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 general election, 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, in a speech to the nation, has alluded to the major demands of the Mukti Bahini movement. Yahya's apparent concession to the major demands of the Mukti Bahini movement, a popular leader of the aggrieved Bengalis, has so far been rejected 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 Rahman's party, the Awami League. The Sheik rift was followed by the proclamation, from a clandestine radio, the independence of his besieged province. Such an act of defiance has long been urged by Bengalis more militant than he. But to the Sheik, confronted by military force 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.

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 resist the demoralized forces of the Mukti Bahini Movement, but it is a country that is so divided that the future of Pakistan is in doubt. The West Pakistani army was able to suppress the Awami League, which won not only the overwhelming support of the people of East Pakistan, but also the 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 would give East Pakistan a fair measure of self-rule without undermining Pakistani unity and permanence into two. But first the killing must stop.

Avoiding a clash

THE Commonwealth Government and the Australian Council of Trade Unions are headed for a bitter clash over the non-payment of fines imposed on 15 trade unions under penal clauses in the Commonwealth Arbitration Act. If the issue is not resolved at a meeting of the National Council next month, the Commonwealth will instruct the Industrial Court officials to collect the unpaid fines, which total $57,000. Such action would be certain to precipitate industrial turmoil unequaled since the imprisonment of Mr. C. O'Shea in 1998. In this situation, there are sound reasons why the Commonwealth Government and the ACTU should reconsider the positions they adopted at last Thursday's inconclusive conference in Canberra.

There is a good reason the Commonwealth should agree to forgo payment of these fines imposed before last year's amendments to the Arbitration Act. The effect of these amendments was to delay the operation of the penal clauses pending the outcome of efforts by an Arbitration Commission judge to obtain a settlement. These amendments amounted to a concession by the Commonwealth that some of the unpaid fines (they total $57,000) were imposed under legislation which was unfair to the unions. By agreeing now, in the interests of justice and industrial peace, to forgo these fines, the Commonwealth would not be abandoning its view that the penal clauses are an essential part of Australia's arbitration law. The Commonwealth would remain free to uphold the law by collecting the $57,000 in fines imposed under the current and more equitable legislation.

For its part, the ACTU should accept that its unqualified opposition to penal clauses is an unacceptable and contradictory policy. What the ACTU seems to want is a system of compulsory arbitration without compulsion, a system which gives benefits to trade unionists without expecting any consideration from them. The ACTU should order unions to pay those fines imposed since last year's amendments to the Arbitration Act, but retain its right to campaign for further amendments and for economic policies which, it believes, would improve the arbitration system. The ACTU has nothing to gain from industrial strife over the unpaid fines.

The IF

WHEN I think of the number of Irishmen who have died at the hands of British soldiers, there could not be enough of them dead.

"We have the right to take the lives of British soldiers as the people of Aden and Cyprus. It is a God-given right and any means necessary to drive them out.

The speaker was a bearded man in a three-piece suit. He is known to be a senior officer of the official branch of the Irish Republican Army in Belfast and admits it.

We were sitting in a hotel bedroom in the heart of the city. I had just asked him whether his organization was responsible for the assassination, earlier this month, of three off-duty Scottish soldiers.

I know there was a report published that we had denied being involved in that," he said. "We did not issue any such statement. We have not denied nor admitted that we had anything to do with those killings."

A few hours earlier, in a small house in a Belfast suburb, I had put the same question to two men who said they were leaders of the breakaway "provisional" branch of the IRA. They flatly denied that the "provos" were involved in the murders.

Gangster

But neither denial nor denials of denials mean much in this city. Inevitably, one popular rumor in Catholic quarters is that the soldiers were killed by Protestant extremists seeking to provoke British army retaliation against Republicans.

It was a possibility, but neither faction of the IRA is shedding tears for the dead. It was not they who left the bodies of the soldiers who were still lingering by the roadside a few days ago to mark the spot where the bodies of the three soldiers were found--fragile memorials for two teenagers and a fellow Roman Catholic who can never have been to understand the passions which brought them to a street that noisy lane on the outskirts of Belfast.

The IRA men are a breed apart.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SIR—Another newspaper recently published an article entitled: "A moment of parents wants Government's verdict."

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