

MILITARY OPERATIONS in Bangladesh

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THE military operations in Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan, which took place during the period 3-16 December 1971, were the culmination of a violent storm that had brewed in the subcontinent for nine months; but the genesis of that storm goes back much further.

Pakistan came into being as a result of the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 when the British

left. It comprised a western and an eastern portion separated by a long stretch of Indian territory. Religion was the basis for the division between India and Pakistan. It was expected that religion would provide the cement to integrate the two parts of Pakistan, however widely separated. However, beneath the veneer of religious unity there were fundamental differences between the peoples of the two parts.

The population of the west is of a composite, multilingual character, with distinctive strains accrued from the plains of Punjab, the desert of Sind, the mountains of Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Province. Historically, this area is oriented toward the Middle East and Central Asia. The east is strikingly homogeneous. Its Bengali culture is unified through a language derived from Sanskrit, and this area is oriented primarily to the Indian mainland.

Limited Democracy

Until 1958, when Field Marshal Mohammed Ayub Khan took over, instability marred Pakistan's political life. After government by martial law for four years, a system of limited democracy was introduced. However, this was abrogated in 1969 when Major General Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan took over. This turn of affairs did not contribute to integration between the two parts of the country. The eastern portion, with a pronounced liberal tradition, smarted with discontent. This was aggravated by the economic disparity it suffered in comparison to the west wing of the country.

General Yahya Khan promised political reforms and a new constitution. Elections were held in December 1970. Sheik Mujibur Rahman, the East Bengal leader, emerged from these elections with an absolute majority. Earlier, he had been asking for autonomy for the east. The leaders in the west thought this might lead to Pakistan's dismemberment. Negotiations were begun to reconcile the differing viewpoints. But these failed and Mujibur Rahman declared independence. Then, in a dramatic sweep, Pakistan's armed forces cracked down on East Bengal on 24 March 1971.

Geographically, the two parts of Pakistan were separated by 920 miles of Indian territory. Land communications between them were never permitted. Furthermore, India also severed air communications shortly prior to the operations. Normal links were by air, flying around the subcontinent with a stopover at Ceylon and by sea. This latter involved a distance of 3000 miles between Karachi and Dacca.

Among the pertinent factors was the 1400-mile frontier with India. A good part of this was without natural barriers. The seacoast of East Bengal, along with India's West Bengal, is a delta. One of the biggest in the world, most of this is marshy and has few ports. Only a small sector in the east would lend itself to amphibious operations. The northern hills receive some of the world's heaviest rains, giving rise to devastating floods. Rivers, riverine beds and swamps are formidable natural obstacles to mobility. On the whole, the soil is soft and fit only for light tanks. Trafficability decreases from north to south. Rainfall occurs mostly between May and September. The winter months are dry and, therefore, suitable for operations.

East Bengal is one of the most thickly populated parts of the world. A population of 75 million in an area of 55,000 square miles yields a density of 1300 people per square mile. Most live in rural areas. Large cities and industrial centers are few.

Pakistan normally kept in the east one or two infantry divisions, a battalion of tanks, an air force squadron, and a few thousand militia. This force was controlled by the high command in the west. Prior to the crackdown, these military elements had been augmented. Then in March 1971, operating from fortified cantonments, the army swiftly captured most of the

major towns. Special efforts were made to protect communications, with particular emphasis on the Chittagong port and airfields. Heavy bombing raids were employed for interdiction, as well as to eliminate pockets of resistance.

In the course of the operations, many of the political and intellectual leaders of East Bengal became casualties or were captured. By the time the monsoons began, the Pakistani forces had acquired a dominant position in the country. They were clearly in control of the major urban centers but not the rural areas. Operations were slowed during the monsoons. Attempts were made to pacify the people but without much success.

The militants of the population began organized resistance, thus giving rise to the Mukti Bahini, or Liberation Army. The hard core of this organization was provided by the regulars known as East Pakistan Rifles, well-trained militia known as the East Bengal Regiment, and the police. Supplementing these were students, party cadres, and dissidents of one kind or another. They had few arms—mostly rifles of World War II vintage. But, as time passed, they looted the Pakistani armories and also acquired weapons from the Indian side of the border. Headed by Colonel M. A. G. Osmany, the Bengali officers formerly of the Pakistani forces initiated training, improved organization and launched guerrilla warfare.

A long border which could not be sealed, sanctuaries on the Indian side, and the rural, forested or riverine terrain provided ideal conditions for guerrilla operations. Numerous road and rail bridges were put out of action, river communications were disrupted, and raids on Pakistani strongholds were carried out. The monsoons,

while they were a handicap to the Pakistani forces, were a boon for the guerrillas.

As the armed conflict expanded, the bulk of the population fled terror-stricken. Some left their homes for safer places within the country, and others crossed into India. For India, these refugees involved administrative and financial burdens, and they also posed security problems in an area already marred by insurgency.

Tension Mounts

By the end of November 1971, the powder keg in the subcontinent's cockpit was ripe for explosion. India had 10 million refugees on its hands, sabotage had been committed in some of its adjoining areas, and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's diplomatic efforts to ensure the return of the refugees under a climate of peace had failed. Pakistani forces had acquired the air of an army of occupation. The people of East Bengal were in silent or open rebellion, with Mukti Bahini in control of a few border zones and active practically all over the country. Tension mounted all along the border with Indian and Pakistani forces exchanging fire at numerous points. In fact, one week before the outbreak of war on 3 December, tank and artillery duels had taken place.

Pakistan had the equivalent of four infantry divisions in East Bengal. In addition, it had about 40 companies of paramilitary formations comprising Desert Rangers, the East Pakistan Civil Armed Force, and the Industrial Security Force. Armor consisted of a little over one battalion of *PT76*, *M24 Chaffee* and *M41 Walker Bulldog* light tanks besides a few personnel carriers. There were six battalions of artillery with 105-millimeter and 130-millimeter guns and many

mortar batteries. There was one squadron of aircraft. Over 150 gunboats plied the rivers. One submarine, out of a total of four in the Pakistani Navy, operated in the Bay of Bengal.

The ground forces were deployed under five divisional headquarters which were located at Dacca, Comilla, Jessore and Nator. These centers also constituted four out of the seven cantonments, the others being at Rangpur, Sylhet and Faujdar Hat. These seven cantonments formed the Pakistani strongholds. Located along the periphery of the land border with India, they were to be the outermost line of defense. From them, troops had fanned out into the adjacent areas. Shellproof bunkers, deep minefields and antitank ditches were carefully prepared, while supplies of food were stocked for a long siege. Intercommunication between these centers was reasonably good, with the hub at Dacca where Lieutenant General A. K. Niazi, the overall commander, had his base.

A second line of defense lay deeper into the country. This was based on the river complex of the Brahmaputra, Ganges, Jamuna, Padma, Meghna and their tributaries. All major bridges were kept ready to be blown up in an emergency. Lastly, there was the defense of Dacca within the riverine triangle where pillboxes had been constructed at a number of points.

India fielded around eight divisions. Up to two battalions of light tanks, mostly the *AMX13* and *PT76*, constituted the armor. In addition, there was a substantial number of armored carriers. The artillery was comprised of 25-pounders, 100-millimeter and 130-millimeter guns. Between eight and 10 squadrons of the air force were placed on alert. These had *SU7s* and *Hunters* in attack, ground support or

interdiction roles, and *MIG21s* and *Gnats* in interceptor roles. Besides, there was a battalion of paratroopers. In the Bay of Bengal was a carrier force built around the *Vikrant*, a 16,000-ton aircraft carrier, equipped with *Sea Hawk* attack aircraft and *Alize* maritime patrolers.

Strong Strike Force

The Mukti Bahini had by now developed a strength of over 70,000. About one-third of this formed a hard-hitting strike force with small arms, light artillery and armed riverine craft at its disposal. The members had an intimate knowledge of the terrain. Intelligence was excellent, particularly with respect to gaps in the Pakistani defenses. After hostilities commenced, the Mukti Bahini came under Indian command and was treated as a valuable ally.

The Indian Regular Army was further assisted by the Indian Security Force, a paramilitary formation with long experience in operations in this region.

Indian ground forces were under the overall command of Lieutenant General J. S. Arora who was headquartered at Calcutta. Under him were three corps commanders (west, north and east), and also the commander of Mukti Bahini. An air marshal commanded the air element from Shillong. The naval commander headquartered at Vizagapatam on the east coast of India.

The Indian command made sure that East Pakistan was sealed off from the nation's nerve center in West Pakistan. Pakistani communication lines were cut off by the air force and by the navy which operated extensively in the Arabian Sea and in the Bay of Bengal. India also kept an eye on the Himalayan frontier where nor-

mally around 150,000 Chinese troops are deployed. This was prudent in view of how, on an earlier occasion, Peking had threatened to intervene. Some troops were given special static defensive roles in the more vulnerable areas close to the border against the possibility of an unforeseen attack by the Pakistani Army. Among the more important installations so protected was the Calcutta industrial belt.

Air and Naval Action

The Indian assault began on the morning of 4 December with almost simultaneous participation of the air, naval and surface elements. In the course of about nine hours, the air force flew about 200 sorties. Its immediate targets were the Pakistani aircraft, all of which were destroyed on the ground except for three *Sabre* jets which were taken care of a day later. In the course of the raids, a good many East Bengal airfields were put out of action, notably those at Jessore, Lalmanir Hat and Akhaura. Thus, within 48 hours of the commencement of hostilities, India established air supremacy which remained unchallenged throughout the war.

Thereafter, the air force began pounding selected targets, to include the Chittagong port and the Dacca defense complex. Brigade headquarters, barracks, officers messes, bunkers and garrison positions, all of which served as static strongholds, were bombed and strafed. At the same time, the air force supported the surface forces, facilitating ground movement by speedy destruction of obstacles. It also destroyed a number of bridges to prevent the retreat of Pakistani forces in the direction of the capital or toward the sea escape route. It was the bombing of the Government House in Dacca that forced the civilian

governor of East Bengal to resign two days before military capitulation.

A little after midnight, the Indian Navy sank the 1600-ton Pakistani submarine *Ghazi* off Visakhapatnam which is India's largest naval base. The submarine apparently was poised for a sneak attack, but instead the Indian Navy established a complete naval blockade of the East Bengal coast. On the morning of 4 December, the carrier *Vikrant* stood off Cox's Bazar. In the first strike, a number of *Sea Hawk* jets scrambled off into the East Bengal territory. Their primary targets were airfields, hangars, gun positions, oil dumps and seacraft. Chittagong came in for attack next. Here, the raiders met with heavy anti-aircraft fire which was silenced shortly.

While the *Sea Hawks* raided during the day, the *Alizes* kept up the pressure during the night. The carrier-borne aircraft also bombed the inland ports of Khulna and Mangla, from where the Pakistani troops were seen to be retreating in panic. On 14 December, the Indian troops landed at Cox's Bazar. This constituted the war's only amphibious operation and, by then, the end was in sight.

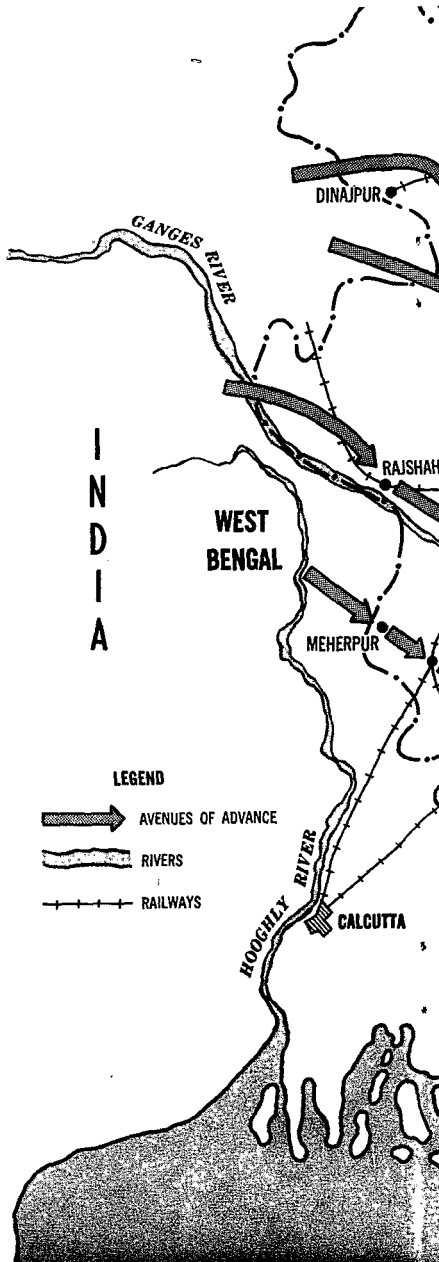
The Indian ground forces moved into East Bengal from all directions. The operations might be viewed as taking place in four sectors which reflected the riverine configuration—the western, south of the Ganges-Padma line; the northwestern, between the Ganges and the Jamuna; the northern, between the Jamuna, Padma and Meghna; and the eastern, east of the Meghna-Padma line. All the operations were directed principally toward the heart of East Bengal where Dacca lies; nevertheless, some of the spearhead columns changed direction as the situation demanded.

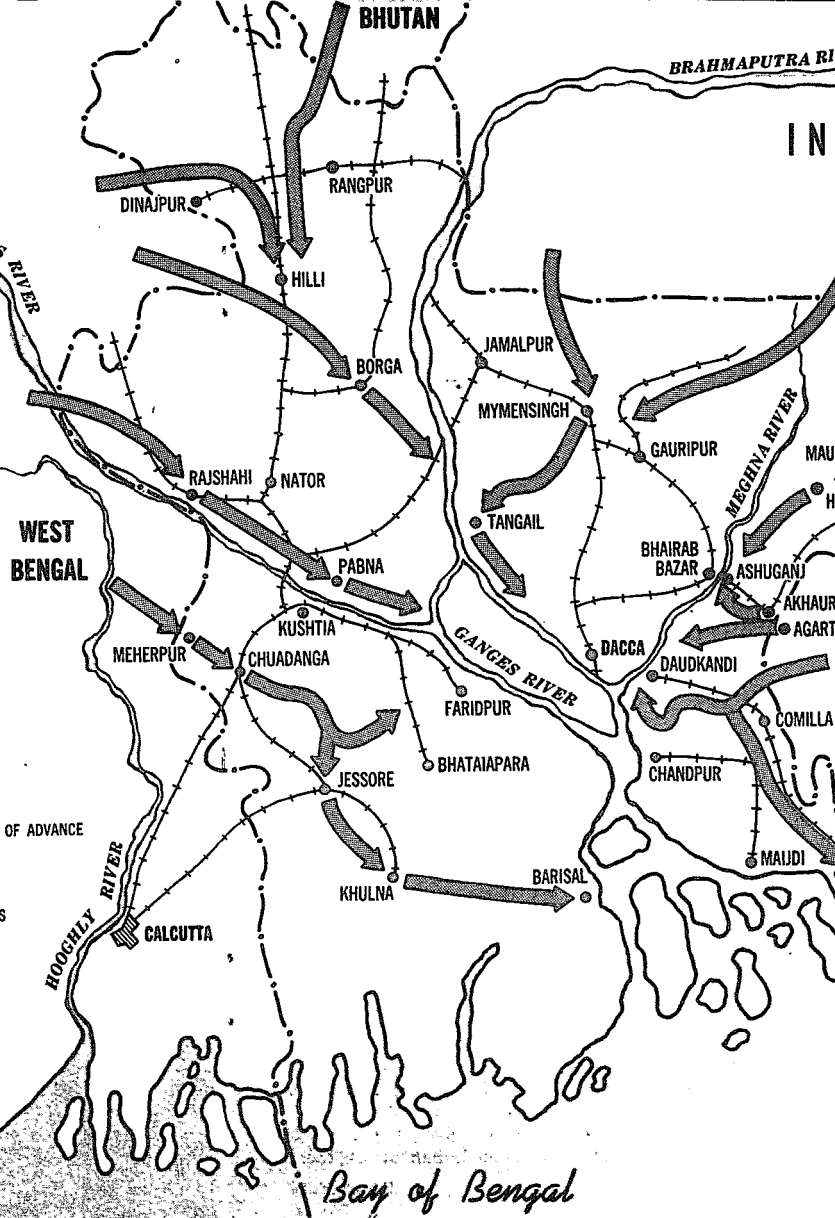
Jessore, the Pakistani cantonment 12 miles from the border, was the target in the western sector. The cantonment, reached quickly by rapid advance, was not as strongly fortified as had been visualized. In fact, it was surrendered without a fight. One Pakistani column retreated to the north in an attempt to regroup with the garrison at Kushtia, an important port on the Padma River. Here, the river is crossed by one of East Bengal's longest bridges.

The garrison fought hard and held for nine days. In the course of the fighting, the bridge was damaged sufficiently to slow the Indian troops moving toward Dacca. Another Indian column moved toward Khulna, also an inland port, and thence farther on to Barisal. A third headed toward Faridpur. The sector was thus ringed by Indian troops. However, none of these troops got to Dacca because of the intervening river. Meanwhile, Pakistani troops were bombed, dispersed or captured.

A three-pronged attack developed in the northern sector. Three major towns on the fringe of the loop were by-passed, and the bulk of the forces joined the southernmost column in its sweep toward the confluence of the Ganges and Jamuna Rivers. Pakistani troops were mostly confined to the garrison towns such as Thakurgaon, Dinajpur and Rangpur. These were well defended with mines, booby traps and concealed machineguns. The defenders battled hard almost to the end of hostilities. Again, in this sector, the Indian troops were prevented from moving beyond the riverine complex.

Of all the approaches to Dacca by land, that from the north is the best, for there are no major rivers to be crossed on the way. The bulk of the Indian troops, after capturing the im-





portant railway junction of Jamalpur, swept south toward Tangail, 46 miles from Dacca. A fresh Pakistani battalion was deployed to stem the advance, but succeeded only in delaying the fall of Mymensingh—the most important town and stronghold in the area—until 11 December. Meanwhile, Indian forces were poised for an attack on the capital in conjunction with forces from the east.

Sporadic Fighting

In the eastern sector, one column headed toward Sylhet, a major town. This strongpoint was stormed with the help of a battalion landed by helicopters. The Pakistani cantonment adjacent to the town, however, held on. Even after the town finally fell, sporadic fighting in the area continued. Another column sped to Ashuganj on the Meghna River. This element found the important bridge across the river severely damaged; however, it could use the ferry.

On the opposite bank, at Bhairab Bazar, a battalion was airlanded to facilitate movement on the road leading toward Dacca. More columns moved straight toward the capital. One of them raced down along the border, capturing Comilla and advancing toward Chittagong. Another developed an axis between Daudkandi and Chandpur. A third touched Ashuganj.

The Indians were now ready for an assault on Dacca. One thrust was to be launched by the land route from Tangail. The other two were to be from the direction of Bhairab Bazar and from the Daudkandi-Chandpur axis, after crossing the Meghna River with the help of boats and improvised bridges. A 600-man battalion of paratroopers was landed north of Dacca on 11 December. On that same date,

the second-in-command of the Pakistani forces made an appeal to the Secretary General of the United Nations for help in repatriating troops. But this proved to be in vain. Meanwhile, surrender by large numbers of Pakistani troops began.

During the next 48 hours, Indian troops came within artillery range of Dacca. Mukti Bahini commandos had for some time been active in the vicinity of the capital, where there had been many explosions and outbreaks of fire. Besides bombing the Government House, where the civil government wrote out its resignation and handed it over to the Red Cross authorities, the air force raided the military complexes. This required true precision bombing because some of these were close to the airfield which the Indian command sought to keep operational for evacuation of foreigners and UN representatives. Evidence of the shock and consternation prevailing in Dacca was given by a Pakistani brigadier captured along with the covering forces he commanded.

Events moved fast and shifted rapidly into a sphere beyond the battlefield. On 14 December, the Indian Army Chief of Staff sent a message to the Pakistani commander calling for him to lay down arms. The following day, a favorable response was received—India first halted the air action and then the ground action.

At 1631, on 16 December, the instrument of surrender was signed at Dacca—the surrender included “all Pakistani land, air and naval forces, as also all para-military forces and civil armed forces.” About 94,000 persons thus became prisoners of war. And with that the military operations in East Bengal ended.

Among the decisive factors which contributed to the Indian victory, there

was first and foremost the complete isolation of the combat theater from the Pakistani home base. No supplies could reach the combat zone from the national reservoir. Lines of communication were so badly cut that at one stage even radio messages went astray. Pakistani forces had to operate in an environment where the local population was sullen when it was not actively hostile. The guerrilla forces played an important role.

India's Superiority

Pakistan had to contend against India's overwhelming superiority. In the theater, its ground forces numbered less than half Indian forces, the air forces were only one-eighth, and after the disaster of the *Ghazi* submarine it had no naval force, except for some river gunboats. This situation should have been better anticipated. At least the air element could have been sizably augmented, for Pakistan was known to have up to 20 squadrons in its air forces.

That better preparations were not made can only be explained in terms of a strategy which relied overwhelmingly on a decisive showdown in the western theater where lay the heartland of Pakistan. But time ran out too swiftly for such a showdown to materialize. After barely two weeks, Pakistan found itself with no option except to agree to the unilateral offer of India to end the war.

Outside the Dacca zone, Pakistan deployed three divisions in all. For many months prior to the outbreak of hostilities, they were chasing the Mukti Bahini guerrillas. One of their main tasks was to seal the East Bengal borders with a view to denying the irregulars sanctuary in the Indian territory. This compelled the Pakistani forces to be strung out along

the border in thinly held pockets. Thus, at no point could Pakistan offer hard, concentrated defense, apart from a few cantonments. Even some of these cantonments could not withstand the Indian assault.

This probably explains the rout in the outlying battlefields, but it does not explain the collapse of Dacca, for, as the Indian commander said, "Dacca fell without a real fight." And yet, because of its situation in a triangle guarded on two sides by wide fast-moving rivers, which provided natural obstacles, Dacca could, conceivably, have been converted into a fortress. But few defenses were found to have been created. Rather, reliance had been placed, it would seem, exclusively on peripheral defense. Moreover, the conduct of the defense of Dacca very soon became incohesive and ill-coordinated. And even while the troops in the outlying areas were putting up resistance, the headquarters in Dacca showed signs of losing its resolve.

A Quick Victory

India was well situated with respect to obtaining a victory right from the beginning. But its problem was not only to win, but to win quickly. Speed was of crucial importance, and speed demanded rapid transportation. Practically all the railway lines in East Bengal had been damaged. Roads, always few, had been in a state of disrepair following the monsoons. Water communications, traditionally the life lines of the country, were immobilized, for some 400 to 500 bridges had been destroyed. Some of these afforded the only crossing across the wider rivers for miles up and down from the bridge site.

Thus, on the Indian side, the role of the engineer was a major one. He laid bridges over numerous rivers, streams

and gaps. The old *Bailey* bridges came in handy, but the army also used a newly acquired heavy assault floating bridge, called the *KM* bridge. This is made from aluminum alloy and rests on rubber pneumatic floats. Besides, there was a great deal of improvisation—fitting an engine to a local boat for instance. Along with the locally acquired steamers and the riverine flotilla of the engineers, these small craft were the principal means of transportation at crucial points for thousands of troops and many hundreds of tons of equipment.

Secondly, the engineers advised on the routes to be followed. The Indian Army sought to by-pass the strongholds in order not to waste time on concentrations of secondary importance, and chose unconventional routes along the rivers, through the fields and across wastes. This required careful, rapid survey since, in East Bengal, vast stretches of soil are not well suited to heavy traffic. All along the routes of advance the local population helped with building material, labor, rickety lorries and handcarts.

The Indian Army attempted surprise with success. This accrued partly from the adoption of the unconventional routes. The enemy was out-

flanked. When enemy elements sought to fall back or to regroup with other formations, they were caught in carefully laid ambushes.

But more dramatically, surprise was gained from launching the most powerful thrust from an unexpected direction—the Tripura front in the eastern sector. Hilly, forested, poor in communication routes, Tripura is by no means a general's delight. Dacca, even though closest from this side, is difficult to reach from this direction because of the intervening riverine complex. Pakistan did not make provisions for a major thrust from this direction.

In record time, the Indian Army mustered more than a corps in this forbidding area. After a few skirmishes close to the border, this force had rather an easy time fanning out for a short-sword thrust directed at Dacca. It was in this zone that the Pakistanis began to surrender en masse.

India won in a lightning campaign because it had everything in its favor—geography, secure bases, ample supplies, control over communications, superiority in numbers, supremacy in the air, and well-conceived strategy and tactics.

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