



OFFICE OF THE
HISTORIAN

FOREIGN RELATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES, 1969–1976, VOLUME XI, SOUTH ASIA CRISIS, 1971

11. Minutes of Washington Special Actions Group Meeting¹

Washington, March 26, 1971, 3:03–3:32 p.m.

SUBJECT

Pakistan

PARTICIPATION

[Page 24]

Chairman—Henry A. Kissinger

State

Mr. U. Alexis Johnson

Mr. Christopher Van Hollen

Defense

Mr. David Packard

Mr. James H. Noyes

CIA

Mr. Richard Helms

Mr. David Blee

JCS

Lt. Gen. Melvin Zais

Col. Frank W. Rhea

NSC Staff

Col. Richard T. Kennedy

Mr. Harold H. Saunders

Mr. Sam Hoskinson

Mr. Keith Guthrie

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

After reviewing the situation in East Pakistan, the WSAG agreed that the U.S. should continue its policy of non-involvement in the dispute between West and East Pakistan. In particular, the U.S. should avoid being placed in a position where it could be accused of having encouraged the break-up of Pakistan. The WSAG agreed that the U.S. should delay action on any request that might be forthcoming for recognition of an independent East Pakistani regime.

The WSAG agreed that the State Department should be responsible for monitoring developments in Pakistan on a day-to-day basis and for insuring that the White House is fully informed. The State Department should insure that adequate preparations have been made to evacuate U.S. citizens should that become necessary.

Mr. Helms: [1 line of source text not declassified] the situation in the area of the Consulate General is very quiet but that an enormous fire has been going on for hours in the old part of the city. Very few shots or explosions have been heard. Only two of the Consulate personnel had been able to get to the Consulate building by 6:30 p.m.

[1 line of source text not declassified] Mujibur Rahman was taken into custody at 1:00 p.m. by the martial law authorities. Two of his supporters were killed when the arrest took place. [2 lines of source text not declassified]

[1½ lines of source text not declassified] They say that Yahya's speech Friday² night has to be heard to appreciate the venom in his voice as he described Mujibur Rahman. The fat is in the fire. Islamabad confirms that Mujibur Rahman was successfully arrested.

It is unclear what caused the collapse of the talks.

Dr. Kissinger: Yesterday it looked as though an agreement were in sight.

Mr. Helms: Yes, an agreement appeared near on March 24. The breakdown may have been because of [Page 25]
Mujibur Rahman's insistence on the immediate lifting of martial law.

A clandestine radio broadcast has Mujibur Rahman declaring the independence of Bangla Desh. There are 20,000 loyal West Pakistani troops in East Pakistan. There are also 5,000 East Pakistani regulars and 13,000 East Pakistani paramilitary troops, but their loyalty is doubtful. We cannot confirm Indian press reports that a large number of Pakistani troops landed by ship. Six C-130s carrying troops were supposed to be going from Karachi to Dacca today. It will take them a long time, since they have to go via Ceylon.

There are 700 potential U.S. evacuees in Dacca and 60 or 70 in Chittagong. There has been no request for evacuation yet.

[1 paragraph (1½ lines of source text) not declassified]

Dr. Kissinger: I have no idea what caused the breakdown in talks. I was as much surprised as anyone else.

Mr. Van Hollen: One possible reason was that Yahya was unable to sell the settlement in West Pakistan. Another factor was the killing of twenty people and the resultant rise in tension.

Dr. Kissinger: Had the compromise³ [under discussion between Yahya and Mujibur Rahman]⁴ gone through, the next step toward independence couldn't have been prevented. That being the case, I don't understand why Mujibur Rahman wouldn't accept the compromise.

[omission in the source text] Will Bhutto become the dominant figure in the West?

Mr. Van Hollen: Possibly there will be a backlash in the West against Bhutto because it was he who forced Yahya to postpone the constituent assembly.

Dr. Kissinger: What do you think is going to happen?

Mr. Van Hollen: An effort will be made to prevent secession. However, the ability of the West Pakistani forces to maintain law and order in East Pakistan over the long run approaches zero. They may be able to control Dacca, but the Awami leadership will move to the countryside.

Dr. Kissinger: Do you think the Awami will organize a resistance?

[Page 26]

Mr. Van Hollen: They began to prepare for it last month.

Dr. Kissinger: If their leaders are arrested, can they continue?

Mr. Van Hollen: Yes, because of the tremendous popular sentiment behind them. After all, they won 160 out of 162 of the Assembly seats from East Pakistan in the election.

Dr. Kissinger: Then the prognosis is for civil war resulting eventually in independence or for independence fairly quickly.

Mr. Van Hollen: That's right.

Dr. Kissinger: Now that Yahya has taken the lead in opposing the secession, how will he be able to back off without fighting?

Mr. Van Hollen: It will be very difficult. He was on record as early as March 6 as opposing secession.

Mr. Johnson: The question is how long he can sustain this policy.

Dr. Kissinger: How long can he supply his forces in East Pakistan?

Mr. Van Hollen: It will be very difficult to do so.

Dr. Kissinger: Do his forces have stocks in East Pakistan?

Mr. Helms: No.

Mr. Van Hollen: There is one understrength division there. It has effective control of only a part of Dacca. It is surrounded by 75 million hostile Bengalis, who could easily be stirred up, particularly if Mujibur Rahman is arrested.

Dr. Kissinger: What is the prognosis for the next few days?

Mr. Johnson: Dawn comes in Dacca at 7:00 or 8:00 p.m. our time. We will know better in one more day how much bloodletting there is likely to be.

Dr. Kissinger: Do we all agree that there is nothing we can do except evacuate our citizens if that becomes necessary?

Mr. Johnson: As of this time, that is true.

Mr. Helms: Yes.

Mr. Packard: Yes.

Mr. Van Hollen: The British are no more inclined to do anything positive. After our earlier approach Heath sent an anodyne message to Yahya. At best that is what we might get again from the British.

Mr. Johnson: We have made arrangements with them to get the reports from their people in Dacca. We are maintaining a 24-hour watch at the Department.

Dr. Kissinger: I talked to the President briefly before lunch. His inclination is the same as everybody else's. He doesn't want to do anything. He doesn't want to be in the position where he can be accused of having encouraged the split-up of Pakistan. He does not favor a very active policy. This probably means that we would not undertake to warn Yahya against a civil war. [Page 27]

Mr. Johnson: I agree. If we do so, he can blame us for the breakup of his country.

Dr. Kissinger: What about recognition?

Mr. Johnson: We can drag our feet on that.

Mr. Van Hollen: We can defer a decision and lay low. A public request would make things more difficult. We should certainly not be the first to recognize.

Mr. Johnson: Our principal concern is the Americans who are there. Thus far, the disturbances have not taken any anti-American tone. The best thing for Americans to do right now is to stay home. We have a warden system, with radio communications. Our evacuation people have been in touch with Pan American and TWA to tell them that we might want some planes. They have also contacted the Pentagon, JCS, and CINCPAC about the possible use of military aircraft. If the airport is available, we can get our people out. We are going to ask Islamabad this afternoon about the possibility of getting West Pakistani troop support to get our people moved out.

Dr. Kissinger: What happens to the aid shipments that were diverted to West Pakistan?⁵ Are they on the way now?

Mr. Van Hollen: They have almost certainly reached Karachi.

Dr. Kissinger: The problem is that West Pakistan now owes East Pakistan for these shipments. This question will have to be settled later.

Mr. Van Hollen: We will probably have to make it up.

Dr. Kissinger: Are you sure we can't get into any problems domestically?

Mr. Van Hollen: No, we made arrangements [for compensation to East Pakistan].⁶

Dr. Kissinger: Our judgment on representations to Yahya [against trying to suppress the secession] is that they would serve to make a record for international and domestic opinion and that they would be money in the bank in East Pakistan. However, we don't need to make a gesture to domestic opinion, and we can't judge what [Page 28] international opinion is like. It might, however, help us in East Pakistan.

Mr. Van Hollen: In the present situation I don't think it would put much money in the bank. If we get a public appeal for recognition, we will have a problem.

Dr. Kissinger: What should we do in that case?

Mr. Van Hollen: Go slow. This will be a problem for our relations with Yahya.

Dr. Kissinger: I talked to the Indian Ambassador the other day. He said that the Indians preferred Pakistan to remain united because of the pressure an independent Bengal would create.

Mr. Van Hollen: I think all the principal countries (the Soviet Union, India, and the U.S.) feel that the integrity of Pakistan is in their interest.

Dr. Kissinger: China would be different.

Mr. Van Hollen: No, it wouldn't. The Indians have a problem because of the Bengali sentiment in India.

Dr. Kissinger: Secession might encourage communal separatism.

Mr. Van Hollen: Yes.

Dr. Kissinger: I take it we are not competing with India in East Pakistan. It doesn't matter if they steal a march on us.

Mr. Van Hollen: No, [it doesn't matter].

Dr. Kissinger: This seems to be a straightforward operational problem. We can let Alex [Johnson] handle it. There are no major interdepartmental differences. (to Johnson) I will keep in close touch with you.

Mr. Van Hollen: The situation in West Pakistan may possibly be worse from our standpoint than in East Pakistan because of the suspicion in the West that the U.S. is behind separatism.

Mr. Johnson: Certainly Bhutto won't discourage that impression.

Dr. Kissinger: Yahya doesn't believe that.

Mr. Van Hollen: He has been told enough times that we are not supporting separatism.

Dr. Kissinger: Is there more suspicion of us than of the British?

Mr. Van Hollen: Much more.

Dr. Kissinger: What would we stand to gain from the break-up of Pakistan?

Mr. Van Hollen: In the eyes of the Pakistanis we somehow want to weaken Pakistan.

Mr. Saunders: This is a case of smear politics being exploited for personal gain.

Dr. Kissinger: Should we send a message to Yahya on this?

Mr. Van Hollen: We have made this point to him again and again.

[Page 29]

Mr. Johnson: It would not be a good idea at this time. Yahya would think we were encouraging separatism.

Lt. Gen. Zais: We have looked into the possible availability of military planes in case commercial aircraft cannot be used because the East Pakistanis took their people out of the control tower.

Dr. Kissinger: That would make it difficult to evacuate by commercial aircraft.

Lt. Gen. Zais: It would certainly be a problem.

Dr. Kissinger: Can anyone land now?

Lt. Gen. Zais: It would be possible to land. We could get four C-141s with seats in Westpac. They could be launched out of Uttapau. From there it is a two-hour flight to Dacca. We would have control personnel on the first plane. After they got there, we could bring the evacuees out fast. We could get everyone in two roundtrips.

Dr. Kissinger: Doesn't this make it probable that evacuation will have to be by military aircraft?

Mr. Johnson: No commercial plane would go in under these conditions.

Dr. Kissinger: We will have to make our plans on that basis [i.e., using military aircraft].

Lt. Gen. Zais: The field is under the control of the West Pakistanis.

Mr. Johnson: Have we been in communication with their air force?

Col. Rhea: The last communication we had was three or four days ago.

Mr. Johnson: Can't the tower at Bangkok determine whether there is anyone at Dacca?

Col. Rhea: The Pakistani Air Force has people operating the tower. They said they might be able to handle six flights per day.

Mr. Johnson: All this suggests we might be able to use commercial aircraft if their communicators could give us some help.

Mr. Packard: That would be all right with me.

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1. Source: National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files (H-Files), Box H-115, WSAG Minutes, Originals, 1971. Top Secret;Nodis. No drafting information appears on the minutes. The meeting was held in the White House Situation Room. A briefer record of the meeting was prepared in OASD/ISA by James Noyes. (Washington National Records Center, OSD Files, FRC 330 76 0197, Box 74, Pakistan 092 (Jan-Jul) 1971)↵
 2. March 26.↵
 3. According to telegram 927 from Dacca, March 24, Mujibur and Yahya reached tentative agreement on March 23 on a solution that involved the immediate establishment of provincial governments, temporary continuation of the central government under Yahya, and the drafting of a constitution. The constitution would embody a division of power between the central government and the provinces in which central government control would be limited to defense, foreign affairs, and currency. (National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 625, Country Files, Middle East, Pakistan, Vol. IV, 1 Mar 71-15 May 71)↵
 4. Brackets in the source text.↵
 5. In response to a request from the Government of Pakistan, a decision was reached in Washington on March 1 to divert to West Pakistan 150,000 tons of wheat intended for disaster relief in East Pakistan. The request was triggered by grain shortages and rising prices in West Pakistan, and U.S. agreement to the request was conditioned upon the understanding that Pakistan would make commercial purchases before the end of 1971 to replace the grain that was diverted. (Memorandum from Saunders to Kissinger, March 1; National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 625, Country Files, Middle East, Pakistan, Vol. IV, 1 Mar 71-15 May 71)↵
 6. All brackets from this point are in the source text.↵