

March 1971 in East Pakistan as Seen by British Diplomats

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<https://doi.org/10.12982/CMUJASR.2025.011>

Editor:

Yos Santasombat,
Chiang Mai University, Thailand

Article history:

Received: December 27, 2023;

Revised: November 26, 2024;

Accepted: December 4, 2024.

ABSTRACT

The month of March 1971 is momentous in the history of the liberation war of Bangladesh. That month the war commenced and Bangladesh declared its independence. Following the declassification of documents from the National Archives, Surry, United Kingdom, this research examines the views of British diplomats in the South Asia region about events in March 1971. Much of this is documentation of the military crackdown on the night of 25 March 1971. The documents show that while the Pakistan army was denying the massacre of 25 March, non-partisan British diplomats were recording evidence of the Pakistan army's cruelty. In addition, the aggressive and obstinate manner of the Pakistan government is overt. These reports significantly helped the British government to frame their foreign policy.

Keywords: Diplomacy, 25 March 1971, Bangladesh, Pakistan, United Kingdom, British High Commissioner, War of Liberation

INTRODUCTION

March 1971 was the most crucial month in Bangladesh's war of liberation. Any discussion of the war must include the events of that month. The Pakistan army's crackdown on 25 March 1971 led the Bengali public to declare the independence of Bangladesh. Other countries, including major powers, followed the development with direct or indirect roles in the ongoing crisis. British archival documents show that even after having a supposedly neutral role, the United Kingdom was not indifferent to events in Bangladesh. As a distant but historically connected third party, official correspondence between British diplomats at the time help to shed

light on the liberation war's history and the events of March 1971. This article uses those documents to provide new insights on the war.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been some attention paid to the role of other nations during the Bangladesh war of liberation by scholars, especially to that of the United States, Soviet Union, India, and China (Azad, 2006; Budhraj, 1973, pp. 482-495; Haque, 2014; Hossain, 2006; Jackson, 1973, pp. 35-50; Pilkington, 2011, pp. 451-474; Sidky, 1976, pp. 965-980). Some research has been undertaken related to the United Kingdom, but without archival sources of diplomatic correspondence. Research has been done on the role of Bengali immigrants to Britain during the war (Tazul, 2001; Matin, 1989), British perspectives and publicity (Harun, 1995), and the role of Bengali newspapers published from Britain at the time (Faruq, 2002). Debnath pays attention to British perceptions of the overall East Pakistan crisis, but gives only a brief description of the month of March 1971 (Debnath, 2011, pp. 421-450). Musson concentrates on the British recognition process of the new state of Bangladesh in 1972, with the March events receiving less focus (Musson, 2008, pp. 125-144). Smith focuses on the British policy making process regarding the crisis, criticizing the United Kingdom's "winning side" approach (Smith, 2010, pp. 451-470). Bhatti (2010) translated 110 UK official documents from English into Bengali, and some telegrams from March 1971 by different British diplomats were included. All of these works reflect different or very specific sides of the crisis, and an explicit study of just the month of March 1971 has not yet been written. The lack of availability of declassified materials was likely a major cause of this inattention. But now there is ample scope to explore this issue and put this pivotal month on the historical record.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND OBJECTIVE

This article looks at the attitudes of United Kingdom diplomats toward the events of March 1971 in order to ask, "What was the attitude of the British diplomats toward the events that occurred in March 1971 in East Pakistan?" The article offers a chronological record of those days of turmoil through the views of British diplomats, including their reactions to massacres, as recorded through their telegrams to the Foreign Commonwealth Office (FCO) and other British High Commission Offices. Special emphasis is given to reactions to the military crackdown of 25 March 1971. The discussion is confined only to those diplomats who were serving at that time in India and Pakistan (now Bangladesh).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Archive documents are an important source for reconstructing and analyzing historical events, offering insights into the official views of bureaucrats and the deliberations of governments. I consulted British archival materials such as the Prime

Minister's official reports (PREM), cabinet papers (CAB), Hansard House of Commons debates, FCO reports, and Dominion Office files. Contemporary newspapers were also used for context. The descriptive and analytical qualitative method was used to achieve this article's descriptive aims.

HISTORICAL BACKDROP

It is imperative to first lay out the pre-history of the East Pakistan crisis. The partition of British India in 1947 led to the creation of India and Pakistan. The eastern part of Bengal¹ became East Pakistan in 1947 and formed one of two sections of the new Pakistan nation state, a majority Muslim country. But religion alone could not cement the ties between West and East Pakistan. It did not take long for Bengalis in East Pakistan to chafe at what many saw as another form of colonial rule by West Pakistan. Inequalities between east and west embittered Bengalis toward West Pakistan (Chottopaddhay, 1971; Jahan, 2001, p. 11; Ministry of Information, 1972, pp. 41-53; Niaz, 2010, p. 11; Sobhan, 2015, p. 263). New national movements were sparked, including a new language movement in 1952, in reaction to a presumed cultural and linguistic superiority harbored by many West Pakistani elites. Later, Bengalis voiced their discontent in the provincial election of 1954. Then in 1966, the movement for provincial autonomy through a six-point program of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was a direct outcome of resentment against the central government of Pakistan. Later, there was a mass violent upsurge in 1969 (Ministry of External Affairs, 1972; Rahman, 1984). Each of these movements further weakened the unity of Pakistan as a whole.

Finally, the 1970 election acted as a catalyst in the separation of the nation. In this election, the Awami League of East Pakistan won all but two seats in the National Assembly (Baxter, 1971, pp. 197-218; Talbot, 1998, pp. 194-201). So, it was obvious that the newly elected Constituent Assembly would be convened at Dacca (now Dhaka), and leader Sheikh Mujibur would form a government. But rather than handing over power to the democratically elected party, on 1 March 1971, the Pakistani authority postponed the 3 March National Assembly meeting for an undetermined period. Dacca was then brutally attacked by the Pakistani military on the night of 25 March 1971. From 26 March East Pakistan severed all links with West Pakistan; East Pakistan its independence, sparking the Bangladesh liberation war. These events were witnessed and observed by British diplomats serving in Pakistan and neighboring countries.

¹ What was formally known as East Bengal became East Pakistan in 1955. After achieving independence in 1971, as discussed in this article, it became the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

BRITISH DIPLOMATS' OBSERVATIONS OF POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN EAST PAKISTAN BEFORE 1971

Generally, a diplomat represents his state to a host country and communicates. Morgenthau compares diplomatic representatives with the eyes, ears and mouth of their own government. According to him, diplomats fulfill the symbolic, legal and political functions for their government and maintain "two-way traffic" between the center and the outside world (Morgenthau, 1985, p. 42). Among other things, one of their tasks is the "reporting and gathering of information by all lawful means on conditions and developments in the host country for the sending government" (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2009). British diplomats work under the supervision of the FCO and gather information to communicate back. Thus, British diplomats play a vital role in informing that country's foreign policy, especially in times of international crisis.

The eventful period 1960s, which had a profound impact on the subsequent political development of Pakistan, was closely experienced and observed by British diplomats. They witnessed how tension escalated. The general negligence of East Pakistan by West Pakistan is seen in their telegrams. In all spheres of developmental activities, East Pakistan was neglected by the Pakistan government. Economic development was disproportionate. Official statistics under-reported the problem. A British official survey in 1970 found anomalies between the data submitted by the central government of Pakistan and their own observations about East Pakistan. They reported that:

There are substantial statistical uncertainties in assessing population, agricultural production and employment trends in East Pakistan. Our impression is that the situation is generally worse than is indicated by official central Government figures (FCO 37/705, 1970b).

These official surveys and observations suggested to British diplomats that East Pakistan secede. Some described it as an "artificially constructed country" (FCO 37/705, 1970a; FCO 37/876, 1971a). In June 1969, the British Deputy High Commissioner to Pakistan, Roy Fox, assumed the worst and told the U.S. Consul General in Dacca that, "I foresee the breakup of the country as a result of Sheikh Mujibur winning the elections which Yahya would be forced to call as a result of political pressure" (Khan, 1999, pp. 274-75). Thus, British diplomats predicted the possibility of a split between the two wings of Pakistan.

A series of events threatened to split Pakistan. Yet British diplomats believed that after the election of 1970, the tension between East and West Pakistan could be settled by a transition of power to a democratic government with the support of the overwhelming majority of the population in the election. British files described the victory as "sweeping" (CAB 128/49, 1970). But the political tension increased rather than decreased. As Sir Cyril Pickard, the British High Commissioner to Pakistan noticed:

The elections solved nothing. The very success of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, made him a prisoner of his own extremists and the lesser success of Bhutto in the West confronted him with an opponent, less interested in a constitutional settlement than power through the ruin of Mujib (FCO 37/870, 1971; FCO 37/876, 1971f).

British diplomats pontificated on the future of Pakistan, particularly the more or less gradual growth of resistance from the Bengalis. They mentioned the preparation of the Pakistan army to suppress the Bengali uprising by killing thousands of Bengalis (FCO 37/876, 1971c). After a serious turn of events, in the first two months of 1971 British diplomats were still optimistic that an escalation of the violence would be avoided and East Pakistan-West Pakistan contact would be resumed (FCO 37/876, 1971e), but it was clear to them that events were moving toward a deep crisis.

SITUATION REPORTS FROM DIPLOMATS IN EARLY MARCH 1971

The British diplomatic postings of Dacca, Islamabad, Calcutta, and New Delhi informed London regularly about the situation. In spite of communication disruptions and mobility restrictions, British diplomats tried to collect as much information as possible through different sources. As the Pakistan news media was under tight control, it did not provide a balanced picture. So, the British High Commission in Islamabad directed the Dacca High Commission to keep in touch with other well-informed missions (FCO 37/876, 1971e). The martial law authority of Pakistan forbade diplomatic wireless transmission on 25 March. Even at that time of information blackout, the British diplomats in Dacca were able to communicate secretly from emergency transmitters (Debnath, 2011, p. 428). In building up the general picture of East Pakistan, they sometimes collected information from other sources and later sought to confirm it (FCO 37/876, 1971f). Thus, voluminous information on the crisis was sent to London.

After arriving in London, all the reports went directly to the South Asian Department (SAD) of the FCO. Duplicates were sent to additional departments, the Cabinet Office, the Intelligence Assessment Unit and the office of the Prime Minister at 10 Downing Street. At least twenty offices and hundreds of people saw the telegrams (Debnath, 2012, p. 17). Important copies of telegrams and regular "Pakistan Situation Reports" were sent directly to the Prime Minister Edward Heath. Intelligence briefings were put together for the Prime Minister by the SAD. The Prime Minister signed these documents, often adding remarks in the paper margins. The situation of Pakistan was taken seriously by the FCO, which opened an emergency unit in the SAD (FCO 37/877, 1971c; FCO 37/880, 1971c). By establishing such a unit, the FCO made sure to have all telegrams and information from the concerned British High Commissions.

Events in East Pakistan became more serious with the declaration of President Yahya postponing the National Assembly meeting in 1 March 1971. The declaration produced an all-out non-cooperation movement. But still British diplomats hoped that in his speech of 6 March 1971, the President of Pakistan would announce a new date and would give Mujib some room for skillful management (FCO 37/876, 1971g). But Yahya did not seem to do this. From Dacca, the Deputy High Commissioner, F. C. D. Sargeant, bluntly criticized the manner of Yahya as “belligerent and uncompromising” in a telegram (FCO 37/874, 1971; FCO 37/876, 1971g). Diplomats speculated on the actions of the Pakistan President. In fact, the indefinite postponement of the 3 March 1971 National Assembly of Pakistan meeting heightened tensions and had an electrifying effect. The diplomats reported on a general strike, business and industry at a standstill, shops closed, schools and colleges closed, the roads devoid of vehicles, railways halted, and Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) flights grounded (FCO 37/876, 1971a). The telegraph and radio links were disrupted following the call of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman for a campaign of non-cooperation with governmental authorities. Before this, the telegrams depicted a clear picture of strong public support for Sheikh Mujib.

By this time President Yahya Khan’s invitation to attend a round table conference was refused by Sheikh Mujib. Curfews were imposed in many towns. British diplomats predicted that disruption to commerce would bring rapid increases in prices and commodity shortages (FCO 37/874, 1971). In other cable it was said that, mail and commercial cables from abroad were not being received. Hence orders and production were falling. Supplies of goods were becoming scarce (FCO 37/877, 1971a). Citing Waymer, a BBC official, the account was summarized by the British High Commission in Islamabad, which supported a similar line to Dacca. Waymer claimed the Dacca airport was under military control in the first week of March (FCO 37/876, 1971c; FCO 37/876, 1971f). In their telegrams the diplomats depicted how the curfew and widespread disturbances affected the economy, confirming that the situation in Dacca was very grave.

The situation further deteriorated with the launch of a civil disobedience movement on 7 March 1971. This movement was declared during a much-anticipated speech by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib at the Dacca Racecourse. The day prior, the President of Pakistan had given a speech blaming political leaders for the crisis, so the British diplomats were not surprised by the disobedience movement. In fact, they criticized the antipathy to the country’s political leaders displayed by the president, and his uncompromising manner (FCO 37/874, 1971). They praised Mujib for his skill in not crossing the Rubicon of a Unilateral Declaration of Independence, as many in his party wished. In describing Mujib’s hold on East Pakistan, a British diplomat wrote: “It was the Sheik’s writ that ran in East Pakistan and not that of the President and the central government” (FCO 37/876, 1971f).

Mujib was indeed in full control of Dacca, and from there, the Deputy British High Commissioner F. C. D. Sargeant informed the Islamabad British High Commission that a combination of civil disobedience, strikes and Awami league directives were causing a serious loss in productivity. The financial and economic

situation had become extremely precarious (FCO 37/880, 1971a). In fact, the events of the first two weeks of March gave the diplomats the notion that East Pakistan had become less safe than it was before. In the meantime, diplomats received directions from the FCO to seek an interview with the Pakistan President, but not to act as an intermediary between him and Mujib (FCO 37/877, 1971b). They were directed to do so because the scope for action by the British government was limited, and diplomatic intervention was thought to be ineffective. They also considered that intervention would be contrary to their interests. So, they wanted to persuade the president in the direction of a negotiated settlement. But persuasion did not work.

RECORDS OF CASUALTIES IN DIFFERENT TOWNS AND THE REINFORCEMENTS ISSUE

The negotiations were designed to show the noble intention of President Yahya Khan to eliminate the crisis. On 9 March 1971, it was declared he would come to East Pakistan, and on 15 March, he arrived. He negotiated with Mujib until 25 March without reaching a solution. By this time, many incidents were recorded in the reports of the British diplomats. These reports describe widespread disturbances in Chittagong and other towns. Some parts of the British Council Library in Dacca were damaged. Reports were coming to the diplomats that other parts of Dacca were also attacked. Following some shooting events involving the army and civilians in Jaydevpur, a town about 22 miles north of Dacca, a curfew was imposed on 20 March. Many people died; British diplomats said that at least three people were killed, with injuries on both sides (FCO 37/878, 1971a). These incidents were discussed in detail in Safiullah's and Islam's narratives (Islam, 2002; Safiulla, 2005).

The situation in Chittagong grew more serious with the incident of the MV Swat of the Pakistan National Shipping Corporation. Sargeant reported that the Swat had been lying at Chittagong since 28 February, unworked on by the port, because it was believed that it contained arms. But the Head of the Chittagong port authority, Commodore Malik, said the ship contained only military vehicles, supplies, and rations. As the stevedores continued to refuse to unload the ship, an attempt was made to start to work on the ship by the army at the night of 24/25 March. Hearing the news, a mob blocked all roads between the Chittagong cantonment and the harbor (Durdin, 1971; FCO 37/878, 1971b). The British Officials collected information about the Chittagong port incident from a witness, Lloyd, who was working as a Consulting Engineer in Sir Bruce White and Partners Company. He said that the trouble started in Chittagong on 23 March when locals confronted army personnel attempting to unload the Swat. Shots were fired, large numbers of local people ran to the scene, and road blocks went up (FCO 37/895, 1971a).

The Pakistan army made good use of the time allowed by the protected talks between Mujib and Yahya. Many reinforcements from West Pakistan arrived. Mascaranhas claims that from 2 March to 24 March, 12,000 soldiers arrived in East Pakistan from West Pakistan (1971). According to others, on 25 March the Pakistan army in East Pakistan was strengthened by 80,000 troops flown in from West

Pakistan (Malik et. al., 2008, p. 247). But Pakistan for its part claimed that only two battalions had been sent over (PREM 15/567, 1971b).

An assessment of the reinforcement capability from West Pakistan to East Pakistan was prepared by the British High Commission of Islamabad. It showed that the flight schedule provided for 23 Boeing 707 flights from Karachi to Dacca each week and the Pakistan Air Force's C130 planes supplied flights at the rate of two per day, capable of lifting, via Ceylon, about 5,000 troops or 800 tons of freight per week. If all the aircraft and all the C130s were used for troops, the British High Commission estimated that 2,500 troops could be transported per day, assuming a 75 percent availability rate. British diplomats reported that PIA Boeing flights were bringing troops with plain clothes. Citing a Ceylon press report, they communicated that 32 Pakistan military aircraft had stayed in Ceylon since the trouble begun in East Pakistan.

By sea, there were sufficient merchant and the navy ships to provide almost unlimited reinforcements from West to East Pakistan, though the sea trip took at least eight days. There were six merchant ships on regular runs from Karachi to Chittagong (FCO 37/880, 1971b). This estimate, collected from reliable sources by the British diplomats, easily dismisses the claim that Pakistan brought only two divisions. Estimated numbers of 12,000 to 80,000 were not an exaggeration.

British diplomats reported that on 31 March 1971 four flights brought troops from West Pakistan (FCO 37/880, 1971e). Other reports confirmed: "the PIA Boeing fleet and three Fokker's in East Pakistan were carrying certain types of ammunition as well as troops. The Pakistan government was heavily reinforcing their troops in the main centers. At least 15,000 troops were estimated to have arrived since mid-March" (PREM 15/568, 1971b; CAB 128/49, 1971b). Another report provided information that communication routes were also affected and the army itself was facing logistics and communications problems. Sargeant commented, "now the army begin to realize that they have perhaps bitten off more than they can chew" (FCO 37/880, 1971e; FCO 37/884, 1971c).

Confirmed reinforcements coming from the sea included a battalion of troops, tanks, and ammunition carried by the ship, "Ocean Endurance." There were few Bengalis in the navy and air force, for they were not trusted by West Pakistan authorities. Bengali crews were removed from navy ships and put on shore duty. Similarly, PIA sent 80 ground crew to East Pakistan, as no Bengali was allowed to handle the aircraft. Durrani, the company's chairman, obtained a guarantee from the president of Pakistan that the PIA's losses would be covered (FCO 37/884, 1971b; PREM 15/568, 1971c).

Those reinforcement operations set the stage for a planned massacre by the Pakistan army. Of course, Operation Searchlight was not the first crackdown on the Bengalis. Prior to this, another operation, Operation Blitz, was planned, designed in December 1970, by the then-Martial Law Administrator, General Yaqub, and approved at a high-level meeting with President Yahya on 2 February 1971 (Gerlach, 2010, p. 128; Salik, 1977, pp. 39-40). Later, the army fulfilled its plan to attack Bengalis with Operation Searchlight on 25 March 1971.

THE MILITARY CRACKDOWN ON 25 MARCH AND AFTER

Unarmed Bengali people were attacked and killed by the Pakistan army on the night of 25 March under Operation Searchlight. The number of dead people in Dacca city has been estimated at approximately 15,000 (Chowdhury, 1984, p. 31). Although British files did not record the total number of Bengalis killed at that night, official telegrams use the figure 5,000 in Dacca and another 3,000 in Chittagong (PREM 15/567, 1971c). The other districts and rural areas were excluded. Almost every telegram received in London reported that the army acted in a “ruthless and punitive fashion” (CAB 128/49, 1971a; PREM 15/567, 1971a).

In their reports the diplomats illustrated the terror caused by the Pakistan army. The Pakistan army took full control of Dacca and other parts of East Pakistan. Reports by Radio Pakistan claimed Dacca was taken by the military on 26 March. Lockouts and strike were prohibited. No foreigners or foreign missions in East Pakistan were allowed to distribute leaflets without permission (FCO 37/878, 1971c). The SAD made situation reports largely based on Dacca telegrams which were sent by Major Cox, Assistant Military Adviser, and F. C. D. Sergeant. They reported that a total curfew was imposed by the Pakistan army from 26 March. Troops were ordered to fire on anyone venturing onto the streets. Wireless transmission was forbidden by the martial law authority. Even the diplomatic telegrams were highly confidential. The diplomats commented that the discipline and control of the troops was very poor, with instances of callous disregard for life, looting, burning and random shooting. The British High Commission building in Dacca had not been attacked but an army detachment disarmed and removed the police guard. The British Council deputy representative, who was in the office at that time, had his car gutted. F. C. D. Sergeant commented that “the army has planned a reign of terror and it has so far been largely successful” (PREM 15/567, 1971e; PREM 15/567, 19 April 1971). Most of the telegrams painted a similar picture.

The British diplomats tried to collect information on the night of 25 March from eyewitnesses. Through a British journalist, they knew that the Austrian wife of an employee at the Intercontinental Hotel, Dacca, left the hotel on 29 March on foot to see the condition in town, but she was eventually turned back by soldiers. She saw unarmed civilian bodies in the street being piled up prior to disposal. Another eyewitness was an English-speaking Czech, who was working as adviser to a jute mill in Chittagong. He left on 29 March and by military aircraft arrived at Karachi on 30 March. He said shooting had gone on for some days and some buildings were destroyed and the harbor was not working (FCO 37/880, 1971g). Describing it as “widespread killing of unarmed civilians, F. C. D. Sergeant wrote:

One of my local staff has had his house looted and now only has the cloths on his back. Fourteen others (some of them Hindus) are missing Troops apparently killed all the teachers and their families in one Dacca University block of flats Shooting the locks

off the doors and mowing down those insides. Butchers sleeping in their shops in new market were shot as they slept (FCO 37/880, 1971c).

Some of the teachers who escaped that massacre, and other teachers who went through such experiences, described similar accounts in their memoirs (Chowdhury, 2011; Kabir, 1972; Rahman, 2002).

From Islamabad, in a cable of 29 March 1971, British High Commissioner Sir Cyril Pickard anxiously wrote that:

In Dacca the army moved into the city at midnight of the 25 March. A series of explosions were followed by several gun battles lasting the whole night and continuing on a diminishing scale throughout the whole of the following day. Dacca has been entirely isolated. Indications are that the army has planned a reign of terror and that it has so far been largely successful ... The Pakistan army is acting with callous disregard for life and is adopting terror tactics to cow the Bengalis. Political leaders are being hunted down and shot (there is no precedent in Pakistani history) and I expect to find that much of the Awami League leadership has been eliminated (PREM 15/567, 1971e).

Eyewitness reports were also included to describe the killing of large numbers of students at Dacca University. F. C. D. Sargeant wrote:

A member of my staff who went there last Saturday was shown a mass grave in front of the building with bulldozer tracks. People were killed quite indiscriminately in most parts of the town and there were numerous bodies lying in the main street, dead bodies are floating in the river and nine truckloads of bodies have been buried at the municipal rubbish dump (FCO 37/880, 1971c).

The Punjabi troops slaughtered the Hindus, in particular, in large numbers. The Biharis (Urdu speaking people who emigrated to East Pakistan from the Indian province Bihar after 1947) and other locally-recruited people² took the opportunity to crush Bengalis by joining with the army. In some telegrams diplomats wrote about their looting, burning and beating up of Bengalis. They also added that, in Pallabi, Mirpur, Muhammadpur and many other parts of Dacca, the Biharis carried out operations (FCO 37/880, 1971d; PREM 15/568, 1971a). Such activities by Biharis continued after the March events. The British High Commissioner of Dacca reported:

Armed Bihari irregulars continue to do the work of the army, terrorizing the Bengalis and slaughtering the Hindus. As I write this dispatch, reports reach me daily of continued killing on a large scale, of wanton destruction of villages and of widespread looting (FCO, 1971a).

² Razakar, Al-Bodor, and Al Sams were paramilitary forces composed of pro-Pakistani Bengalis who were against Bangladesh independence and worked as local guides for the Pakistan army.

Rural areas like Barisal, Madaripur, Tangail, Madhupur, etc., faced similar attacks as Dacca (FCO 37/887, 1971). Diplomats also collected that information. British officials planned to evacuate British nationals³ from East Pakistan. FCO officials declared in a news conference that although no firm preparatory measures had been taken, evacuation arrangements were planned through Singapore and the ship *The Clan Macnair*, which was available at that time in Chittagong harbor (FCO 37/880, 1971f). The British Prime Minister Edward Heath read regular situation reports from Pakistan with interest. He asked the FCO to obtain the fullest possible accounts from evacuees who arrived in London (FCO 37/895, 1971c). Prime Minister Edward Heath read about the continuing situation in Pakistan and as he heard that the evacuees were coming, he ordered officials to take a full account of what was taking place in Pakistan.

INTERVIEWS OF EVACUEES BY BRITISH INTELLIGENCE

Following official orders, British intelligence interviewed evacuees from East Pakistan, focusing on those who seemed reliable. In April, A. J. Collins of the Dacca High Commission interviewed some British citizens who escaped from different parts of East Pakistan in several ways (FCO 37/895, 1971e). Interviewed in London on 1 April, Miss Le Queens of the Baptist mission in old Dacca confirmed that the villages on the bank opposite Dacca had all been burned. In her statement she described the condition of the minority community of East Pakistan. She said that in the old town some 300-400 Hindus were in Saint Gregory's Catholic School, and the army took as many as they could fit in a truck to Jagannath College where they were all shot (FCO 37/895, 1971d). The Hindus of East Pakistan, branded by the Pakistani army as "the enemy of the country," were targeted and killed extensively, and these reports proved it.

Mr. Longwill, the former Head of the James Finley and Company office in East Pakistan, left Dacca on 28 March. Longwill was also the President of the UK Association of Pakistan. He recounted that Iqbal Hall and other residences at Dacca University, and the East Pakistan Rifles headquarters, were all attacked. He believed that nearly 100 were dead there. He also added that inexcusably punitive expeditions were sent down into old Dacca to kill a lot of people (FCO 37/895, 1971b). Graham Halt, field manager of Hunting technical services, and his wife Elizabeth Halt had a rough time in March and April. They were trapped at Bogra when fighting broke out on 25 and 26 March. After unpleasant adventures they managed to escape over the Indian border (FCO 37/895, 1971f). Another evacuee, Mr. Grech, who had lived in East Pakistan for many years and could speak fluent Bengali, was a reliable reporter of the current situation to officials, and described the same thing (FCO 37/888, 1971b).

³ The total number of British citizens in East Pakistan at that time was 904. Of these, 611 were in Dacca and Chittagong and the remaining were in outlying areas, including almost half in the plantation area of Sylhet (FCO 37/876, 1971d).

Lewis of the Baptist Mission of Dinajpur was interviewed in London on 8 April, saying that on 28 March, inside the mission compound, troops from opposing sides took position and begun to fire. On the Pakistan army side there were nearly 500 soldiers, and the other side was also well equipped with machine guns and rockets. There was looting by the Pakistan army. They also said that many of the cattle which were vital for plowing had been killed, which might produce famine. Mr. Lloyd, of Sir Bruce White and Partners, Chittagong, left on the ship *Clanmacnair* on 5 April, after two years working as a Consulting Engineer with the Yugoslav enterprise which was building the dry dock. Lloyd described Chittagong as a dead town as the army gradually gained control there. He said that there had been considerable destruction, although the central commercial area, Agrabad looked unharmed. The population had virtually all fled. He estimated a minimum 2,000-3,000 killed. Dead bodies lying in the streets were being eaten by dogs and vultures. The stench of bodies hung over the docks and as the ship left the jetty the wash brought many bodies out from under it. During the fighting the army captured an arms factory in a hill near the main housing area. They also claimed to have captured 17,000 rifles from the police, who were nearly all killed.

Another couple, Mr. and Mrs. Dickson of the Rashidpur tea estate, left their estate in Sylhet on 25 March. After a journey of immense difficulties, and staying in a village for a whole week from 27 March to 4 April, they succeeded boarding the ship *Clanmacnair* on 5 April. They witnessed widespread devastation of villages by the Pakistan army. Dickson added that when their train stopped near Comilla, an American journalist left it to take pictures and was shot and wounded by soldiers. Similarly, Pearson and Storrier, from Sylhet district, crossed the border. They recounted a food crisis and chaotic situation which would become desperate. Their accounts were of value in providing information. Most evacuee statements mentioned bodies lying in the rivers or streets and the ruthless behavior of the Pakistan army.

Along with the Bengalis, some foreigners also had to face the Pakistan army directly. Mr. Howie, a British Council staff on 25 March had gone with two other volunteer service overseas to take photographs of St. Thomas Cathedral in the old city of Dacca, Nawabpur. By this time, they saw that a car containing some Americans was in some. Sensing the danger, Howie put his camera away and they remained out of sight about a quarter of an hour inside the Church. But later a crowd accused them all of being Central Intelligence Agency agents and spies and they were taken back to the army headquarters in the old town of Dacca. They were asked to line up against the wall and a firing squad was in the process of preparing. Skelton, an American, arrived moment before the Pakistanis were to have executed these three British persons. He learned of the firing squad from one of the intended victims. So, he went directly to the cantonment. Skelton carried on talking until he finally got them all free ("Britons saved", 1971; FCO 37/895, 1971d). If Skelton was not there then Howie and the others would likely have been shot. But some other Europeans did die (FCO 37/ 883, 1971b).

Despite an official declaration of normalcy and the eventual calmness of Dacca, evidence reached British intelligence that a policy of uprooting Hindus was still being cruelly pursued in the area south of Dacca and killing, looting, burning and raping was going on. F. C. D. Sergeant criticized the “ferocious tactics” of the army (FCO 37/883, 1971a). In a similar way, Cyril Pickard reported that, “the result of the army’s actions has undoubtedly generated a degree of hatred among the Bengalis for the army which will never permit the situation to return to normal” (FCO 37/884, 1971d). Another British High Commissioner (J. L. Pumphrey, Islamabad) criticized the Pakistan government’s decision to use military force in East Pakistan as “an appalling miscalculation” (FCO 37/930, 1971).

FINDINGS

The British documents used in this study show that, as part of their job, British diplomats followed the political developments of East Pakistan. The ghoulish events of March 1971 stunned them. Therefore, the situation in East Pakistan was studied with even closer attention, and the events of March got wide coverage in their telegrams. Casualties and the numbers of soldiers were topics taking up a significant portion of their telegrams. These telegrams reflected the concern and apprehension at the deterioration of the situation. They described the army’s actions against the populace, as well as their own thoughts and opinions on the crisis. The massacre of the 25 March shocked British diplomats. They tried to collect information on the military crackdown of 25 March from different sources. Interviews of evacuees were taken by British intelligence. Some diplomats criticized the Pakistan government. The language used in the telegrams showed that they were displeased with the activities of Pakistan government. All those reports and telegrams are significant, because while the Pakistani authority claimed that they were just “restoring order,” these files are evidence of the Pakistani army’s killings. The correspondence by foreign observers show that the army’s aim was to suppress the nationalist movement completely, whatever the cost and by whatever means necessary.

CONCLUSION

British diplomats had the opportunity to assess the situation in March 1971. In order to help policy makers and keep the British government appraised, the diplomats made great efforts to understand the events in Pakistan. The FCO evaluated their observations and suggestions and used them to frame government policy. Throughout the crisis Britain remained neutral based on the thought that the events were Pakistan’s internal affairs and diplomatic intervention by Britain would be ineffective. Yet efforts at pursuing a negotiated settlement were continued publicly and privately. Later, a pro-Indian tilt was evident in the British government outlook. This shifting attitude was influenced by all those telegrams, letters and reports sent by the diplomats from this region, which influenced British policy

making. They remain as useful accounts of the war and the relentless behavior of the Pakistan government and army at the time.

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