

Plunge into chaos

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to know what is happening in East Pakistan. According to Radio Pakistan, President Yahya Khan's predominantly West Pakistani Army, is in control of the east, Sheik Mujibur Rahman is under arrest as a "traitor," and life is returning to normal. According to Indian reports, Sheik Mujibur is free, the 16,000-strong East Pakistani (Bengali) rifles and police are resisting General Tikka Khan's forces, and two days of civil war have already brought a huge civilian death toll (10,000? 100,000?). What is clear is that Pakistan, as the world has known it, is in pieces and that a political miracle will be needed to put it together again.

Such a miracle is not credible. President Yahya, blind to some of the bloodiest lessons in history, to the British in Ireland, the French in Algeria and many more, is trying to restore solidarity by armed force. His ambition would be ludicrous if its consequences were not bound to be so tragic. He is attempting to impose loyalty to an always artificial Pakistan, dominated by a West Pakistani minority, upon 75 million Bengalis who have already shown by an overwhelming vote in democratic elections that their loyalty is to Sheik Mujibur and his demand for an autonomous East Pakistan. Sheik Mujibur, having won a majority of seats in the stillborn constituent assembly, having demonstrated

his authority by virtually establishing his own civil government in East Pakistan after the declaration of martial law, has been remarkably moderate in the interests of a feasible confederation. Only after the breakdown of his talks with the President did he call for independence. The blame for the breakdown rests with the President. He has repudiated the result of a democratic election in the interests of minority West Pakistani supremacy.

President Yahya has the power—tanks, artillery and planes—to win temporary victories in East Pakistani cities. But in the long run, with his army 1,000 miles from its bases, how can he hope to subdue the guerrilla warfare, fuelled by Bengali nationalism, which can be expected to continue indefinitely in the notoriously difficult rural terrain of the East? Nor is there a mediator in sight—certainly not India whose satisfaction at the preoccupation of the Pakistani Army will be tempered by fears of repercussions in turbulent West Bengal. Even Britain, with its unhappy memories of the very different war fought by a Biafran minority, is unlikely to want to become involved, despite its huge investments in West Pakistan. Only second thoughts by President Yahya can prevent prolonged tragedy. And he appears to be committed to chaos.