

Why Apology from Pakistan?

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The relationship between Bangladesh and Pakistan is overshadowed by the tragic events of 1971. The bilateral engagement remains cool although it has many potentialities for expansion in both depth and dimension.

Since 2009, no high-ranking Minister visited Bangladesh from Pakistan except the Foreign Minister Ms. Hina Rabbani Khar who remained only for five hours in Dhaka on November 9th to deliver the letter of invitation to the Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina on behalf the Pakistan President Zardari to attend the D-8 Summit in Islamabad from November 22-23.

The D-8 countries include Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, Nigeria and Turkey. Incidentally these states are also members of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC).

It is reported that Prime Minister would not attend the summit because of her earlier commitment to attend the Armed Forces Day on November 21 and Prime Minister's International Affairs Adviser Prof. Gawher Rizvi will represent Bangladesh as a special envoy of the Prime Minister at the summit.

During Pakistan Foreign Minister's visit, no bilateral discussions were held. She met her counter-part in Bangladesh Dr. Dipu Moni reportedly not more than for 20 minutes and the meeting was reportedly "cut and dry" .in diplomatic terms. It was reported in the media that Ms. Hina Khar was not received or seen-off by her counter-part.

It is reported that during the meeting, according to the Bangladesh foreign secretary, Bangladesh Foreign Minister raised with Ms. Hina Khar "some unresolved issues" including an apology from Pakistan for the atrocities inflicted on Bangladeshi innocent civilians in 1971. Ms Khar reportedly stated that Pakistan had "regretted in different forms and ... it was time to move on".

Before Ms. Hina Rabbani Khar left she called on the leader of the opposition and former Prime Minister BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia and invited her to visit Pakistan.

In 2011, when the new Pakistan High Commissioner called on the Foreign Minister of Bangladesh, Dr. Dipu Moni raised the question of apology for the crimes against humanity on innocent civilians by Pakistani soldiers in 1971.

It may be recalled that on 3rd December, 1973, a resolution of the General Assembly (Resolution number 3074) was adopted underscoring the obligations of member-States of the UN in the detention, arrest, extradition and punishment of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Bangladesh is a member of the UN and it is a duty of Bangladesh to hold trials for such crimes.

The Hasina government has started the trial of Bangladesh nationals who allegedly assisted the Pakistan military to commit the horrible crimes against humanity on Bangladeshi innocent civilians at the two legally constituted International Crimes Tribunals.

Observers say that it is, therefore, all the more necessary that the Pakistan should at least apologise to Bangladesh for the atrocities perpetrated on Bangladeshi civilians, because Pakistan will not send the surviving high-ranking military officers to stand trial in Bangladesh as “clemency” was provided to the alleged perpetrators under the 1974 Tripartite Agreement.

President General Pervez Musharraf visited Bangladesh in July 2002 and regretted the tragic episode perpetrated by Pakistani army in 1971 on the people of Bangladesh.

The Pakistani leader reportedly said: "Your brothers and sisters in Pakistan share the pain of the events of 1971. The excesses during that unfortunate period are regrettable. Let us bury the past in a spirit of magnanimity. Let not the light of the future be dimmed."

In using the word "excesses" to describe the actions of Pakistani forces, General Musharraf carefully avoided references to who committed the "excesses" and on whom the "excesses" were committed, and also whether they were mere excesses or constituted planned crimes against humanity executed by a military machine upon an unarmed people. His regret was not certainly considered an apology.

Apology means first the acknowledgment of crimes committed and second feeling and expressing remorse for crimes and third doing something to restore that was manifestly wrong and hurtful.

Incidentally, a few days after President Musharraf left Bangladesh, a joint statement by leaders of 51 civil rights organisations of Pakistan made a public apology to the people of Bangladesh. They said: "We feel sad and burdened by what we know was a violation of the people's human rights... The apology should have come a long time ago, and citizen groups did make attempts to do so... We deeply feel that a message from us is necessary to acknowledge the historic wrongs, to express sincere apology and build a bond based on honest sentiments".

In the recent past, there have been voices from Pakistani journalists, members of civil society and Imran Khan, the political chief of Tehrik-e-Insaf that Pakistan should apologise for the atrocities committed in 1971.

The leading Pakistani English daily *Dawn* on 11th November in its editorial came out for full-fledged apology to Bangladesh people. It wrote that Pakistan must recognise the wrongs committed by its leadership during those days, and issue a full-fledged apology — not just expressions of regret — that is acceptable to Dhaka.

It is the Pakistan armed forces which have to address the grave wrongs committed in Bangladesh more than 40 years ago. Most of the Pakistani high military officers who were allegedly responsible for the crimes are dead.

It is not understood why the new generation of armed forces is not ready to apologise. They must note that new generation of leaders of Germany apologised to the Jews for the holocaust while that of Japan did to China and South Korea for war crimes. In 2008, Australian Prime Minister apologised to the Australian Aboriginal community for the wrongs committed in the past. The Vatican has apologised for the actions of Catholics who persecuted non-Catholics, and expressed sorrow over the attack on Constantinople during the Crusades, thousands of years ago.

It is the government of Pakistan which is ultimately responsible for the apology and unless Pakistan has a strong democratic government, it seems apology has to wait until that time.