch, in a briefing paper at the US State Department in 1996, ‘where he drafted the United Nations Security Council resolutions that created the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, the Burundi Commission of Inquiry, and the Central African Arms Flow Commission’ (Wikipedia: Gregory Stanton). The eight stages and their characteristics (summarized here) are:

1. Classification (us and them) by ethnicity, race, religion, or nationality;
2. Symbolization by giving names or other symbols to the classification;
3. Dehumanization by denying ‘the humanity of the other groups; their members are equated with animals, vermin, insects or diseases’.
4. Organization, ‘usually by the state, often using militias to provide deniability of state responsibility’;
5. Polarization by driving groups apart. Laws may forbid intermarriage or social interaction;
6. Preparation: ‘Victims are identified and separated out because of their ethnic or religious identity’;
7. Extermination ‘begins and quickly becomes the mass killing legally called “genocide”’;
8. Denial ‘always follows a genocide. It is among the surest indicators of further genocidal massacres. The perpetrators of genocide dig up mass graves, burn the bodies, try to cover up the evidence and intimidate the witnesses ... blame what happened on the victims.’ (Stanton 1996).<sup>1</sup>

Not to forget the indirect effects like hunger and disease, resulting in premature death, as Mike Davis writes in his *Later Victorian Holocaust. The Great Bengal Famine of 1943* would be a perfect later example.

Once the main perpetrators are no longer in power and archives are open to research, we get to know how mass killings could evolve. Today, after travel has become so much easier, crises are sending more refugees overseas and more and more refugees are reaching the shores of the rich countries, we are forced to witness how such disasters evolve. There is also an increased interest in past developments like the Bangladesh Genocide of 1971. Prominent among the new studies are ‘The Blood Telegram’ by G. J. Bass, ‘Just War Theory and India’s Intervention in East Pakistan, 1971’ by N. Goswami, ‘1971. A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh’ by S. Raghavan, or ‘The colonel who did not repent. The Bangladesh war and its unquiet legacy.’ by S. Tripathi.

Coming back to my initial questions: (1) The first thing is to find out what really happened, have it well documented and make the results available to everyone. As people get older, it becomes more difficult

to find eye witnesses. It is still time to talk to them. Interviews can easily be recorded, but have to be documented. There should be precise translations, especially if people are to be addressed in Pakistan, who do not speak Bangla and have little command of English. Emphasis has also to be on training translators and controlling translations. (2) The study of similar events elsewhere would be helpful to find common patterns. Bangladesh could help victims of other genocide and try to help to avoid new ones. (3) Stories like those of Zoni Weisz help to understand how genocides evolve and give people hope. (4) Joint history commissions help to clear textbooks from misconceptions and jingoism. German historians together with French and Polish colleagues together have been writing history textbooks for our students. (6) Following the media, in particular the new, so called social media.

In the case of Pakistan the first step would be to find out what the younger generation knows about the events of 1971. When teaching in Pakistan I found some interest, but little knowledge. K.K. Aziz's book 'The Murder of History' (Aziz 1993:154-156) provides a good introduction into the sorry state of history teaching in Pakistan and the reasons, why text books are written in such a deplorable way.

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