

Scenario 11

Ojhri Camp Episode (1988):

In *'the News London' of 6th May 2011*, a column written by Haroon Rashid titled [LAIKEN] has given a brief description of 'Ojhri Camp Episode'. In the column the theme concerning that tragedy was described as translated under:

'..... the only fact was that it (Ojhri Ammunition Depot) was set to fire by the Americans themselves because they (US authorities) did not want that the said ammunition should be passed on to the Afghan Mujahideen fighting with Soviets. The reason behind was that the America had secretly negotiated with the Soviets for their safe exit back. The tussle between Gen Ziaul Haq and America had taken start because Gen Zia wanted to establish a 'national government' in Afghanistan before Soviet's exit.

*Gen Ziaul Haq wanted so because he did not want 'civil war' in Afghanistan. In Pakistan, all political parties were with **PM Junejo who was then acting under US Influence (?)**. Geneva Accord was signed and a 'true Pakistan Loving' Gen Ziaul Haq was killed by Americans afterwards.'*

History available on record tells that the basic facts were otherwise. The episode is still alive in the newspapers and various research archives of libraries. The inquiry reports might be lying in the Cabinet Secretariat and a copy thereof in the defence ministry.

The history witnessed that who was the American stooge; Gen Ziaul Haq or PM M K Junejo. Who can imagine that in military regimes, a nominated prime minister could have control over Ammunition, Afghan *Mujahideen* (religious fighters), policy on Afghanistan, strategy of armed fighting with Soviets, decisions regarding ISI's relationships with Afghan fighting factions and above all with the Americans direct. The reality might be altogether different but the written (and secret) material at hand does not lead us to above paragraph of fiction.

On **10th April 1988** the military ammunition depot at Ojhri Camp Rawlapindi, blew up and unleashed an inferno that sent all sorts of rockets all over Rawalpindi and into neighbouring Islamabad. Lying there was about 10,000 tons ammunition, about 30,000 numbers of 107mm rockets, millions of bullets of various sizes, thousands of anti-tank mines, mortar bombs and hundreds of Stinger missiles which were bound to reach the fighting factions of *Mujahideen* contingents inside the Afghanistan territory.

After finalizing the Geneva Accord, America did not want that this ammunition should go to Afghan *Mujahideen* because they could pose two serious threats to firstly; for fleeing Soviet platoons from Afghanistan and secondly; the *Mujahideen* could abolish Najeebullah government in Afghanistan to establish Taliban's own rule. Both situations were not acceptable to America. **(Ref: Irfan Siddiqui in Daily 'Jang' dated 18th August 2011)**

It also led to a sequence of events that led to the ouster of the then Prime Minister Mohammed Khan Junejo and, depending on which conspiracy experts believe, to the death of the then President Gen Ziaul Haq. The US officials had blamed sabotage for the explosion. Others held that the said explosion was done by Pakistan army agents to cover up a pilferage of the weapons stocks, including Stinger missiles. The true cause of the explosion still remains a mystery.

In Pakistan, it was another dark period of the military rule and of militant *jihadism* acceptable to the Americans against a back drop of Soviet Russia's attack on Afghanistan on 25th

December 1979. Gen Ziaul Haq was pleasing the West particularly America and its allies were supporting the *Mujahideen* groups. Then Osama Bin Laden was America's most favourite freedom fighter who was leading the Western inspired Jihad against the Soviets on the Afghanistan soil. Billions of dollars were pouring in for Pakistani military to manage this Jihad in Afghanistan whereas millions of dollars were also spent on providing weapons and logistical support for the *Mujahid* (religious fighter) groups through Gen Ziaul Haq's team.

Most of this American and British weaponry were dumped at Ojhri, a camp near the centre of Rawalpindi city which was directly controlled by the ISI. The ISI's cell which used to control the Afghan War under direct command of one Gen Akhtar Abdul Rehman, was not even answerable to the GHQ's routine channels of command nor its officers but directly to one Gen Ziaul Haq only.

One **Tariq Mehmood**, a former journalist of '**The Frontier Post**' had recalled this episode in this way:

'The people of Rawalpindi and Islamabad did not know the reason of missiles attack. American stinger missiles which had been given for fighting in Afghanistan had found their way into the hands of the Iranians. They were stored in Ojhri dump, and it was pretty obvious that those looking after the dump had sold them on to the Iranians, pocketing the money. A team of American naval investigators was in mid-flight, on its way to Ojhri to investigate. They entered Pakistani airspace, when the dump was blown up.'

Two days after the explosions at Ojhri, Gen Ziaul Haq had compared what happened to the disasters at Russia's Chrenobyl and India's Bhopal. He refused to admit that Ojhri was a transit dump where weapons were destined for Afghanistan. The deed was blamed on foreign agents refuting that it was an insider's job.'

Allegations of foreign hand could not hold ground because '*stinger missiles do not just go off, they had to be primed. Army ammunition dumps, are built in such a manner that an explosion should not affect the other. But here were truckloads of the stuff over ground, and much more underground, all going off.*' By the time the Americans arrived, 1000 people were dead as per available reports of local Red Cross office. Officially announced figure of the death toll was 30 and prominent among those killed was a sitting Federal Minister Khaqan Abbasi whose car was hit by a flying missile while he was on his way to Murree, his hometown.

The '**New York Times**' of 17th April 1988 had told that: '*.... the explosion killed at least 93 people and wounded about 1100 people.*' Credibility could not be assigned to any agency in respect of figures.

The people of Pakistan, media and the foreign correspondents were never told that what kind of ammunition was dumped there in Ojhri and in what quantity. It remained a secret between Gen Ziaul Haq and Gen Akhtar Abdul Rehman, the then in-charge of Afghan War against the Soviets but '**The Dawn**' of **11th April 2008** had revealed that:

'Ojhri Camp had about 30,000 rockets, millions of rounds of ammunition, vast number of mines, anti-aircraft Stinger missiles, anti-tank missiles, multiple-barrel rocket launchers and mortars worth \$100 million in store at the time of blasts that destroyed all records and most of the weapons thus making it anyone to check the stocks.'

The fact remains that there were so many unexploded bombs and missiles left behind and the army had no idea how to defuse them. Trial and error method was applied but each error cost the life of an army officer. About 1000 more died in this process alone and there remained much confusion around. On 17th February 2007 two workers died in Rawalpindi from unexploded ammunitions from Ojhri dump. In Tariq Mehmood's words: '*... reminding about callousness of the rulers who stored so much weapons in side a major city like Rawalpindi, and then those who colluded to blow it up.*'

One of the fallouts of Ojhri episode was that Gen Ziaul Haq had lost all his credibility in Pakistan and in America. That is why he later planned to eliminate him and at last succeeded on 17th August the same year when the two above mentioned Generals, Ziaul Haq & Akhtar Abdul Rehman, along with other 17 had lost their lives in a plane crash. Ojhri event was a crime against humanity.

Mohammad Khan Junejo, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, had displayed his concern with the then President and Army ruler Gen Ziaul Haq over the issue and demanded punishment for the army officers and Generals who were deemed responsible for the catastrophe while Gen Ziaul Haq (who kept portfolio of the Army Chief even after lifting of the martial law by extending his own term of office) could not afford to see an interference in his domain.

PM Mohammad Khan Junejo had openly blamed Gen Akhtar Abdul Rahman, because he was sure of the fact that the camp had been blown up deliberately just before the arrival of a US Defence Audit team, to cover up the fact that some Stinger missiles had been sold off to other countries, most probably to Iran.

In the last, PM Junejo had also managed to get nominated Gen Aslam Beg as Army Chief as per seniority whereas Gen Ziaul Haq wanted to post his second in command as the next Army Chief.

The final showdown took place on 29th May 1988. Three days earlier the PM had asked his Principal Secretary to take the 'fact finding report' regarding Ojhri blasts with him on his foreign tour to Seoul and Manila. This report was compiled by a committee of senior members of the Parliament who were allocated this job by the PM Secretariat. The report was shocking. On his way back from Manila PM Junejo had approved the given recommendations and signed by virtue of which the top army Generals had to face the consequences including court martial. The Military Secretary accompanying the Prime Minister, somehow, had managed to communicate the report's final outcome to Gen Ziaul Haq through pilot's wireless system from the cockpit.

Gen Ziaul Haq immediately planned to get rid of his PM, Mr Junejo and had called a press conference in the Army House Rawalpindi. The number one team of correspondents was present at the Islamabad Airport to receive the PM and were hoping de-briefing by the PM after his foreign tour. But on an urgent call from the Press Secretary of Army House, the number two team of correspondents had to attend Gen Ziaul Haq's press conference in which he, under article 58(2)(B) of the amended constitution, dismissed PM Junejo's government and dissolved the national and provincial assemblies. In sacking Prime Minister M K Junejo, Gen Ziaul Haq had made the following allegations against the Junejo government:

- The law and order in the country had broken down to an alarming extent resulting in tragic loss of human lives.
- The life, property, honour, safety and security of the citizens of Pakistan were rendered totally unsafe.
- The integrity and ideology of Pakistan have been seriously endangered and doubts generated in this regard.
- The president's conscience always pricked that he had not fulfilled his promises regarding the enforcement of Islam made to the people in the referendum of 1984.
- The public morality had deteriorated to an unprecedented level.
- A situation had arisen in which the government of the federation cannot be carried on in accordance with provisions of the constitution necessitating an appeal to the election.

So when PM Junejo came out of his plane, he was no more Prime Minister. No cabinet minister, none of the three force's Chiefs, no government officer or no media correspondent was there to welcome him. He had to leave the Airport in a private car to his home.

An essay appeared in **'The News' on 14th April 1998** titled '*Ojhri disaster saw end of Junejo govt:*' written by **Kamal Siddiqi** described that:

'The government of prime minister Muhammad Khan Junejo, installed by General Ziaul Haq, was dismissed shortly after the Ojhri camp blasts and the newspaper says that an inquiry report by Junejo's government was the reason for the dismissal.'

The **'Indian Express'** of the same day had given details as:

[Two committees were formed by the government to look into the affair. The first was the military committee headed by a serving General. This committee's findings and recommendations were ignored since it called for the removal of Gen Zia's right hand man, Gen Akhtar Abdul Rehman, along with other senior military officials. Its report, presented within one week of the incident, was rejected.

Another more interesting committee was the one set up by Prime Minister Muhammad Khan Junejo. This was a political committee headed by a Cabinet minister and comprising four federal ministers. Controversy surrounded the findings of this committee. The members could not reach a consensus on who was responsible for the Ojhri tragedy. In his remarks, the head of the committee, Aslam Khattak (probably the Minister for Interior then) had concluded, 'No one was responsible. It was an act of Allah.'

However, the minister of state for defence, Rana Naeem Mehmood, a hawk in the Junejo cabinet and a die hard proponent of democracy, prepared a non paper which was signed by three of the five members of the political inquiry committee. The paper recommended the court martial of senior Generals and laid the blame on Gen Akhtar Abdul Rehman. 'Many believe that this paper cost Junejo his government.'

The newspaper report also gives another interesting angle: an interview with General Hamid Gul, a senior member of the Army Command at the time. Gul says: Before the blast, the first draft of the accord said both the Soviets and the Americans would stop arms supplies to Afghanistan. But after Ojhri, the Americans accepted negative symmetry, agreeing that both sides would continue with their supplies.']

BBC of 10th April 2008 had narrated (www.bbc.co.uk) that there had been fire and periodical blasts in the half burnt ammunition heaps at Ojhri. In the above report of 'The Indian Express', the first Military Committee was headed by a serving General named Lt Gen Imranullah Khan. The report with recommendations of Court Martial against the then In-charge Afghan Operations (Gen Akhtar Abdul Rehman) was sent to the President's Secretariat where it was shelved like so many other important files wanting attention.

During Gen Musharraf's rule some opposition members called for making these reports public but the then PML(Q) government took the position that it would not be '*in the larger national interest*'. Gen Musharraf did not want to tarnish the image of their Army colleagues. Irony of the fate was that after 1988, the PPP and the PML(N) got power and mandate to rule for two terms each consecutively but none of them opted to declare these two reports open.

Although there exists some pointers in the Charter of Democracy, signed in 2006 at London by the PPP and PML(N), which could be pursued to make such reports public, but neither the President Zardari nor the Opposition Leader Nawaz Sharif dared to take such a bold step. Interestingly, both the major political parties had made demands while being in the opposition but none of them bothered to do anything about it when they came to power.

Contrarily, **Michael R Gordon** of the **'New York Times'** got published an official version of the State Defence Department **on 17th April 1988** by giving a categorical version that:

'One week after a major explosion at a Pakistani ammunition dump, Defence Department officials say that it was sabotage but Pakistani leaders have made contradictory comments about the blast. At first, Gen Ziaul Haq called the explosion

"an extraordinary accident," then on Friday, Gen Ziaul Haq said the blast was the result of sabotage.

Defence Department officials say they believe that the blast was the result of sabotage because of the circumstances surrounding the explosion. The explosion appeared to be part of a pattern of attacks last weekend, including an attempted rocket attack on an oil storage installation in Peshawar that didn't work; a fire at an ordnance factory in Lahore and a bomb that was discovered and defused in Islamabad.

But the State Department officials insist on understanding that the significance of the explosion is exaggerated.'

It may be the case that the then American government did not want to make Gen Ziaul Haq angry in the backdrop of on going Afghan War against Soviet infiltration but the then ISI Chief Gen Hamid Gul is alive to give testimony in this respect.

Imran Ali Teepu gives some details of explanations given by Gen Hamid Gul, the then ISI Chief's explicit interview in '**The Dawn' of 10th April 2010** by saying:

'Even Gen Hamid Gul, who was then heading the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), is amazed that the facility run by the agency for funnelling US-supplied arms to the Mujahideen fighting the Soviet army in Afghanistan, was located in a densely populated area of Rawalpindi but then it was a 'strategic compulsion' to hide its weapons stockpiles from Russia's spy satellites.

Gen Hamid Gul categorically stated that: 'It is wrong to say that the tragedy occurred because the Americans were due to inspect the ammunition depot. The Americans always conducted inspections. We had nothing to hide from them. The archives room of the facility was not damaged, claiming that it provided ample proof of the military establishment's innocence.'

From the above narrations it becomes crystal clear that our political and military dictatorship never wanted to share cogent facts of our history with the people they govern. It amounts to distrust in the people and reflects lack of confidence in our successive rulers from whichever background they belonged.

Let us pray that our coming leaders should come up with devotion and truthfulness for the sake of their nationalism at least.