

THE GUARDIAN

MANCHESTER

Wednesday April 14 1971

Rhetoric and reality

Where, after three weeks of messy bloodshed, do the military rulers of Pakistan now stand? Superficially they prosper. Bangla Desh's bands of "liberation fighters" have never coped and will never cope with the Pakistani Army in force. That force is being deployed to flatten urban resistance. Yahya Khan will soon have most cities and towns on a tight rein. He will also have all the Chinese spare parts, overflying rights, and hire purchase rhetoric he can take. For the moment the Awami League "miscreants" are dead, incarcerated, or negligible. Pakistan is cowed but united.

Yet the true balance-sheet is very different. Perhaps (ideally and even at some cost) Pakistan is better together than apart. Perhaps continual martial law can maintain that state and, as famine saps revolt, bring smouldering servility. But Yahya must be forced to take a wider view. Maybe a coordinated Bengali resistance movement will need years to organise, but in the meantime Bengalis will remain one of the most populous people on earth, always simmering in crowds, always ready to overwhelm and slaughter patrols or lone Punjabi soldiers. The province which—head for head—provides a majority of Pakistanis will have to be held down by tanks and planes and large concentrations of troops for as long as any prophet can see. There is no decent hope of passing the buck to some civilian regime since virtually every civilian politician—bar the ancient, sickly Nurul Amin—was obliterated at the polls last December. Collaborators with Islamabad will have no democratic justification; they will not be able to appear in public without peril.

The Eastern prospect, in short, is long, weary gloom—economic stagnation, starvation, murders, the slow growth of extremism. Even Chinese friendship has a touch of poison in the embrace. Peking may care little if Maoist Bengalis like Maulana Bhashani find themselves at the wrong end of Yahya's bayonets: anything to worst the pro-American Sheikh Mujib. But once the Awami League is defunct and East Pakistan is given over to wild men of rebellion, then only the most stupid of generals will be surprised to find

Chinese arms in every guerrilla cache. And in the West there lies bleakness too. Mr Bhutto may rejoice at army action today; but he will not rejoice long if it keeps him from the power he won at the ballot box. Pakistan is a nation in hock to the World Bank and to the aid-givers of the world—they are already turning away, gorged on brutality. Pakistani defence policy (and the whole existence of the generals) rests on confrontation with India over Kashmir. Pakistan alleges that India holds the Pakistani-loving Kashmiris in check by steely repression. It is the most ludicrous of cases now, as the junta of Islamabad openly exercises just such repression on 75 million bona-fide Pakistanis. The United Nations will surely collapse in bitter laughter if Kashmir comes up again. The issue is as dead as the students of Dacca University.

Nobody can tell precisely what Yahya's strategists whispered in his ear three weeks ago. Nobody can tell but anyone can deduce. They appear to have thought that cutting off the head would kill Bengali nationalism; precisely the reverse. They appear to have forgotten about world opinion. They appear, most insanely of all, to have ruled India out of the military calculations, so that the uncontrolled border and the aid seeping in has them as much by the throat as proliferating diplomatic complications. To reiterate: the Bangla Desh affair is not a second Biafra or the fruits of more interminable wrangling between Delhi and Rawalpindi. It arose simply, when a well-conducted, peaceful election produced a result the army could not stand. Sheikh Mujib himself has not, in any certain sense, declared Bengali independence. He was not asking essentially for more than the programme he legally fought and won the election on. Of course there are shades of grey; of course, responsibility for the carnage is shared. But influential and intelligent Pakistanis in the West can stop that carnage tomorrow if they add up the balance-sheet aright and put their soldiers in economic chains. This is not a Sino-Soviet slanging match about Marxist technicalities. It is, at root, a simple matter: of freedom, of morality, and of humanity.