

From New Delhi by Ramtanu Maitra

Sheikh Mujib assassination revisited

New evidence may link foreign interests to protection of the killers of the late Bangladesh President.

South Asian nations lost a host of heads of state to assassins during the 1970s and '80s, when Cold War tension was at its peak. Most of the assassinations remain unsolved. Those which were declared officially solved, nailed the gunman without making any effort to widen the net. Political exigencies, the muscle of the international powers that be, and general apathy among the people, kept the investigations shallow.

One such assassination was that of Bangladesh's founder-President, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Sheikh Mujib, as he was widely known, was killed by a posse of "rebel" soldiers who invaded the Presidential palace with guns, tanks, and armored cars in the early hours of Aug. 15, 1975, to wipe out the near and dear ones of the President. It was a mass slaughter, conducted on India's Independence Day, ostensibly to send a message to Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who was a close political and personal friend of Sheikh Mujib. Years later, on Oct. 31, 1984, Mrs. Gandhi herself was assassinated by one of her bodyguards.

Although two disgruntled colonels and assorted Army men and bureaucrats were identified as likely killers of Sheikh Mujib (years later, two colonels made a habit of walking around the streets of Dhaka bragging about their "great deed"), the administrations that followed the assassination, led by Army generals, clearly protected these suspects and sent them abroad as employees in Bangladesh's foreign missions. While these facts are

well known to most Bangladeshis, it is not fully recognized that the assassination could have had a foreign input. Besides the disgruntled Army men and ambitious Army generals within Bangladesh, there could be others who would have liked to see Sheikh Mujib dead and gone.

The events that led up to the assassination indicate that then-U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, whose link to British intelligence is widely recognized, was becoming unhappy over Sheikh Mujib's close proximity to the Indian prime minister, and, indirectly, to the Soviet Union. A week before Sheikh Mujib was killed, Kissinger was there, and noted at a press conference that his differences with Sheikh Mujib were not resolved.

There was also the sudden appearance of an American reporter, allegedly linked to the CIA at the time, in Dhaka on the day of assassination.

No doubt, there were indications of a possible foreign element in the foul play. Moreover, it is generally the case that the assassination of a head of state does not occur in a vacuum. In this case, of course, the hands-on killers were shipped out and not brought back. No real investigation took place, and no one was nailed for killing Sheikh Mujib.

It might have stayed that way, as many other assassinations have been summarily swept under the rug. In this case, however, the events may not allow the Bangladeshis to forget the assassination completely.

Following the assassination of Sheikh Mujib, his Army chief, Maj.

Gen. Ziaur Rahman, came to power through a series of short-lived coups. President Ziaur Rahman was in turn assassinated in 1981 by an Army officer. The true story of that assassination, too, remains untold.

In the early '90s, the late Ziaur Rahman's wife, Begum Khaleda Zia, backed by her husband's friends, and by domestic anti-Mujib and anti-India factions, came to power, defeating Sheikh Hasina Wazed, one of the two daughters of Sheikh Mujib who had escaped assassination, because she was abroad at the time. The election was relatively fair. Sheikh Hasina had grown up to lead Sheikh Mujib's party, the Awami League, and became the leading politician of Bangladesh. Now, Sheikh Hasina is the prime minister, Begum Zia is her main opponent, and India-Bangladesh relations have begun to improve, after years of neglect.

There are reports that Begum Khaleda is organizing to topple Sheikh Hasina. But in the meantime, the Bangladesh government in Dhaka has reopened the Sheikh Mujib assassination case. It is obvious that President Ziaur Rahman's role in protecting the suspects will be questioned. But, there is yet another development.

It has been reported in a Bangladeshi newspaper that Begum Khaleda, while in Pakistan recently, met with two of the murder suspects who are now in Pakistan. The Pakistani government in Islamabad is in difficulty over this, because Pakistan does not want to admit that it is harboring the suspects and thus blocking Dhaka's investigation.

Dhaka has also made the accusation that while Begum Khaleda was in Pakistan as the opposition leader, she was treated as the head of state, and her itinerary within Pakistan was not fully disclosed.

All this leads one to believe that Islamabad has something to hide.