

This week in history: November 9-15

8 November 2020

25 years ago: Nigerian junta hangs nine oppositionists

On November 10, 1995, nine members of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) were executed by the Nigerian military dictatorship of General Sani Abacha.

The victims, including playwright and author Ken Saro-Wiwa, were convicted on trumped-up charges by a secret military tribunal on October 31. The junta upheld their sentences November 8 and ordered the executions to be carried out immediately to forestall further protests.

The execution was particularly grisly, as the makeshift gallows did not function properly and no less than five attempts were made before the blindfolded men were put to death. The bodies were taken to a local cemetery surrounded by tanks and soldiers, preventing relatives and friends of the victims from paying their last respects.

Saro-Wiwa and his companions came into conflict with the military dictatorship and the giant oil monopolies which bankrolled its operations. Nigeria was the fifth largest oil exporter at the time, with its biggest customer the United States, which purchased 40 percent of Nigeria's output.

Both Shell and Chevron had extensive oil exploration operations in the Niger Delta region, where the 500,000 Ogonis live. Saro-Wiwa and his companions set up MOSOP in opposition to the tribal chiefs, puppets of the junta, to demand a greater share of the oil revenue for the Ogoni people, and restoration of agricultural land laid waste by the oil companies.

The nine prisoners were indicted for the 1994 murder of four pro-junta chiefs, who were lynched by Ogoni youth. None of the defendants were actually present at those killings—they were punished for their political activities. In the final weeks before the executions, worldwide protests failed to budge the junta. Royal Dutch/Shell rebuffed pleas from Amnesty International and other human rights organizations to pressure the junta, declaring it had “no right to interfere with the legal processes of a sovereign state such as Nigeria.”

50 years ago: Cyclone kills a half million in East Pakistan

On November 11, 1970, a major tropical storm known as the Bhola Cyclone hit East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) causing a massive loss of human life. At least 500,000 people were killed as a result of the storm, which brought about devastating floods to the

densely populated low-lying Ganges River delta. The Bhola Cyclone is the deadliest tropical cyclone in recorded history and the fifth deadliest of all recorded natural disasters.

The cyclone formed in the Bay of Bengal several days before it made landfall in East Pakistan as a Category 4 tropical cyclone. The highest winds recorded from the storm reached 150 mph. When it made landfall, the cyclone caused a 33-foot-high storm surge that swallowed everything and everyone in its path, including farms, ships, buildings, and entire villages.

The impacted areas were utterly devastated by the storm. The total estimated damage was about \$86.4 million, or \$579.6 million in 2020 dollars—a figure that underscores the extreme poverty of the population. An estimated 85 percent of homes were destroyed in the Ganges delta area. At least 9,000 fishing boats were lost and 280,000 cattle killed. Some smaller islands hit lost all human life. Some areas of India were also hit by the storm, causing death and damages to agriculture and homes. A 5,500-ton Indian freighter was sunk, drowning its entire 50-man crew.

Immense social devastation followed the storm. Having lost virtually all farming, fishing, and livestock, the surviving population struggled to sustain itself. Three months after the storm, 75 percent of the population continued to rely on food aid.

The cyclone heightened the political crisis that was already well underway in East Pakistan. In 1969, a mass uprising of workers and students had forced the resignation of the dictator President Ayub Khan who was replaced by his commander-in-chief of the army, General Yahya Khan, but the Pakistani government was both incapable and unwilling to provide the assistance the region's poor desperately needed.

Abetted by Pakistan's bitter rival India, Bengali nationalists channeled the social opposition into an independence from Pakistan. About a month after the cyclone, on December 7, Pakistan's first general election since independence was held, resulting in a major victory for the Bengali nationalist Awami League. However, Yahya Khan ignored the result of the vote and refused to allow the Awami League to form a government.

As the crisis developed over the next few months, East Pakistan saw mass eruptions of popular support for independence from West Pakistan. Looking to suppress the mass uprisings, Yahya Khan ordered mass killings of supporters of Bengali independence on March 25, 1971. The massacres deepened the Bangladesh war for independence, and set the stage for Indian entrance into the conflict and the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971.

This culminated in Pakistan's defeat and the creation of Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries on the planet. It joined five other successor states of British imperialism on the subcontinent: India, Pakistan, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Nepal, and

75 years ago: Vietnamese Stalinists dissolve party to curry favor with imperialist powers

On November 11, 1945, the Vietnamese Stalinists voluntarily dissolved their Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), in order to win the support of right-wing nationalist forces that opposed the occupation of the north of the country by the Chinese Kuomintang, and to lay the grounds for a sordid deal with French imperialism.

In a circular issued to justify the liquidation, the Stalinists stated that they were dissolving the party “in order to destroy all misunderstanding, domestic and foreign, which can hinder the liberation of our country.” The rank-and-file membership was instructed that if they wished to “continue theoretical studies,” they could join the Indochina Association of Marxist Studies.

The dissolution occurred amid immense upheaval. The surrender of the previous Japanese occupiers of Vietnam in the Second World War, in August 1945, had sparked a mass movement against the reintroduction of colonial rule, culminating in a revolution.

The Stalinists, led by Ho Chi Minh, responded by seeking to suppress the movement, including within their own rank-and-file. They had developed extensive dealings with American spies and military officers during the war against Japan. Ho Chi Minh decided to collaborate with the American plan for the entry of a Chinese Kuomintang army into the north of Vietnam, and the formation of a de facto British-French administration in the south.

To cement their dealings with the imperialists, the Stalinists ordered the brutal suppression of the substantial Vietnamese Trotskyist movement, which fought for a revolutionary socialist perspective. This failed to appease the imperialist powers. The Stalinists were repaid for their treachery by a major offensive in October of British and French imperialist forces, aimed at exterminating the Viet Minh independence movement that the ICP led.

It was in response to this onslaught that Ho Chi Minh and the Stalinists liquidated the Communist Party and forged greater ties with right-wing nationalist organizations. In November, they would begin negotiations with the French Commissioner for Tonkin, Jean Sainteny. These talks culminated in a March, 1946 accord between the Stalinists and the French government, which stated that the “Vietnamese Republic” would remain part of the French union and would “welcome amicably the French army.”

The Stalinist betrayals were based upon the two-stage theory of revolution, which rejected the fight for socialist policies in countries of belated capitalist development, and instead sought alliances with sections of the national ruling elite. They served to isolate the Vietnamese working class from the emerging revolutionary upheavals of workers around the world.

100 years: Armenian capital of Yerevan evacuated

On November 15, 1920, the capital of the Republic of Armenia, Yerevan, was evacuated at the approach of Turkish Nationalist troops from the south. Press reports stated that the Armenian army had withdrawn from the city, having exhausted its ammunition, and that roads out of the city were clogged with refugees, over 100,000 of whom had fled Armenia for neighboring Georgia.

The Armenians had abandoned the strategic city of Kars on October 30 to a Turkish advance. Georgian troops, with the permission of Armenia, had occupied a neutral zone between the two countries to prevent it from falling into Turkish hands.

Turkish and Armenian forces had been skirmishing since September along the border. The Turkish nationalist forces under the command of Kemal Ataturk were attempting to regain territory that had been taken from the Ottoman Empire in the 1870s by the Russian tsarist regime.

The Republic of Armenia called for the French and British imperialists to send troops, but only a small number of Greek troops had come to Armenia’s aid. Armenia was forced to sue for peace, and a ceasefire went into effect on November 18. On December 1, a peace treaty was concluded between Armenia and Turkey.

But by then, the capitalist Republic of Armenia, founded in 1918, had already come to an end. Following a Bolshevik-led uprising in northern Armenia a few days after the cease-fire with the Turks, the Red 11th Army invaded Armenia from Soviet Azerbaijan. By November 30, power was in the hands of a Bolshevik revolutionary committee. On December 1, the Red Army entered Yerevan and a Soviet Republic of Armenia was declared.



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