

Arnold Zeitlin Remembers 1971
Excerpt of Arnold Zeitlin's interview with *The Daily Star*

The Daily Star (DS): What was the world's reaction to the war?

Arnold Zeitlin (AZ): The liberation war was certainly a time when the world eyed on East Pakistan, but Pakistan made the mistake of forcing journalists to leave East Pakistan on March 26 cutting the world off from information.

The independence of East Pakistan was an obvious choice as the 1970 election results showed that Bangalis of East Pakistan voted for Awami League and West Pakistan for Pakistan People's Party (PPP). The lack of vision and maturity of the political leaders led to so many sufferings and killing of general people.

Some Punjabis, did not consider Bangalis as true Muslims and the mistrust, hate and discrimination gained ground from this belief.

DS: When did you first come to this country?

AZ: I came to this country exactly 35 years ago in December when the country was in emergency declared by Admiral Ahsan as Biharis and Bangalis were rioting on the streets.

DS: Where had you been on 25 March night?

AZ: As March was tensed the world eyed on East Pakistan and many journalists stayed at the Intercontinental Hotel. On the night of March 25 most of the journalists were sent to Karachi. I was in the house of Akhter Ispahani in Gulshan with Roedad Khan, the then information secretary, Kaiser Chowdhury, former private secretary of once foreign minister of Pakistan Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.

DS: What happened at that time?

AZ: I left a message at the hotel and one of the journalists warned me not to go back to hotel as all the journalists had been asked to check out and had been sent back to Karachi. And my friend said that there were flames and fire in front of the hotel. Mrs. Ispahani Akhter called General Omar who was the political officer of the Army and the General told her to break into the cantonment. So Roedad and Kaiser drove down the airport road but somebody had put a huge tree on it. Because one of the orders of Sheikh Mujib was to put a barrier on roads. So we drove back to Gulshan and spent the rest of the night on the roof. Next day was curfew; no communication no telephone. The day after, on March 27 they lifted the curfew. We drove into the town. We drove to the university and found bodies of students in front of a hall. Then I drove back to the hotel.

DS: What was the situation there? Were you the only journalist at the hotel?

AZ: No Simon Dring and my photographer colleague Michel Meron from AP were present at the hotel at that time. I went back to the hotel and walked to the reception. The man did not expect me. He asked me whether I was leaving or coming.

DS: How did you leave the country?

AZ: We then left for airport as one of the PIA planes was waiting for the few foreigners still here. Simon Dring, Michel Meron and I had to undergo an exhausting search at the airport. They searched everything, every piece of paper, film, clothes, and suitcase.

DS: You have said that you were the first journalist to send news outside East Pakistan of the massacre on March 25?

AZ: Yes, before Simon Dring. The plane stopped for refuelling and surprisingly they allowed me to get out of the plane. The first thing I did is call the AP stringer in Colombo, Manik De Silva and I dictated him the story. And that was the very first story sent out by anyone from Dhaka.

The Morning News of Pakistan took one line from my story that AP correspondent Arnold Zeitlin reported that 'Army is in full control in Dhaka'. Though there were lines in my report that people were leaving the country and students had been killed.

DS: What do you think was the role of common Bangali people during the liberation war?**AZ:** The Pakistani Army was operating without any intelligence as they were completely in the dark, as the general people did not cooperate with them with any information about the freedom fighters.

DS: What made the Pakistani Army kill the intellectuals of Bangladesh just before their official surrender?

AZ: Whether it was the Pakistani Army or Razakars killed the intellectuals is the question.

DS: Would you like to comment on the surrender ceremony?

AZ: One thing I would like to ask is that why there was no senior leader from Bangladesh present at the occasion? Symbolically this undermines the struggle for freedom of the Bangalis. The Bangalis struggle for freedom goes back to the British rule. The Bangalis struggle for independence started since the division of Bengal in 1905. And then it was a continuous process: the Lahore Resolution in 1940, the separation in 1947 the language movement in 1952 -- all led to freedom of Bangalis.

DS: How do you see liberated Bangladesh?

AZ: If I have to write a book on this I would name it liberation betrayed'.

DS: Can you give us an example why you are saying this?

AZ: The people of Bangladesh have not achieved the fruits of freedom. There is no institution developed for the people. Dhaka City has become a city of black money. A certain class takes the role of Pakistan's economic exploitation on the Bangalis in the free Bangladesh. Avik Sanwar Rahman is the staff correspondent of The Daily Star.