

Monday, March 29, 1971

Pakistan tragedy

ONLY a day before Pakistan's constitutional crisis exploded into civil war, there were hopes that the bitterly divided nation might hold together by peaceful political agreement, and perhaps return soon to democratic civilian rule. These hopes have been shattered by the tragic events of the past few days. Exactly what precipitated the violent upheaval in East Pakistan is not clear; the strict military censorship and expulsion of foreign correspondents have obscured the truth. But President Yahya had apparently conceded in principle the major demands of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, popular leader of the aggrieved Bengalis, whose cry for greater local autonomy had so far been suppressed by the West Pakistani-dominated military regime.

This hopeful pointer to a compromise settlement was suddenly reversed when the army, instead of lifting martial law and returning to barracks as agreed, imposed a massive clamp-down on East Pakistan and outlawed Sheikh Mujibur's party, the Awami League. The Sheikh retaliated by proclaiming, from a clandestine radio, the independence of his besieged province. Such an act of defiance had long been urged by Bengalis more militant than he. But to the Sheikh, confronted by military forces far stronger than any he could muster, it must have been an act of desperation. To President

Yahya, it was plainly an act of treason, and the rebellious Bengalis are paying for it in savage bloodshed.

Even if reports are true that the army has managed to crush the revolt, President Yahya's goal of a strong and united Pakistan seems more remote than ever. His troops may be able to restore a semblance of central rule over East Pakistan. They may be able to suppress the Awami League, which won not only the overwhelming support of the people of East Pakistan, but also an absolute majority of seats in the subsequently suspended National Assembly, ending for the first time the electoral advantage — though not the political and military power — of the West Pakistani minority.

But a nation cannot be held together indefinitely by the military repression of a hostile majority of people. To the existing differences of race, custom, language and geography will be added an insuperable barrier of hatred and resentment. If the violent conflict of the past few days has not already killed the prospects for a just and peaceful solution, then President Yahya would be wise to accept proposals for a federal structure that will give East Pakistan a fair measure of self-rule without breaking Pakistan completely and permanently into two. But first the killing must stop.