

## COMMENT 223 – *On the UN Genocide Remembrance Day*

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Seventy-three years ago, the United Nations (2020) approved its first human-rights treaty – also known as the Genocide convention, because it mainly concerns the crime of genocide. The 9<sup>th</sup> of December, the day of its original approval, has been celebrated since 2015 as 'the International Day of Commemoration and Dignity of the Victims of the Crime of Genocide and of the Prevention of this Crime'.

Remembering crimes and honouring victims is indeed crucial to prevent new instances of genocide. This is why SADF has repeatedly (Casaca, 2018) analysed the Bangladesh 1971 Genocide perpetrated by Pakistani armed forces (in cooperation with local Islamist fanatics).

SADF accompanied the determined and praiseworthy efforts by the Bangladeshi authorities and the civil society (South Asian Democratic Forum, 2015) to bring those responsible for the 1971 occurrences to justice. Such efforts included the reestablishment of the International Crimes Tribunal of Bangladesh – a move strongly resisted by powerful revisionist lobbies, some of which despicably covered their actions under claims of 'human rights' principles and actions.

Under a triparty agreement (Ahmed & Liton, 2021) signed in 1974, the 195 soldiers of the Pakistani army accused of genocide should have been tried in their country. However, no such thing occurred. In fact, the Pakistani authorities have as yet issued no apology for the 1971 genocide – much less have they taken any measures to prevent its repetition. Of course, the principle of No Impunity for crimes against humanity is necessary to prevent new instances. We therefore insist once more that all of those involved in the Bangladeshi genocide must be brought to justice.

The brutal will to erase existent human identities (or construct new ones) through the physical elimination of whole human groups lies in the centre of genocide. It is therefore imperative for the international community to watch most closely any attempt by any political force to downplay or even dehumanise any human group (based on ethnic, religious, or political grounds).

The 1971 Pakistani genocide in Bangladesh originated in the formal refusal by the Pakistani rulers to recognise the right of Bengalis to use their mother tongue – although, at the time, most of the country’s population was Bengali, with Bengal as the first language.

State policies geared at erasing identities by whole human groups are unfortunately common – and the disrespect for a group’s mother language is often the most obvious symbol. What is remarkable in this case is that the targeted group was the overwhelmingly largest within the victim country. More awkwardly even, the national language imposed, Urdu, was spoken as a native or a second tongue by only a small minority.

Before it became Pakistan’s national language, Urdu had been favoured by the British authorities in India since the XVIIth century (Rahman, 1996, as cited in Auer, 2014), replacing the Persian used by the Moghul Empire.<sup>1</sup>

The authorities of the new Pakistani country saw the issue of imposing Urdu as a national language as a pillar of the construction of the new ‘national identity’. Consequently, when the Pakistani military authorities engaged in genocide for imposing their views, they simultaneously targeted the non-Muslim population – most in particular, Hindus – and the Bengali-speaking intellectuals, regardless of their religion (the University of Alabama at Birmingham Institute for Human Rights Blog, 2017).

The supremacist ideology underlying the Bangladeshi genocide consists in a totalitarian reading of religion which has not fundamentally changed since 1971 and has been even reinforced during General Zia’s dictatorship. As SADF stressed in several analyses – specially in its policy brief regarding education in South Asia

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Indeed, so much is Urdu associated with Muslim culture in India, Pakistani nationalism in Pakistan, and Islam in both countries that it is often ignored that it was promoted by the British (who often called it Hindustani) in the nineteenth century.’ ([Rahman, 2013,p.32](#)) Rahman, p. 39, refers to the specific efforts by colonial rulers to impose Urdu in Bengal.

(South Asia Democratic Forum, 2017) – education in general, and linguistic formation in particular, have been cornerstone in Pakistan’s indoctrination.

Whereas Muslim religious schools have often been perceived as the main issue involved, Pakistan’s national educational policy is the true core of the problem:

‘When Pakistani students open a physics or biology textbook, it is sometimes unclear whether they are actually learning science or, instead, theology. The reason: every science textbook, published by a government-run textbook board in Pakistan, by law must contain in its first chapter how Allah made our world, as well as how Muslims and Pakistanis have created science’ (Pervez Hoodbhoy, in Dawn, quoted by South Asian Democratic Forum, 2017, p.15)

Another author in the same newspaper, Usmani Maheen, (South Asian Democratic Forum, 2017, p.15) classifies Pakistani policy as ‘the ideology of thought control’.

The situation has clearly deteriorated in the recent past. The previous relative freedom of press has been utterly dismantled through repeated threats and ever more often assassinations of journalists who dare defy the state (International Federation of Journalists, 2021). On the other hand, authorities decided to overstep existing provincial autonomies regarding education by imposing a national curriculum (Khan, 2021) in which, according to the Sindh education minister Syed Sardar Ali Shah, ‘federal government wants ‘English’ and ‘Urdu’ alone as the medium of instructions [erasing regional languages, as Sindhi]; (...) ‘we are also teaching religion but the SNC [Single National Curriculum] is talking too much of religion’ (...) and is of ‘low quality’.

Pakistan’s fanatic indoctrination policies have resulted in a staggering number of Jihadi organisations and their affiliations, as recently assessed by the US Congressional Research Service (Congressional Research Service, 2021). Pakistani military authorities use Jihadi outfits for both repressing regional or national identity tendencies within national borders and waging undeclared wars in Afghanistan and India. Yet Jihad is by nature a global endeavour, and Pakistani-based Jihadist movements are moved by global as well as Pakistani targets.

As the collective declaration on the Bangladesh genocide (Kabir, 2021) to be presented this year on the Remembrance Day recalls, Pakistan is as we speak

renewing the policy of smashing national identities in the country, namely as concerns the Baloch, Sindh, and Pashtun minorities.

The impending catastrophe in Afghanistan has had some wake-up impacts – however limited – within European institutions. The European Parliament recently approved a resolution where it acknowledges the pernicious impact of Pakistan’s promotion of Jihad in that country.

The resolution, in its point G, recalls that:

‘many members of the Taliban’s caretaker government are holders of passports issued by Pakistan; whereas this government heavily discriminates against the country’s ethnic and religious minorities’

In its point 46:

‘Recalls that for many years Pakistan provided safe havens for Taliban members, as well as assistance to their security forces; instructs the EEAS [European External Action Service] to convey to Pakistan’s leadership that it bears responsibility for security and stability in Afghanistan and that it must use its influence on the Taliban to achieve those aims, and to consider if there is reason to immediately review Pakistan’s eligibility for GSP+ status and the benefits that come with it in the light of current events;’

These European reflections, although welcome, are still quite far from addressing the whole unfolding drama, which started in colonial times and has worsened ever since. The simplistic geopolitical logic of preventing Russian expansion was once used to justify Pakistan’s support for Jihad in Afghanistan. However, that policy remained in a sort of automatic pilot fashion even when, as the aforementioned European resolution admits:

‘our collective failure in Afghanistan means a strategic advantage for non-Western powers and neighbouring countries, notably Pakistan, as well as China and, to a lesser extent, Russia’ (point 50)

The European Union’s respect for human rights should be understood as solidly anchored in European interests. Worse than the indifference regarding human rights in general external policies (and trade policies in particular) is to provide a special favourable trade statute, such as GSP+, to a country which excels at violating the very same human rights principles proclaimed in the rationale for the attribution of

this statute in the first place. This amounts to simply support human-rights violations. Unfortunately, this is what the European Union has done in Pakistan – with the devastating results we are now witnessing.

The unequivocal rebuttal of the Jihadi genocidal supremacist ideology underlying the Genocide in Bangladesh is the only way to avoid new occurrences of such crimes. The current Afghan tragedy constitutes an opportunity for the European Union to understand the need to change course and stop appeasing fundamental human-rights violations.

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