

## Why don't we observe 25<sup>th</sup> March night as “National Black Night”?

*By Barrister Harun ur Rashid*

*Former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.*

Every nation has glorious and black days in its history. Londoners observe every year in September as the “Blitz Day” when German air force (Luftwaffe) wanted to destroy London in September 1940. They also observe the surrender of Nazi Germany as Victory Day on 7<sup>th</sup> May.

Jews in Israel observe their “Black Night” on 9-10 November each year because it was on this day in 1938 more than 100 Jews died as mobs attacked their synagogues, shops and homes and about 30,000 were arrested, beginning a full-scale physical elimination of Jews from Europe. Jews called it “Kristallnacht” (Crystalnight) because Nazi party supporters smashed glass windows of shops, synagogues and homes. There are many instances where nations not only observe victory days but also “Black Days or Nights”.

Every one is aware that on 25<sup>th</sup> March midnight 1971, the brutal military crackdown, under the code name of “*Operation Searchlight*”, was perpetrated by Pakistan army on the unarmed Bengali civilians including university teachers, doctors and prominent members of civil society. In the book “*Perspectives of Pakistanis on 1971*” (2004), General Niazi admitted to an interviewer that at least 30,000 people had been killed.

The story leading to military crackdown was told by a Pakistani Public Relations Officer of the army, Siddiq Salik, in his book “*Witness to Surrender*” (1997). He wrote: “Before giving the final order to General Tikka Khan, Pakistani military President General A.M. Yahya Khan said to Tikka Khan: The bastard is not behaving. You get ready... Tikka Khan rang up GOC at 10 PM to say : ‘Khadim, you can go ahead’. And the secret plan of brutal military action was implemented.”

The massive military action on 25<sup>th</sup> midnight onwards on the scale of a war without warning against unarmed Bengalis had very few parallels in history. There was indiscriminate killing, burning and looting of unarmed civilians. Foreign reporters were expelled before the military action.

Dhaka was a city of corpses and when curfew was lifted from the city, a wave of tens of thousands people from Dhaka had to leave the city for rural areas. Many have walked miles after miles towards their home villages for personal safety.

One eye-witness late Mrs. Jahanara Imam (who lost her son) left a graphic account of life on 25<sup>th</sup> March, Thursday, in her book “*Of Blood and Fire*” (1990 & 1998) as follows:

“Someone said that President Yahya quietly left for West Pakistan under strict security. I don’t understand why there should be soldiers on the streets.... I was fast asleep. Suddenly I woke up at a very loud sound. Rumi and Jami came rushing to my room. Deafening sounds of heavy guns, the intermittent sounds of machine guns, the whistling sound of bullets filled the air. The tracer balloons brightened the sky. South of our house, across the playground are the University Students’ dormitories--Iqbal Hall, Mohsin Hall and a few other buildings of the University quarters. All the noise came from that direction.”

It was in the university quarters where university teachers including the Chairman of the Philosophy department Dr. Gobinda Chandra Dev was dragged and killed ( Dr. Dev taught me in the university in the 50s).

Many surviving victims have left their written records with revealing details and emotions. Their first-hand experience of the Pakistani brutality on an unarmed civilian Bengali population sparked the determination of freedom fighters for independence. The unleashing of terror by Pakistani army on civilians led the young people to fight the oppressor.

Can we forget them? It seems that we don’t remember them. In my view it is a pity that we don’t observe the national tragedy on the night of 25<sup>th</sup> March as the “Black Night”. Even the enlightened Dhaka University students do not observe the death of their martyred teachers who were butchered in the university premises on that night. What we could do is to observe a peaceful vigil night with candle- lights and prayer for the eternal bliss of the departed souls.

26<sup>th</sup> March was the day when we declared our independence as a separate country because after the butcheries done on the night of 25<sup>th</sup> March, a nine-month long war of independence (liberation war) continued. Bangladesh became a sovereign nation on 16<sup>th</sup> December, 1971.

25<sup>th</sup> night was the moment of truth when Bengalis faced a demonic power of the military of Pakistan. It was the night when brave Bengalis decided to fight for independence and the grim determination in them to fight came from the dark memory of 25<sup>th</sup> March.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> night the “lamps” went out all over Bangladesh and it was a night of despair, darkness and sadness. On 26<sup>th</sup> March we witnessed “lamps” being lit and it was a day of faith, hope and light. There is some dynamism about 26<sup>th</sup> March but this dynamism came from the pessimism of black night of 25<sup>th</sup>. As St. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) wrote: “ It is in dying that we are born to eternal life.”

While it is appropriate to celebrate our independence day on 26<sup>th</sup> March, it would be equally appropriate that we should observe the 25<sup>th</sup> March night as the “Black Night”.

**One led to the other. One was the cause and the other was the result. Both are interconnected and one cannot be separated from the other as the Sun cannot be separated from sunlight.**

**Because of 25<sup>th</sup> night horrors, we saw new physical forces, from the electric current to dynamite, new aspirations for independence and emancipation, new compelling forces that could mobilize tens of thousands of men and women for liberation war and new social forces which brought the masses to the forefront of liberation movement.**

**Because of 25<sup>th</sup> night, Bengalis were made to feel not only powerful and determined but also superior to Pakistan army. That was why we won and liberated Bangladesh from the military occupation.**

**Unity and cohesion among people emanate from observance of national tragedy and glorious events. Young people must know why, how and what occurred on 25<sup>th</sup> night. 26<sup>th</sup> march comes after the dark night of 25<sup>th</sup>. Both these events need to be observed in Bangladesh for national consciousness.**