

The Vultures of Bengal

Fat vultures brood over the ravaged towns of East Pakistan, grim testimony to the slaughter which took place during the Pakistan Army's savage crackdown on Bengali separatists. The fighting has died down for the time being, with the Bengali resistance largely routed, but what may become known as the year of the vulture in East Bengal is not ended. Famine now stalks this tragic land of chronic disaster.

As a result of the dislocations of the civil war, the devastation of floods and cyclones last fall and of persistent food shortages in this heavily overpopulated region, at least 10 and perhaps 30 million of East Pakistan's 75 million inhabitants face starvation within the next few months. Contrary to bland assurances which continue to emanate from West Pakistani spokesmen, the situation is unquestionably desperate and will require a large-scale international relief effort if a tragedy of major proportions is to be averted.

The groundwork for some relief operations is already being laid with a promise of American food aid and a visit of United Nations officials to India, where refugees from East Pakistan are already pouring across the border at the rate of 60,000 a day—to a current total of over 1.5 million, according to Indian officials.

The larger effort, however, must be made in East Pakistan itself. A report that the Pakistani Government is preparing to allow UNICEF to begin relief operations in the strife-torn province is encouraging. But there is little evidence so far of the kind of concern in Islamabad and preparation abroad that will be required to meet the needs of East Pakistan in time.

Because of this country's unique capacity to furnish needed relief supplies and essential logistical support, the United States has a special responsibility to take the lead in organizing the relief effort. Because of the heavy dependence of Pakistan's military regime on American economic and military support, the United States Government also is in a unique position to prod Islamabad to abandon its policy of repression in the East and to cooperate more fully in the international effort to deny the vultures of Bengal further human prey. Moves in Congress to suspend military and economic assistance to Pakistan until such changes are made represent the kind of firm policy in the Pakistani crisis that the Administration should have adopted long ago. Although Administration spokesmen have said that Pakistan aid programs are "under review" and that no arms have been shipped to that country since the beginning of the crackdown, no general suspension of aid has been announced and, in fact, it appears that some aid has been continuing.