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Comparative Analysis: The Bangladesh Genocide and Other Recognised Atrocities

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Abstract

In this report, ‘Comparative Analysis: The Bangladesh Genocide and Other Recognised Attrocities”, the authors aim to showcase similarities between recognised genocides in comparison to the officially unrecognised genocide in Bangladesh in 1971. The Liberation War in 1971 in Bangladesh, marking the partition between West - and East Pakistan (today Bangladesh), stands for the death of up to 3 million Bengali nationals and countless other atrocities through the West Pakistani military. This report is structured along the concept of the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (UNGA, 1948) as basis for a comparative analysis of the Cambodian, Armenian, and Rwandan genocides with the Bangladesh genocide. By conducting a comparative analysis of these cases, the authors aim to find similarities and factual overlap between the events to lay the groundwork for the argumentation on why, therefore, the Bangladeshi genocide should also be officially recognised. Special emphasis will be put on the defining genocidal acts listed in Article Two of the UN CPPCG (1948), described as “intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group”.

1. Introduction

"We are going. But we are leaving our Seed behind."

- Saying from a West Pakistani soldier after surrendering to the Indian army

The twentieth century, often referred to as "the bloodiest century in human history" (Forsythe, 1997; Akmam, 2002, p. 543), is also regarded by scholars as "an age of genocide" (Chalk & Jonassohn, 1990, as cited in Akmam, 2002, p. 543). However, despite their undeniable occurrence, many genocides are yet to be recognised. Since its formal adoption in 1948, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide has officially recognised only three genocides: the Rwandan genocide of 1994, the Bosnian genocide of 1995, and the Cambodian genocide between 1975 and 1979.

The case of the Bangladesh genocide in 1971 reflects the difficulties encountered in the process towards formal recognition. To this day, the period from March to December 1971 remains a dark period for many Bengalis. It was a period of violence, injustice, and little recognition, marked by a lack of awareness and acknowledgment by the international community.

This report will draw a comparative analysis between the Bangladesh Genocide of 1971 and other genocidal atrocities, namely the Cambodian genocide (1975-1979), the Armenian genocide (1915-1923), and the Rwandan genocide (1994). Thereby, the report will shed light on the historical and political reasoning towards genocidal recognition along the formal framework of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948.

UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide

Scholars have varied definitions of genocide. However, the only definition that recognises genocide as a crime under international law is the definition prescribed by the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (further referred to as The Convention), which is currently ratified by 153 countries around the world. This definition will be used throughout this report.

Article ii of The Convention states;

[..] genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

(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.

1. Bangladesh Genocide

Bangladesh has a long history of colonial rule. In 1947, after gaining independence from India as a province of Pakistan, Bangladesh was named East Pakistan. From the beginning of the independence of West and East Pakistan from India, East Pakistanis faced discrimination by West Pakistanis. Fueled by economic disparity and political deprivation, the Awami League (the most popular political party in East Pakistan) organised a movement for autonomy in the province. Its leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, came up with a six-point demand, which was a prescription for having plural states, which formed a direct threat to the interests of the West Pakistani rulers. The Awami League went on to win 167 out of 169 seats in East Pakistan and became the majority party in Pakistan. West Pakistan interpreted this development as a threat.

On March 25th, 1971, the West Pakistani Armed Battalion started 'Operation Searchlight', which aimed to neutralise the Awami League's political power. It engaged in indiscriminate mass killing in different parts of Dhaka, and quickly spread to the rest of the country. To achieve their objective, the army had to (1) capture the leadership of the Awami League, (2) neutralise the student leaders and cultural organisations, which mobilised the renaissance of Bengali nationalism, and (3) disarm Bengali armed men. The motive against East Pakistani Bengalis (an ethnic group composed of both Muslims and Hindus) in the 1971 war was fueled by the West Pakistanis' perception of Bengalis as racially inferior. Young Bengali men were met with cruel forms of violence, as they were identified as potential sources of resistance, and about 200,000 women were raped, causing 25,000 pregnancies.

The victims of rape, known as *biranganas,* were primarily Bengali females of all castes and religions. After raping the women, soldiers often murdered them by forcing a bayonet between their legs. War correspondents repeatedly heard from refugees that soldiers killed babies by throwing them in the air and catching them on their bayonets and murdered women by raping them and then spearing them through the genitals. Newsweek concluded that the prevalence of these unusual forms of murder targeting children and women was an indication that the West Pakistani army was carrying out a calculated policy of terror amounting to genocide against the whole Bengali population.

A variety of sources, including eyewitnesses and journalistic accounts, report systematic killing, rape, and destruction by the Pakistani army, consistent with genocide. The reports indicate how students, politicians known to favour independence, intellectuals, Awami League activists, and Hindus were special targets of the Pakistani army.

There was a clear intent from the Pakistani Army to destroy the Bengali nation, for which the army went on to kill and torture Bengalis, as well as carry out the rape of many Bengali women. Considering the Hindus as the primary victim group, the massacre in Bangladesh can also be called genocide. The Hindus were a minority group, the destruction of which was intended by the perpetrators. Taking the 200,000 cases of rape and 25,000 forced pregnancies into account during the nine months of atrocities in Bangladesh, it can

surely be categorised as genocide against the Bengali nation as a whole based on the incidents of rape alone.

International Reaction and Legal Recognition

Americans who were present in Bangladesh at the start of the genocide shared their testimonials. So did the American Pat Sammel, who was evacuated from Dhaka shortly after Operation Searchlight started, sharing his experience in a letter, stating how the West Pakistani army used guns on unarmed civilians, systematically eliminating the intelligentsia of the country and wiping out entire villages. Other evacuated Americans reported that they had seen Pakistani leaders with specific lists containing the names of Bengali professors who were slated for execution. The means to prove intent is crucial to recognise a genocide. The premade list of targets, including but not limited to members of the Bengali nationalists, intellectuals, and Hindus by the Pakistani army, is a clear sign of that intent.

The US consul general in Dhaka then, Archer Blood, denounced the violence by what is today known as 'the Blood Telegram'. Despite this, the Nixon administration refused to intervene. At the time of the ongoing genocide in East Pakistan, West Pakistan was serving as an intermediary between China and the US under the Nixon administration, at a time when the US was battling the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

In 2022, Congressmen Chabot and Khanna introduced a resolution in the US House of Representatives titled "Recognizing the Bangladesh Genocide of 1971", which called for punishment under international law against war criminals in the Pakistan Army and their allies for the murder of three million people in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), the government of Pakistan to acknowledge its role in the genocide and to offer formal apologies to the government and people of Bangladesh, and to prosecute, under international law, any perpetrators who are still alive.

In 2009, the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) of Bangladesh was established by the national government, which has the authority to prosecute domestic war crimes. Due to its limited mandate, many perpetrators go unpunished for their crimes, and many Bangladeshis and their families go on to live without the proper recognition of their suffering or seeing their perpetrators held accountable.

2. Comparative Analysis

In 1971, the Liberation War led to the deaths of up to 3 million Bengali nationals. A clear breach of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide took place, including but not limited to" *killing members of the group*" and "*causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group*". However, little international was taken, and no justice for the survivors has been served by recognizing the atrocities for what they are: Genocide. By comparing the Bangladeshi Genocide to three internationally recognized Genocides; Cambodia, Armenia, and Rwanda, the report showcases clear points of similarities with the Bangladeshi Genocide, demonstrating why it should be internationally recognized as such.

Cambodia

Overview

"To keep you is no benefit, to destroy you is no loss".
- Khmer Rouge warning (Mam, 1997)

In 1953, Cambodia, formerly a French colony, gained its independence and was ruled by the Sihanouk dynasty. In 1970, Prince Sihanouk's constitutional monarchy was overthrown by Prime Minister and General Lon Nol, who assumed power and established a US-backed military dictatorship. In exile, Prince Sihanouk joined forces with the Cambodian Communists or the Khmer Rouge, headed by Pol Pot. Gradually, the Lon Nol Army lost territory in Cambodia until, on 17th April 1975, the Khmer Rouge captured the capital, Phnom Penh, and defeated the Republic, marking the beginning of the Khmer Rouge regime and its subsequent genocide in Cambodia (University of Minnesota, n.d.).

Under Pol Pot, who was educated in Paris, the Khmer Rouge renamed the nation to Democratic Kampuchea. It reset the calendar to 'Year Zero', transforming Cambodia into an agrarian communist society (BBC, 2014). The killings commenced with the murder of former government officials. Inhabitants of Cambodian cities and towns were expelled from their homes to work in agricultural communes. Money, private property, and religion were abolished. Ethnic minorities such as the Cham Muslims faced particular persecution. The Khmer Rouge killed those of its own who it suspected to be traitors. Dissidents were swiftly executed.

Mismanagement of the economy led to food and medicine shortages, and many Cambodians died from disease and starvation. Approximately one and a half to three million people were killed at the hands of the Khmer Rouge during their brutal four-year rule, killing about a quarter of all Cambodians. There were mass graves throughout the nation, referred to as 'killing fields' (Clark, 2023).

In 1979, Vietnam invaded Cambodia and overthrew the Khmer Rouge regime, ending the genocide. Vietnam controlled Cambodia until 1989. In 1993, the Comprehensive

Cambodian Peace Agreement introduced a democratic government. Many Cambodians who had fled to Thailand during the genocide subsequently sought refuge in the US, which contributed significantly to the Cambodian-American diaspora, and many in Cambodia live today with the trauma of the war and violence (World Without Genocide, 2019).

International Reaction and Legal Recognition

In 1970, when the US-backed Khmer Republic under Lieutenant-General Lon Nol seized control of Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge began a civil war with the Republic. This occurred amidst Cold War tensions between the US, China, and the Soviet Union, and near the end of the Vietnam War, in which the US fought communist North Vietnam forces in support of the South. The U.S. staunchly opposed the proliferation of communism and therefore supported the Lon Nol regime, which was pro-western and anti-communist. However, the rise of the Khmer Rouge opposed the US's interests in Southeast Asia by promoting communism in this volatile region during the Cold War era. Despite this, the US government had little interest in the Khmer Rouge coming to power. This lack of interest stemmed from the consideration that the Khmer Rouge was in opposition to the Vietnamese communist forces. The US was more preoccupied with the events occurring in Vietnam at the time and was concerned with Cambodia solely regarding how it would affect the Vietnam War. General William Westmoreland, commander of US forces in Vietnam, stated, "The Oriental doesn't put the same high price on life as does a Westerner. Life is plentiful, life is cheap in the Orient" (Turse, 2013). In 2024, US Representatives Lori Trahan and Robert Garcia introduced legislation designating April 17th, 2025, as Cambodian Genocide Remembrance Day (Rep. Lori Trahan News, 2024).

Shortly after the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, Pol Pot and Ieng Sary, another top Khmer Rouge official, were tried in absentia (Wiener Holocaust Library, n.d.). By the time courts dedicated to persecuting perpetrators of the genocide, many movement leaders were already dead. In 2006, the UN and the Cambodian government inaugurated a joint tribunal known as the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) to convict perpetrators of the genocide. After five indictments and three convictions costing $300 million, the tribunal ceased active litigation in 2022 but has yet to be decommissioned (Backhouse, 2024). Many former members of the Khmer Rouge hold government positions in Cambodia today, including the former prime minister Hun Sen, whose son is the current prime minister. Today, an overwhelming majority of Khmer Rouge members have never been tried for their crimes. Senior Khmer Rouge leaders Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan have been found guilty of crimes against humanity and genocide against the Cham Muslims and Vietnamese in Cambodia, with both sentenced to life imprisonment (Beech, 2018; BBC News, 2018).

Similarities to Bangladesh

The Cambodian and Bangladesh genocides share a few key similarities but also have many stark differences. Two Khmer Rouge leaders were convicted of committing genocide

during the regime against the minority Cham Muslim and ethnic Vietnamese populations of Cambodia by the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia. However, the violence at large, such as the murdering of intellectuals and those seen as opposing the Khmer Rouge, was referred to as crimes against humanity rather than genocide. This categorisation is similar to the Bangladesh case as there was religious violence perpetrated against the Hindu population of Bangladesh, which, according to this framework, could constitute genocide, and there was the murdering of intellectuals and political dissidents, which could constitute crimes against humanity. The death count is disputed for both conflicts. In Cambodia, it ranges from 1.5 million to 3 million, whereas the range is much larger in Bangladesh, from 300,000 to three million, with differing accounts from the Bangladeshi government and other sources. Moreover, both conflicts led to large displacement of peoples within the respective nations. In Cambodia, around one million Cambodians fled, with around 100,000 settling in the United States, whereas around ten million Bengalis were forcibly displaced during the 1971 war and genocide. However, a key difference between Cambodia and Bangladesh would be that the violence in Cambodia partially stemmed from communist versus anti-communist tensions, whereas the struggle in Bangladesh was more linked with ethnonationalism and separatism. Furthermore, the criminal charges from the violence in Bangladesh crossed international borders and would implicate Pakistani nationals, whereas a majority of the Khmer Rouge were Cambodian nationals who could be tried in Cambodian courts, thereby creating another barrier to justice for the Bangladeshis.

Armenia

Overview

The Armenian genocide took place between 1915 and 1923 in varying intensity and resulted in the death of up to 1.5 million Armenian Christian people, enforced by the Ottoman Turkish Empire. The mass murder involved massacres and individual killings, as well as systematic measures of ill-treatment, exposure, and starvation during deportation. The atrocities were mainly executed by Ottoman government forces, commanded by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) or “Young Turks”.

As a Christian minority, Armenians had to endure discriminatory legal restrictions and societal inferiority already in the years leading up to the genocide. Aiming to reach Muslim Turkish dominance in Central and East Anatolia, the genocidal program was connected to or covered by the context of the First World War to prevent Western allies and Armenian people from joining forces. Therefore, the Ottoman Empire and the CUP formed part of the alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary, fighting for a nationalistic eastern expansion of the Turkish state. Next to the killings and displacements of Armenian people from all regions, thousands of children were converted to Islam after being forcibly taken out of their families.

The end of the Armenian genocide cannot be attributed to a specific date. Still, it can be seen as the gradual process from the military defeat of the Ottoman Empire in 1918 to rising international pressure and humanitarian involvement after fast-spreading reports about

the atrocities committed against the Armenian population. Most of the survivors of the genocide fled the country and resettled in one of the biggest cultural diasporas at the time.

In 1948, the UN CPPCG defined genocidal intent to differentiate between genocide and other forms of homicide, important for the legal perspective on the genocide, was defined as "intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group". Therefore, the genocidal intent can be captured in the systematic and direct killings of Armenians, next to the deportations. The former also involved massacres along the deportation routes executed by extermination groups, officially called Special Organizations or *Teshkilâti Mahsusa.* These were gangs of newly released prisoners authorised by Government officials to carry out genocidal measures.

Furthermore, the active denial of basic needs during and after the deportations, leading to deliberate starvation and dehydration, followed by similar conditions and atrocities in concentration camps in the Syrian desert, can be seen as a further demonstration of the genocidal intent. Additionally, measures of eradication of the Armenian identity, for example, by forceful displacement of children, is an incremental indicator of genocidal intent, described as cultural genocide. Next to physical destruction, the 1948 Genocide Convention recognises measures of national, spiritual, and cultural destruction of a national or religious group as part of an overarching genocidal strategy.

International Reaction and Legal Recognition

Today, the Armenian Genocide has been recognised by many states and organisations, such as Germany, Austria, Argentina, the Netherlands, the US, and the European Parliament. The UN does not yet formally recognise the Armenian genocide in its resolutions, however, it has been acknowledged within individual bodies of the UN. For example, during the UN Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities in 1985 the Armenian genocide was specifically mentioned as an example of meeting the genocide criteria outlined in 1948. Many of these developments have only occurred recently, mostly due to the fear of economic disruptions with Turkey and country-specific concerns, as the recognition has been highly contested, especially by Turkey, for decades and still is.

The denial of the Turkish government of the mass elimination of the Armenian people prevents the affected to overcome the generational trauma triggered by the atrocities committed. The Turkish denial of recognition of the events in 1915 as genocide is often reasoned by the argument that the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crimes of Genocide (CPPCG) defining genocide for the first time does not contain provisions mandating its retrospective application. Additionally, the Turkish government argues that the proof of 'intent to destroy' is not definite in the case of the Armenian genocide. In Turkey, according to Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code, public references to the Armenian genocide can lead to imprisonment, as they are seen as defamation of the national identity. However, especially during the discussion of Turkish EU membership and approaching the centenary of the genocide in 2015, the pressure to recognise

the Armenian genocide, especially from some EU countries, grew again. This led to a statement by Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan in 2015 referring to the Armenian genocide as 'shared pain' in the context of the many lost lives in the world war, disregarding the Armenian genocide.

Similarities to the Bangladesh Genocide

The Armenian genocide (1915-1923) and the Bangladesh genocide (1971) share multiple key elements concerning their causes, methods, and long-lasting impact on targeted populations. Firstly, both target groups share an ethnic and religious identity. In Bangladesh, the Pakistani government targeted mainly Bengali Hindu groups, while in Armenia the Ottoman Empire targeted the Armenian Christian minority. Additionally, both genocides involved large-scale massacres and forced deportations, which were enforced either directly by state officials or through state-supported military groups, including the Young Turk government of the Ottoman Empire and the Pakistani military regime.

Furthermore, the Bangladeshi genocide, as well as the Armenian genocide, left global diasporic legacies after tens of thousands of people fled the countries to survive. There are still millions of family members and direct contemporary witnesses bearing the generational trauma triggered by the genocidal experiences. Finally, in both cases, the affected populations still suffer from political denial and minimisation of the atrocities by those responsible. As mentioned above, Turkey officially denies the Armenian genocide until this day, and in the case of Bangladesh, though acknowledging some military involvement, Pakistan has not taken responsibility for the violence seen in the genocide either.

Rwanda

Overview

On the evening of April 6th, 1994, a plane was shot down in Kigali. Aboard were Juvenal Habyarimana, the President of Rwanda, and Cyprien Ntaryamira, the President of Burundi. The assassinations shattered the fragile peace established by the Arusha Accords, an accord brokered in the hope of ending the armed conflict between the Rwandan Patriotic Front and the Rwandan Government. Following the assassination were 100 bloody days, where unimaginable violence overtook the country. Over three months, genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes were perpetrated, primarily against Tutsi civilians, as well as moderate Hutus. The violence resulted in the deaths of between 800,000 and 1 million men, women, and children, a rate four times greater than at the height of the Nazi Holocaust (United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda). The genocide left more than 250,000 women widowed and between 300,000 and 400,000 children orphaned. Hutu men raped primarily Tutsi women as a political weapon during the Rwandan genocide.

International Reaction and Legal Recognition

Although the reality of genocide was clear just days into the massacres, the international community responded inappropriately. To avoid the obligation in the genocide convention to intervene, international players avoided using the term 'genocide' to qualify the massacres. Initially, the prominent reading was that "tribal massacres" took place in a context of "chaos" caused by a "civil war" in a "failed state", in other words, a situation nothing could be done about. It took until the end of May for UN General Secretary, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, to publicly acknowledge that "[i]t is a genocide (…) I have failed (…) It is a scandal" (Reyntjens, Clingendael Spectator).

As The Convention not only provides for prevention but also the punishment of the perpetrators of genocide, the UN Security Council, on November 8th, 1994 established the International Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), as written in Resolution 955. The ICTR was highly relevant in international law as it clarified the notion of an ethnic group as a victim of genocide and established that rape can be a weapon of genocide.

Similarities to Bangladesh

Striking similarities and influence can be found in the Rwandan Genocide, which lays important groundwork for the recognition of the Bangladesh genocide. In both genocides, the systematic use of rape is a clear breach of The Convention, as was established through the ICTR as a weapon of genocide. Furthermore, in Rwanda, racialist ideologies mainly served as a mask or pseudo-justification for the more fundamental goal of regime survival under conditions of sharp socio-economic crisis and growing political opposition. If we look at the case in Bangladesh, or back then East Pakistan, we notice a similar parallel, where the government of West Pakistan was threatened by the Awami League and their six-point plan for autonomy. In Rwanda, as well as in Bangladesh, genocidal killings were planned upfront by the creation of targeted kill lists or death lists. In both cases, the use of ethnic targeting is clear. In the case of Bangladesh, Bengalis were ethnically distinct from the ruling Pakistani regime. Similarly, the Tutsis were targeted in Rwanda, where the Hutu majority was controlling the government. Finally, the mass killings are undeniable. Estimates in Bangladesh speak of 300,000 to 3,000,000 people who were killed. In Rwanda, 800,000 people lost their lives in three months.

CONCLUSION

The 1971 Bangladeshi Genocide is one we can call forgotten, unknown, not recognized. With this comparative report, the authors compared the 1971 Bangladeshi Genocide to three internationally recognized genocides; Cambodia, Armenia, and Rwanda. By drawing similarities and contrasts between the mentioned cases and the case of Bangladesh, this report showcased clear similarities with all three researched, recognized genocides.

From the case of justice for Cambodia following the violence of the Cambodian genocide, a key takeaway may be inferred. As the indictments and convictions showed, it was more difficult for the contemporary Cambodian government to charge Khmer Rouge officials for genocide of the mass violence it perpetrated against Cambodians during their four-year regime. However, the targeted killings of Cham Muslims and ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia were unequivocally labeled as genocide, while other acts were prosecuted as crimes against humanity—an approach that could likewise be enforced in this case.

Secondly, the case of the Armenian genocide shares many similarities with the Bangladesh genocide. Its comparison specifically showcases the ongoing fight for recognition and overlooked justice for the targeted populations and diasporas of both Armenia and Bangladesh. Furthermore, it represents the limited means of the international community to hold those responsible accountable for the cruelties committed in the genocidal actions.

Finally, the genocide in Rwanda represented a last-ditch attempt by an increasingly autocratic and unpopular regime to cling to state power, whatever the costs for the population at large. In no sense, therefore, was the genocide the result of spontaneous fighting between two competing castes or ethnic groups. The same conclusion can be drawn from the case of Bangladesh, where the West Pakistani government made a last resort to cling to the state in its entirety after the Awami League became the majority party. The genocide in Bangladesh did not form spontaneously, it was not a civil war, but Bengalis were targeted specifically by the Pakistani army with the help of premade kill lists.

These similarities showcase the gravity of the 1971 Bangladeshi Genocide. Whereas the three internationally recognized genocides mentioned earlier in this report are widely known, few people are aware of the atrocities done by the Pakistani army in the Liberation War. This report demonstrated clear overlap and similarities between the recognized genocides and the currently still unrecognized genocide of Bangladesh in 1971. Therefore, the authors hope by publishing this report for international political leaders to rethink their position on this issue.

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