

Call It What It Is: *Why Recognising the Bangladesh Genocide Matters*

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Bangladesh Campaign – April 2025



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Introduction

“If we do not fully acknowledge, commemorate, and teach our children about genocide, the words ‘never again’ lose their meaning.”

- Fmr. U.S. President, Joseph R. Biden, April 2021.

Genocide is marked by such unimaginable horror and devastation that, for some, it raises the question: *why remember it at all?* The answer is multifaceted. We remember it because doing so is important to recognising the truth of what has happened, and recognition is how we show empathy to others, secure justice for victims, preserve historical truth, prevent future atrocities, and uphold the rule of law.

Empathy and Memory

For survivors, the memory of genocide is not a distant event—it is a lived-reality that continues to shape their everyday lives. The enduring ability to remember is a fundamental aspect of the human experience. As Australian historian and genocide scholar Paul R Bartrop wrote, human beings will remember things “some that impact upon us directly, some outside of our own experience that interest us, and some that have no bearing either on us or on our interests, but are thrust upon us by circumstances beyond our control”.¹ Memories are universal, shared both personally and collectively. While individual memory depends on personal recall, collective memory is sustained through acts of remembrance—intentional, communal efforts to ensure that society does not forget. Remembrance is a meaningful way to acknowledge and legitimise individual memories, and it is also a deeply human way to empathise with the experiences of others.

Truth and Historical Integrity

By remembering the loss and suffering of genocide victims, we demonstrate our commitment to truth. Honest acknowledgement of historical events is essential to preserving historical accuracy and integrity. Without a steadfast commitment to truth, we risk dishonestly revising history and erasing the lived experiences of victims. How we memorialise the past directly influences the historical narratives we construct. Historical narratives are more than just objective accountings of facts; they are stories crafted through judgements and interpretations.

As British historian Geoffrey Cubitt described it, historical narratives are “based on selection”.² Certain facts are chosen to shape particular stories. There is as much deliberation

¹ Paul R Bartrop, ‘Genocide and the Defeat of Memory’ (2021) 14(1) *Genocide Studies International* <<https://doi.org/10.3138/gsi.2021.12.13.0>> accessed 9 February, 2025.

² Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007), 53.

about what is told as there is about what is omitted. For this reason, any narrative about history can be viewed as a political choice, carrying the responsibility to uphold and protect the truth. Nowhere is this responsibility more crucial than in the case of recognising the truth about genocide.

Genocide recognition, as psychologist and scholar Ervin Staub explains, “teaches us something about ourselves as human beings”.³ It reminds society of the ruthless consequences of unbridled hatred, discrimination, and violence. More than anything, it reflects humankind's fundamental failure to protect itself—a failure that should never be repeated again. At the heart of the phrase “never again” is an unwavering outcry to confront the dark chapters of human history and to learn from them in turn so that future generations act to prevent the horrors of genocide from occurring again.⁴ Education’s connection to prevention shows why genocide recognition is more than symbolic. As historian Carl Becker once said, history is “the memory of things said and done”. Thus, how it is studied influences how it is remembered.⁵ How we remember genocide determines how we learn from it, which influences our ability to prevent future genocides from occurring.

Failing to learn from past atrocities increases the risk of further devastation and hinders our ability to prevent future occurrences. One of the most harrowing examples of this failure is the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, wherein inaction and the dismissal of early warning signs allowed mass atrocities to unfold on an unimaginable scale. Despite being the most highly publicised genocide of the 20th century, 800,000 Rwandans lost their lives over the course of 100 days. In an address at the United Nations on the international community’s failure to prevent the Rwandan Genocide, Former Secretary Ban Ki-Moon urged leaders to consider “how different it would have been had we, the international community, acted properly at the proper time.”⁶ Alarming, as many as 120 million civilians have been victims of genocide in the 20th century alone,⁷ with genocides occurring with impunity in the decades since.

The more negligent our commitment to historical truth, the more vulnerable we become to historical revisionism. Historical revisionism is the construction of pseudo-historical claims to advance oppressive agendas through restrictive political narratives controlled by suppression.⁸ The most prominent examples of historical revisionism

³ Jen Langley, 'Why Genocide Recognition Matters' (Facing History & Ourselves, 22 April, 2022) <<https://www.facinghistory.org/ideas-week/why-genocide-recognition-matters>> accessed 13 February, 2025 (quoting Ervin Staub, *Crimes Against Humanity and Civilization* (Facing History & Ourselves)).

⁴ Afroze F Zaidi, 'Gaza and the Politics of Genocide Recognition' (Islamic Human Rights Commission, 22 May, 2024) <<https://www.ihrc.org.uk/gaza-and-the-politics-of-genocide-recognition/>> accessed 14 February 2025.

⁵ Carl Becker, “Everyman His Own Historian,” *American Historical Review*, 37:2 (January 1932), 224, 229.

⁶ Kofi Annan, 'Remarks at the Opening of the Exhibition “Lessons from the Rwanda Genocide”' (30 April, 2007) <<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2007-04-30/remarks-opening-exhibition-%E2%80%99Clessons-rwanda-genocide%E2%80%99D>> accessed 10 February, 2025.

⁷ James L Pigmon, *Evil: Genocide in the 21st Century* (Master of Liberal Studies Thesis, Rollins College 2011) <<https://scholarship.rollins.edu/mls/11>> accessed 17 February, 2025.

⁸ Facing History & Ourselves, 'Refuting Denial' (14 March, 2016) <<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/refuting-denial>> accessed 13 February, 2025; Ronald Grigor Suny, 'Insight

are evidenced by the denials of the Srebrenica Genocide and the Holocaust, the erasure of Korean comfort women, and the discrediting of the Nanking massacres.⁹ These historical examples reveal the ugly truth that political agendas for power often employ campaigns designed to foster apathy, incite violence, and nurture hatred.¹⁰

*The way to motivate people to commit such acts, Herb Hirsch wrote, is to manipulate their historical memories by creating myths designed to stimulate racial, ethnic, or national hatreds that feed the violence. Politics is, in this respect, related closely to memory, and until we are able to see and understand the complex connections between the two, the seemingly endless repetitions of mass killing are destined to endure.*¹¹

A dominant group that is motivated by power will often act based on their own interpretation to manipulate memory and justify atrocities against the targeted group.¹² Friedrich Nietzsche said,

*There is no set of maxims more important for a historian than this: that the actual causes of a thing's origin and its eventual uses, the manner of incorporation into a system of purposes, are worlds apart; that everything that exists, no matter what its origin, is periodically reinterpreted by those in power in terms of fresh intentions.*¹³

As a result, the focus of contemporary genocide-prevention scholarship has shifted toward safeguarding historical truth and combating genocide denial.¹⁴ “Genocide denial is the attempt to minimise or redefine the scale and severity of a genocide and sometimes even deny a genocide is or was being committed”, writes Mark Hackett of Operation Broken Silence.¹⁵ It serves to delegitimise victims and further dehumanise targeted groups. To counter genocide denial, it is essential to promote education that is accessible, digestible, and based on truth—and truth demands recognition.

Accountability and Prevention

Recognition also plays a crucial role in accountability under international law. In addressing the atrocities committed in the former Yugoslavia, former U.S. Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger stated that the international community has “a moral and historical

142: The Pernicious Practice of Historical Denial' (Middle East Institute, 15 March, 2016) <<https://mei.nus.edu.sg/publication/insight-142-the-pernicious-practice-of-historical-denial/>> accessed 15 February, 2025.

⁹ Facing History & Ourselves, 'Refuting Denial' (14 March, 2016)

<<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/refuting-denial/>> accessed 13 February, 2025.

¹⁰ Jacqueline Fordyce, 'Genocide Denial, Disinformation, Armed Conflict: What can lawyers do?' (JUSTICE Scotland, 20 June, 2022).

¹¹ Herbert Hirsch, *Genocide and the Politics of Memory: Studying Death to Preserve Life* (University of North Carolina Press 1995), 9.

¹² Herbert Hirsch, *Genocide and the Politics of Memory: Studying Death to Preserve Life* (University of North Carolina Press 1995), 24.

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals* (1956).

¹⁴ London Centre for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism, 'Genocide Studies'

<<https://londonantisemitism.com/projects/genocide-studies/>> accessed 11 February, 2025.

¹⁵ Mark Hackett, 'The Dangers of Genocide Denial' (20 November, 2023) Operation Broken Silence <<https://operationbrokensilence.org/blog/the-dangers-of-genocide-denial/>> accessed 25 February, 2025.

obligation not to stand back a second time in this century while a people faces obliteration”.¹⁶ State parties to the Genocide Convention have a dual responsibility to prevent genocide and to punish those responsible for it.¹⁷

In the Bosnian Genocide Case, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) underscored that state parties to the Genocide Convention have “a direct obligation to prevent genocide”, which includes the responsibility “to employ all means reasonably available to them to prevent genocide so far as possible”.¹⁸ This legal duty obligates states to act, highlighting the importance of taking proactive measures to prevent genocide. This means that “once genocide is found to be occurring, a moral and political duty arises in favour of action”.¹⁹

Recognition informs future action and preventative measures but also provides critical retrospective insight. As Herbert Hirsch explains, “Most nations attempt to avoid honest self-recognition, especially when their past behaviour may be viewed as less than morally justifiable”.²⁰ However, acknowledging past atrocities helps nations and society at large understand the underlying causes and conditions that enabled such violence, thereby offering valuable lessons to prevent history from repeating itself.

Referring to the Rwandan Genocide, Former Secretary-General Anon said,

*No one can claim ignorance. All who were playing any part in world affairs at that time should ask, ‘What more could I have done? How would I react next time — and what am I doing now to make it less likely there will be a next time?’*²¹

It also honours the experiences of victims and survivors by fostering healing and reconciliation. By confronting the truth of past genocides, recognition strengthens the global commitment to justice, accountability, and the protection of human rights.

Genocide strikes at the core of human morality, fundamentally undermining the principles of compassion and justice that hold societies together. Its ramifications extend beyond moral considerations, carrying profound political, legal, and psychosocial implications. Such impact makes recognition not only a moral imperative but a necessary step for upholding international law, ensuring accountability, and fostering societal healing. We cannot expect resilience in victims without recognition of their suffering.

¹⁶ Secretary Lawrence Eagleburger, The Need to Respond to War Crimes in the Former Yugoslavia, 3 U.S. Dep’t State Dispatch 923 (1992).

¹⁷ Michael J. Kelly, ‘Genocide - The Power of a Label’ (2007) 40 Case W Res J Int’l L 147.

¹⁸ Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Bosnia and Herzegovina v Serbia and Montenegro) (Judgment) [2007] ICJ Rep 43.

¹⁹ Michael J. Kelly, ‘Genocide - The Power of a Label’ (2007) 40 Case W Res J Int’l L 147, 158.

²⁰ Herbert Hirsch, *Genocide and the Politics of Memory: Studying Death to Preserve Life* (University of North Carolina Press 1995), 28.

²¹ Kofi Annan, ‘Address to the Commission on Human Rights’ (7 April, 2004)

<<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2004-04-07/address-kofi-annan-commission-human-rights>> accessed 15 February, 2025.

More than 80 years have passed since the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps, yet genocides continue to occur around the world—a stark testament to the international community’s greatest failure. If we change the course of our future, we must learn from our past, and learning begins with recognition. As Herb Hirsch wrote, “not forgetting is not in itself the solution. Although simply remembering may be necessary as a start. . . to build a humane, just, and peaceful future”.²² By formally recognising genocide, states and international institutions can take a necessary, public stand against historical revisionism, validate the experience of victims, demonstrate accountability, and reinforce their commitment to preventing future atrocities.

The Bangladesh Genocide

*“The [Pakistani] army had premade lists of targets, including members of the Bengali nationalists, intellectuals, and Hindus. The army believed that mass violence would terrorise what they saw as a racially inferior population into subservience, especially if Bengali elites were killed, but instead faced popular resistance that was put down with violence. Young men were targeted as potential sources of resistance and women and girls were raped as a way to destroy Bengali families”.*²³

- Holocaust Museum Houston

The violence launched on March 25th, 1971 in Dhaka, marked the beginning of a ruthless nine-month genocide campaign marked by widespread violence, including systematic killings and human rights abuses across the country. The violence was rooted in West Pakistan’s perception of Bengalis as a distinct and inferior ethnic, religious, and national group and their intent to erase the Bengali identity by forcibly assimilating East Pakistanis into a singular West Pakistani identity.

*“Amongst [West Pakistan’s] policies were the prohibition against speaking Bangla, the imposition of Urdu as an official language, and the violent persecution and repression of a linguistic and cultural opposition that had started right after the partition. During this period of time, many social movements expressing Bengali cultural and national identity were born, such as the “Language Movement” and the “Six-Points Movement”, an antecedent to the call for independence”.*²⁴

- Lemkin Institute (2022)

The systematic denial of East Pakistanis’ civil and political rights by West Pakistan agitated Bengalis and engendered a movement for Bengali self-determination. In 1970, East and West

²² Herbert Hirsch, *Genocide and the Politics of Memory: Studying Death to Preserve Life* (University of North Carolina Press 1995), 35.

²³ Holocaust Museum Houston. (n.d.). *Bangladesh, 1971*. Holocaust Museum Houston. Retrieved March 10, 2025, from <<https://hnh.org/education/bangladesh-1971/>> accessed 2 March, 2025.

²⁴ Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention, 'Statement on Bangladesh Genocide of 1971' (2022).

Pakistan held their first and only nationwide parliamentary election. The Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and representing the Bengali-majority East Pakistan, secured a decisive victory, winning 167 out of 313 seats in the Pakistan National Assembly—an outright majority. Meanwhile, the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and based in West Pakistan, won 88 seats.²⁵ The remaining seats were distributed among independent candidates and smaller parties. Despite the Awami League’s clear mandate to form a government, political tensions escalated as the ruling West Pakistani elite, unwilling to cede power to East Pakistan, refused to recognise the election results and catalysed the violence that later ensued.

It is widely accepted that the military of West Pakistan initiated the violence that began the Liberation War of 1971.²⁶ In the first of many horrific war crimes, Pakistani armed forces attacked students, scholars, and professors at Dhaka University. Students who attempted to flee or resist were brutally executed by the Pakistani armed forces.²⁷ Soldiers from the Pakistani army set a female dormitory on fire and gunned down unarmed women as they attempted to escape.²⁸ On March 29, just four days after the genocide began, *The New York Times* reported an estimated 5,000 to 7,000 people had been killed in Dhaka, while *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported between 10,000 and 100,000.²⁹ Heavy rains later uncovered two mass graves at Zahrul Huq Hall and Rokeya Hall at Dhaka University.³⁰

*“[S]cholars have documented the systematic nature of the genocide against Bengali people. Pakistan’s elite expressed superiority and disgust towards Bengalis. Military commanders intended to crush Bengali spirit and identity. The Pakistani army compiled lists of targets, focusing on intellectuals and nationalist leaders”.*³¹

- World Without Genocide

Approximately 3 million people were killed over the course of nine-months, and over 16 million people were displaced from their homes, with ten million seeking refuge in

²⁵ Asif Munir, *Bangladesh Revisited* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 5th edn, October 2018) 10.

²⁶ Imtiaz Ahmed, *Recognising the 1971 Bangladesh Genocide: An Appeal for Rendering Justice* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, February 2022) 9.

²⁷ Imtiaz Ahmed, *Recognising the 1971 Bangladesh Genocide: An Appeal for Rendering Justice* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, February 2022) 12
<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/risk-disaster-reduction/sites/risk_disaster_reduction/files/bd_genocide_booklet.pdf> accessed 10 March, 2025.

²⁸ Imtiaz Ahmed, *Recognising the 1971 Bangladesh Genocide: An Appeal for Rendering Justice* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, February 2022) 12
<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/risk-disaster-reduction/sites/risk_disaster_reduction/files/bd_genocide_booklet.pdf> accessed 10 March, 2025.

²⁹ Imtiaz Ahmed, *Recognising the 1971 Bangladesh Genocide: An Appeal for Rendering Justice* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, February 2022) 12
<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/risk-disaster-reduction/sites/risk_disaster_reduction/files/bd_genocide_booklet.pdf> accessed 10 March, 2025.

³⁰ Imtiaz Ahmed, *Recognising the 1971 Bangladesh Genocide: An Appeal for Rendering Justice* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, February 2022) 12
<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/risk-disaster-reduction/sites/risk_disaster_reduction/files/bd_genocide_booklet.pdf> accessed 10 March, 2025.

³¹ World Without Genocide, *Bangladesh* (World Without Genocide)
<<https://worldwithoutgenocide.org/genocides-and-conflicts/bangladesh>> accessed 10 March, 2025.

neighbouring India—one of the largest and most significant refugee crises in history.³² Refugees in overcrowded camps within and along the border with India endured extreme hardship, facing starvation, malnutrition, and appalling sanitary conditions. Despite efforts by the Indian government and humanitarian organisations, conditions worsened, particularly during the monsoon season. Many camps were flooded with filth, leaving refugees wading through contaminated water while struggling to eat meagre rations before swarms of flies overtook them.³³ Malnutrition was rampant, as were infections from diseases like cholera, smallpox, and dysentery.³⁴ Relief-worker, Julian Francis, who coordinated Oxfam’s humanitarian efforts for Bengali refugees, described the harrowing conditions endured by Bengali refugees as follows in a document published by Oxfam in September 1971:

*“There are no walls to keep the rain from blowing in, nor any partitions except lines of washing to separate one family from the next. The thatched roof seems to sweat smoke, but just as the smoke drifts out, the rain comes in at every pore, and the mud floor which is their bed gets wet and slimy. Regularly each hut disgorges a hundred refugees or more who form queues for their government rations, queues for the wells, queues for a place at the trench latrines. Those with dysentery seldom make it to the queue. The children form lines for their daily dollop of special nutritious food. This is the totality of life for nine million refugees - there is no work, there is no money”.*³⁵

- Julian Francis, *Oxfam* (1971)

It is estimated that between 200,000 and 450,000 women were abducted and raped or forced into sexual slavery in Pakistani army-run camps, with an estimate of 70,000 who became pregnant as a result.³⁶ In 1972, the New York Times published an article describing the horrors that Bengali women had endured, including the use of rape as a weapon of ethnic cleansing.

“There are reports circulating in Dacca that systematic rape was a policy of the occupying army. The object, according to these accounts, was to produce a large

³² *Criminal Appeal No 143 of 2014* (n.9) 2–3; World Without Genocide, *Bangladesh* (World Without Genocide, no date) <<https://worldwithoutgenocide.org/genocides-and-conflicts/bangladesh>> accessed 10 March 2025; Imtiaz Ahmed, ‘Recognising the 1971 Bangladesh Genocide: An Appeal for Rendering Justice’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, February 2022) <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/risk-disaster-reduction/sites/risk_disaster_reduction/files/bd_genocide_booklet.pdf> accessed 10 March, 2025.

³³ Imtiaz Ahmed, ‘Recognising the 1971 Bangladesh Genocide: An Appeal for Rendering Justice’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, February 2022) 20 <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/risk-disaster-reduction/sites/risk_disaster_reduction/files/bd_genocide_booklet.pdf> accessed 10 March, 2025.

³⁴ Imtiaz Ahmed, ‘Recognising the 1971 Bangladesh Genocide: An Appeal for Rendering Justice’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, February 2022) 20 <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/risk-disaster-reduction/sites/risk_disaster_reduction/files/bd_genocide_booklet.pdf> accessed 10 March, 2025.

³⁵ Julian Francis, ‘Reflections on refugees – 1971 and 2017’ (bdnews24.com, 28 September, 2017) <<https://bdnews24.com/opinion/reflections-on-refugees-1971-and-2017>> accessed 10 March, 2025.

³⁶ Ali Riaz, *The Troubled History of Partition and Violence in South Asia* (2014) CORE 2131 <<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/42549865.pdf>> accessed 23 November, 2024; Michael Safi, ‘The Past Has Yet to Leave the Present: Genocide in Bangladesh’ *Harvard International Review* (2023) <<https://hir.harvard.edu/the-past-has-yet-to-leave-the-present-genocide-in-bangladesh/>> accessed 23 November, 2024.

*number of children with non - Bengali fathers to dilute the prevailing Bengali nationalism”.*³⁷

- Julian Francis, *The New York Times* (1972)

In an interview, Geoffrey Davis, an Australian doctor at the International Abortion Research and Training Centre in London who was brought to Dhaka by the United Nations to assist with late-term abortions of raped women and international adoptions, recounted harrowing cases of women being tied to trees and gang-raped, having their breasts brutally mutilated, and their bodies discarded in mass graves.³⁸ With disease and malnutrition widespread in the aftermath of the war, abortion was considered the least harmful solution to the crisis. Dr. Davis believed that the commonly cited estimate of raped Bengali women was likely an undercount, as many women were afraid to come forward due to sociocultural stigma within their communities. He estimated that up to 5,000 pregnancies resulting from rape were terminated using indigenous methods without proper sanitation, sterilisation, or a medical professional.³⁹ Many rape survivors were shunned by their communities and deemed "defiled" due to deeply ingrained cultural and religious beliefs.⁴⁰ Countless pregnant women took their own lives or killed their unwanted babies by drowning or other means. Many women who returned to their villages were killed by their husbands.⁴¹ The stigma was so overwhelming that some survivors, fearing shame and rejection at home, pleaded with their captors to take them to Pakistan rather than release them. Thousands of children were adopted by Christian missionaries in North America and Europe.⁴² However, widespread venereal disease prevented many children from being adopted, with many dying from malnourishment, disease, and infection.⁴³

The war ended on December 16th, 1971 when approximately 93,000 Pakistani forces surrendered to the Indian military and Bangladeshi forces, with Bangladesh emerging as an

³⁷ Robert Trumbull, 'Dacca Raising the Status of Women While Aiding Rape Victims' (The New York Times, 12 May, 1972) <<https://www.nytimes.com/1972/05/12/archives/dacca-raising-the-status-of-women-while-aiding-rape-victims.html>> accessed 10 March, 2025.

³⁸ Lorraine Boissoneault, 'The Genocide the U.S. Can't Remember, But Bangladesh Can't Forget' (Smithsonian Magazine, 28 March, 2017) <<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/genocide-us-cant-remember-bangladesh-cant-forget-180961490/>> accessed 10 March, 2025; Anushay Hossain, '1971 Rapes: Bangladesh Cannot Hide History' (Forbes, 21 May, 2012) <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/worldviews/2012/05/21/1971-rapes-bangladesh-cannot-hide-history/>> accessed 10 March, 2025.

³⁹ Robert Trumbull, 'Dacca Raising the Status of Women While Aiding Rape Victims' (The New York Times, 12 May, 1972) <<https://www.nytimes.com/1972/05/12/archives/dacca-raising-the-status-of-women-while-aiding-rape-victims.html>> accessed 10 March, 2025.

⁴⁰ Bina D'Costa, '1971: Rape and its Consequences' (bdnews24.com, 15 December, 2010) <<https://bdnews24.com/opinion/1971-rape-and-its-consequences>> accessed 10 March, 2025.

⁴¹ Robert Trumbull, 'Dacca Raising the Status of Women While Aiding Rape Victims' (The New York Times, 12 May, 1972) <<https://www.nytimes.com/1972/05/12/archives/dacca-raising-the-status-of-women-while-aiding-rape-victims.html>> accessed 10 March, 2025.

⁴² Imtiaz Ahmed, 'Recognising the 1971 Bangladesh Genocide: An Appeal for Rendering Justice' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, February 2022) 4 <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/risk-disaster-reduction/sites/risk_disaster_reduction/files/bd_genocide_booklet.pdf> accessed 10 March, 2025.

⁴³ Robert Trumbull, 'Dacca Raising the Status of Women While Aiding Rape Victims' (The New York Times, 12 May, 1972) <<https://www.nytimes.com/1972/05/12/archives/dacca-raising-the-status-of-women-while-aiding-rape-victims.html>> accessed 10 March, 2025.

independent nation.⁴⁴ All Pakistani prisoners-of-war were held in India until an agreement reached between Pakistan and India allowed for all prisoners, save for 195 accused of war crimes, to be repatriated to Pakistan, where they have never faced justice. Large-scale displacement of the population caused severe economic disruption in Bangladesh, from which the country has truly never recovered. Nearly every family endured profound loss.⁴⁵ Ninety percent of houses, shops, banks and other buildings were destroyed, with total losses amounting to an estimate of five billion USD, according to the Bangladesh Government.⁴⁶

Current Recognition Efforts for the Bangladesh Genocide

*“Justice for this genocide remains elusive. After a string of military coups in independent Bangladesh, the Awami League regained power and in 2010 initiated the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) to try genocide perpetrators. Pakistani perpetrators live abroad outside the reach of the court, so the tribunal focused on Bangladeshi collaborators, who did everything from propaganda efforts to identifying targets and participating in killing”.*⁴⁷

- Holocaust Museum Houston

The global community was well aware of the brutality unfolding in Bangladesh in 1971. The Prime Minister of India at the time, Indira Gandhi, condemned the assault as "genocide" as early as March 31, 1971.⁴⁸ Pakistani journalist Neville Anthony Mascarenhas's famous 13 June, 1971 article, entitled "Genocide," which was published in the United Kingdom's *Sunday Times*, exposed the brutality that Pakistani armed forces unleashed on Bengalis living in East Pakistan, receiving international attention. Undoubtedly, Mascarenhas' reporting contributed to the war's end by shifting global opinion against Pakistan and prompting India to take decisive action.⁴⁹ Bengalis living and working in the United Kingdom raised funds for the Bengali resistance and organised peaceful demonstrations, including the *Recognise Bangla-Desh Rally* in Trafalgar Square on August 8, 1971.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ *Criminal Appeal No 143 of 2014* (n.9) 2.

⁴⁵ Imtiaz Ahmed, 'Recognising the 1971 Bangladesh Genocide: An Appeal for Rendering Justice' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, February 2022) 22
<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/risk-disaster-reduction/sites/risk_disaster_reduction/files/bd_genocide_booklet.pdf> accessed 10 March, 2025.

⁴⁶ Imtiaz Ahmed, 'Recognising the 1971 Bangladesh Genocide: An Appeal for Rendering Justice' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, February 2022) 22
<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/risk-disaster-reduction/sites/risk_disaster_reduction/files/bd_genocide_booklet.pdf> accessed 10 March, 2025.

⁴⁷ Holocaust Museum Houston. (n.d.). *Bangladesh, 1971*. Holocaust Museum Houston. Retrieved March 10, 2025, from <<https://hnh.org/education/bangladesh-1971/>> accessed 2 March, 2025.

⁴⁸ Lorraine Boissoneault, 'The Genocide the U.S. Can't Remember, But Bangladesh Can't Forget' (Smithsonian Magazine, 28 March, 2017)
<<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/genocide-us-cant-remember-bangladesh-cant-forget-180961490/>> accessed 10 March, 2025.

⁴⁹ Mark Dummett, 'Bangladesh War: The Article that Changed History' (BBC News, 16 December, 2011)
<<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16207201>> accessed 10 March, 2025.

⁵⁰ The National Archives, 'The Independence of Bangladesh in 1971' (The National Archives)
<<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/the-independence-of-bangladesh-in-1971/>> accessed 10 March, 2025.

However, Cold War politics hindered formal recognition of the Bangladesh genocide in the immediate aftermath. In the U.S., former President Richard Nixon and his national security advisor at the time, Henry Kissinger, viewed Pakistan as a key regional ally and resolutely supported its military dictatorship.⁵¹ U.S. diplomats, including Archer Blood, the American consul-general in Dhaka, and Kenneth Keating, the U.S. ambassador to India, urged Nixon to withdraw support for the Pakistani regime. However, their pleas went unheeded and Blood was eventually recalled from his post. Instead, the U.S. supplied Pakistan with weapons and leveraged its alliance as a strategic conduit for opening diplomatic ties with China.⁵² Recordings of White House conversations reveal that Nixon and Kissinger used Pakistan's military dictator, General Yahya Khan, as an intermediary to establish communication with Mao Zedong's regime, including using a trip to Pakistan as a cover story to secretly visit Beijing.⁵³

India's close ties with the Soviet Union further stymied recognition.⁵⁴ In August 1971, India signed the *Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation* with the Soviet Union, signalling a shift away from India's previously neutral stance in the Cold War.⁵⁵ This development alarmed Nixon and Kissinger, who feared a deepening Indo-Soviet alliance. As a result, the U.S. prioritised countering Soviet influence over addressing Pakistan's atrocities in Bangladesh.⁵⁶ In his article entitled "Bargaining Away Justice", Pulitzer Prize nominee and scholar of international security Gary J. Bass explains how "Bangladesh's experience shows the primacy of international security over justice".⁵⁷ Despite receiving detailed reports from diplomats like Blood, who explicitly described the atrocities as a genocide, the U.S. chose to remain aligned with Pakistan, prioritising geopolitical interests over humanitarian concerns.

"Unlike the Rwandan genocide, or the Holocaust, or the killing that followed the breakup of Yugoslavia, the genocide in Bangladesh that ended 45 years ago this week

⁵¹ Lorraine Boissoneault, 'The Genocide the U.S. Can't Remember, But Bangladesh Can't Forget' (Smithsonian Magazine, 28 March, 2017)

<<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/genocide-us-cant-remember-bangladesh-cant-forget-180961490/>> accessed 10 March, 2025; Gary J. Bass, 'Looking Away from Genocide' (The New Yorker, 19 November, 2013)

<<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/looking-away-from-genocide>> accessed 10 March, 2025.

⁵² Lorraine Boissoneault, 'The Genocide the U.S. Can't Remember, But Bangladesh Can't Forget' (Smithsonian Magazine, 28 March, 2017)

<<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/genocide-us-cant-remember-bangladesh-cant-forget-180961490/>> accessed 10 March, 2025.

⁵³ Gary J. Bass, 'Looking Away from Genocide' (The New Yorker, 19 November, 2013)

<<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/looking-away-from-genocide>> accessed 10 March, 2025.

⁵⁴ Lorraine Boissoneault, 'The Genocide the U.S. Can't Remember, But Bangladesh Can't Forget' (Smithsonian Magazine, 28 March, 2017)

<<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/genocide-us-cant-remember-bangladesh-cant-forget-180961490/>> accessed 10 March, 2025.

⁵⁵ Lorraine Boissoneault, 'The Genocide the U.S. Can't Remember, But Bangladesh Can't Forget' (Smithsonian Magazine, 28 March, 2017)

<<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/genocide-us-cant-remember-bangladesh-cant-forget-180961490/>> accessed 10 March, 2025.

⁵⁶ Lorraine Boissoneault, 'The Genocide the U.S. Can't Remember, But Bangladesh Can't Forget' (Smithsonian Magazine, 28 March, 2017)

<<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/genocide-us-cant-remember-bangladesh-cant-forget-180961490/>> accessed 10 March, 2025.

⁵⁷ Gary J. Bass, 'Bargaining Away Justice: India, Pakistan, and the International Politics of Impunity for the Bangladesh Genocide' (2016) 41(2) *International Security* 140 <<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/638860>>.

*has largely slipped out of public awareness—even though the upper estimate for the death toll is three million”.*⁵⁸

- Lorraine Boissoneault, *Smithsonian Magazine* (2017)

One of the key pieces of evidence on the Bangladesh Genocide has been the Report of the Hamoodur Rahman Commission.⁵⁹ The Commission was established in December 1971 by the Pakistani government to investigate West Pakistan's defeat and the allegations of atrocities that took place during the Liberation War.⁶⁰ After examining nearly 300 witnesses,⁶¹ it submitted two reports to the Pakistani government: an initial report in 1972 and a supplementary report in 1974.⁶² The reports were classified and suppressed by the Pakistani government for decades due to concerns about their potential impact on the military's image. In 2000, parts of the 1974 supplementary report were leaked, bringing its findings to public attention.⁶³ However, despite its revelations, no significant actions were taken against those implicated, and the full 1972 report has never been officially released.

In 2009, with assistance from the United Nations and European Union, Bangladesh established the International Crimes Tribunal, a domestic court sought to investigate and prosecute suspects involved in the genocide.⁶⁴ However, over half a century has passed since the atrocities were committed, and few perpetrators have been brought to justice.⁶⁵ No one who served in the Pakistani military in East Pakistan in 1971 has been held accountable or punished for their crimes during the war.⁶⁶ On March 11th, 2017 the Parliament of Bangladesh voted unanimously to declare March 25th Genocide Day in remembrance of the atrocities carried out by the Pakistani armed forces.⁶⁷ Nine days later, on March 20th, the

⁵⁸ Lorraine Boissoneault, 'The Genocide the U.S. Can't Remember, But Bangladesh Can't Forget' (Smithsonian Magazine, 28 March 2017) <<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/genocide-us-cant-remember-bangladesh-cant-forget-180961490/>> accessed 10 March, 2025.

⁵⁹ Hamoodur Rahman Commission, *Hamoodur Rahman Commission Report* (1972, republished 2010).

⁶⁰ Rounaq Jahan, 'Genocide in Bangladesh' in Samuel Totten, William S Parsons, and Israel W Charny (eds), *Century of Genocide* (2nd edn, Routledge 2004) 249, 262.

⁶¹ Farhana Akter Shooovra, 'Perpetrations of 1971 – An Analysis in Light of Hamoodur Rahman Commission Report' (2012) 4 *Arts Faculty Journal* 87 <https://doi.org/10.3329/afj.v4i0.12934>.

⁶² Farhana Akter Shooovra, 'Perpetrations of 1971 – An Analysis in Light of Hamoodur Rahman Commission Report' (2012) 4 *Arts Faculty Journal* 85 <https://doi.org/10.3329/afj.v4i0.12934>.

⁶³ Abhinandan Mishra, 'Pak Quietly Buries Report on GHQ Genocide in Bangladesh' *The Sunday Guardian* (Online, 27 November, 2021) <<https://sundayguardianlive.com/news/pak-quietly-buries-report-ghq-genocide-bangladesh>> accessed 13 March, 2025.

⁶⁴ Muskan Yadav, 'Bangladesh War Crimes Tribunal Sentences Eight for Liberation War Crimes, Acquits One' (JURIST, 4 February, 2021) <<https://www.jurist.org/news/2021/02/bangladesh-war-crimes-tribunal-sentences-eight-for-liberation-war-crimes-acquits-one/>> accessed 10 March, 2025.

⁶⁵ World Without Genocide, *Bangladesh* (World Without Genocide, no date) <<https://worldwithoutgenocide.org/genocides-and-conflicts/bangladesh>> accessed 10 March, 2025.

⁶⁶ Imtiaz Ahmed, 'Recognising the 1971 Bangladesh Genocide: An Appeal for Rendering Justice' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, February 2022) 28 <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/risk-disaster-reduction/sites/risk_disaster_reduction/files/bd_genocide_booklet.pdf> accessed 10 March, 2025.

⁶⁷ Asif Munir, *Bangladesh Revisited* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 5th edn, October 2018) 4; Mohammad Abu Bakar Siddique, 'Parliament Declares March 25 Genocide Day' (Dhaka Tribune, 11 March, 2017) <<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/16307/parliament-declares-march-25-genocide-day>> accessed 10 March, 2025.

government's cabinet ministers approved Parliament's resolution as a means of formally recognising the 1971 genocide.⁶⁸

For decades, Bangladesh's Liberation War Museum has been dedicated to raising global awareness of the 1971 genocide and honouring its victims through various initiatives. These include establishing memorials at mass killing sites and creating a national museum to preserve the genocide's history and legacy.⁶⁹ In 2014, the museum further expanded its efforts by founding the Centre for the Study of Genocide and Justice, which focuses on research, documentation, and education on genocide while also ensuring the commemoration of its victims. In 2021, the museum, with advocacy from Tawheed Noor, the son of a prominent Bangladeshi journalist, Serajuddin Hossain, who was killed during the genocide, petitioned the *Lemkin Institute*, *Genocide Watch*, and the *International Coalition of Sites of Conscience* to publicly recognise the Bangladesh Genocide. In 2022, each of these organisations released statements acknowledging their recognition and calling for international consensus on the events of 1971.⁷⁰

*“Conclusive research by internationally recognised genocide experts indicates that the nature, scale and organisation of the Pakistani Military operations demonstrate planning and intentional design by the Pakistani junta leadership and military command to destroy a substantial part of the Bengali ethnic and national group and a substantial part of the Bengali Hindu religious group”.*⁷¹

- Genocide Watch (2022)

*“Given the lack of a broad international recognition of this crime, the Lemkin Institute calls upon the international community, including the United Nations, to urgently recognise the Bengali genocide as a way to pay tribute to the victims and to hold perpetrators accountable. The Lemkin Institute also calls upon the international community to provide help and support to Bangladesh in its justice efforts, as well as to pressure Pakistan to work with Bangladesh in its search for truth and justice”.*⁷²

- Lemkin Institute (2022)

⁶⁸ Genocide Watch, 'Cabinet Approves Genocide Day' (Genocide Watch, 20 March, 2017)

<<https://www.genocidewatch.com/single-post/2017/03/20/cabinet-approves-genocide-day>> accessed 10 March, 2025.

⁶⁹ International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, 'Forgotten No More: Statement on the Bangladesh Genocide' (2022)

<<https://www.sitesofconscience.org/2022/03/forgotten-no-more-statement-on-the-bangladesh-genocide/>> accessed 13 March, 2025.

⁷⁰ Genocide Watch, 'Recognition of the Bangladesh Genocide of 1971' (2022)

<<https://www.genocidewatch.com/single-post/recognition-of-the-bangladesh-genocide-of-1971>> accessed 13 March, 2025;

International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, 'Forgotten No More: Statement on the Bangladesh Genocide' (2022)

<<https://www.sitesofconscience.org/2022/03/forgotten-no-more-statement-on-the-bangladesh-genocide/>> accessed 13 March, 2025;

Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention, 'Statement on Bangladesh Genocide of 1971' (2022)

<<https://www.lemkininstitute.com/statements-new-page/statement-on-bangladesh-genocide-of-1971>> accessed 13 March, 2025.

⁷¹ Genocide Watch, 'Recognition of the Bangladesh Genocide of 1971' (2022)

<<https://www.genocidewatch.com/single-post/recognition-of-the-bangladesh-genocide-of-1971>> accessed 13 March, 2025

⁷² Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention, 'Statement on Bangladesh Genocide of 1971' (2022)

<<https://www.lemkininstitute.com/statements-new-page/statement-on-bangladesh-genocide-of-1971>> accessed 13 March, 2025.

*“This lack of accountability undermines human rights for all and is particularly painful for Bengalis. Not only are they denied justice, but a central component of their history is being erased, making closure and more peaceful futures out of reach”.*⁷³

- International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (2022)

In September 2021, the European Bangladesh Forum (EBF), a Europe-based Bangladeshi diaspora organisation, and the Switzerland-based International Human Rights Commission Bangladesh convened at the Geneva Conference to chart a path toward recognising the 1971 Bangladesh Genocide.⁷⁴ Two months later, the EBF hosted another conference in The Hague, where participants called for international recognition and an unconditional apology from Pakistan.⁷⁵ In 2022, University College London’s Humanitarian Institute, in collaboration with the Bangladesh The High Commission in London and the Centre for Genocide Studies at the University of Dhaka held a symposium titled “The 1971 Bangladesh Genocide and a Call for International Recognition” to highlight the atrocities committed by Pakistani armed forces and the importance of international acknowledgement.⁷⁶

In October 2022, U.S. Congressman Steve Chabot submitted H.Res 1430, a resolution to the United States Congress to recognise the Bangladesh Genocide, including also documentation of the crimes against humanity and war crimes committed during that period. The resolution has not yet been considered by the House of Representatives. It was referred to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs for consideration but has sat idle ever since.

Six months later, in April 2023, the International Conference on Bangladesh Genocide Recognition held an event that brought together scholars, activists, and policymakers to address the atrocities committed during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War.⁷⁷

Most recently, in March 2024, Global Human Rights Defence submitted a document to the UN Human Rights Council titled “Genocide Recognition in Bangladesh: A Call for Global Acknowledgement and Practical Measures”, urging the international community to recognise the Bangladesh Genocide and to take practical steps toward justice and reconciliation.

⁷³ International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, ‘Forgotten No More: Statement on the Bangladesh Genocide’ (2022) <<https://www.sitesofconscience.org/2022/03/forgotten-no-more-statement-on-the-bangladesh-genocide/>> accessed 13 March, 2025.

⁷⁴ ‘Intl Conference Held in Geneva to Recognise Bangladesh Genocide’ *The Daily Star* (Geneva, 21 September, 2021) <<https://www.thedailystar.net/nrb/news/intl-conference-held-geneva-recognise-bangladesh-genocide-2188446>> accessed 18 February, 2025.

⁷⁵ ‘International Conference on Recognition of the 1971 Bangladesh Genocide’ *Diplomat Magazine* (The Hague, 8 December, 2021) <<https://diplomatmagazine.eu/2021/12/08/international-conference-on-recognition-of-the-1971-bangladesh-genocide/>> accessed 18 February, 2025.

⁷⁶ ‘The 1971 Bangladesh Genocide and a Call for International Recognition’ *UCL Institute for Risk and Disaster Reduction* (London, October 2022) <<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/risk-disaster-reduction/events/2022/oct/1971-bangladesh-genocide-and-call-international-recognition>> accessed 18 February 2025.

⁷⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Bangladesh, ‘IAGS Adopts Resolution Declaring 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War Atrocities as Genocide’ (Press Release, 24 April 2023) <https://mofa.portal.gov.bd/site/press_release/e3cbabc0-e4ad-424c-afe7-fbe503005a35> accessed 18 February 2025.

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