Disease, Hunger and Death Stalk Refugees Along India’s Border

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Special To The New York Times

KARIMPUR, India, June 8—Sickness, hunger and death are common scenes now along India’s 1,500-mile border with East Pakistan. Millions of Bengalis — unofficial figures put the number over 10 million — have fled East Pakistan to escape the Pakistani Army, which since late March has been trying to crush the movement for nationhood, autonomy, and later independence, in East Pakistan.

The Bengalis have brought cholera with them. Official figures put the death toll here in West Bengal state at 3,500, but reports indicate that it is much higher — perhaps as high as over 10,000. A thousand or more others have died in the three other border states where the Bengalis have taken refuge.

In this Indian town near the border, a mother had died of cholera an hour before, but the infant, less than a year old, continued to nurse. A doctor came upon the scene and put him gently away.

A few feet away on the cold cement porch of the health center, another person had just died — a 60-year-old grandfather, Abhinath Malakar.

His son sat, crumpled and crying, beside the stiffening emaciated body. Fingers had begun to gather. A grandmother hung, wailing, in the arms of an aunt. This family, from the Jessore district in East Pakistan, had waited for 13 days to reach India.

The toll rises steadily, and with new waves of refugees pouring into India daily, there is no way to predict when the epidemic will end.

Along the roadsides lie the bodies left by those too frightened or too sick to make the short journey to the border. Corpses lie by the road, some with the masks still on.

Vultures, dogs and crows fight. Skeletons already picked clean bleat in the sun. A few bodies have been buried in shallow graves, but the vultures have torn the graves open.

The roads leading from the border are a trail of clothes and bones. A body floats in a stream or in a path. The stench is acrid and villagers cover their faces as they hurry past.

Mass Graves in Some Areas

In some towns, attires have been made into the bodies in mass graves. Here in Karimpur, which is 20 miles north of Calcutta by road, five relief workers buried several hundred in a 24-hour period. But even at these sites, packs of stray dogs dig in the earth.

In many ways, the scene is a repetition of the horror of the cyclone that killed hundreds of thousands in the Delta area of East Pakistan last November.

There are water shortages and sanitation facilities have virtually broken down. The main streets of border towns are avenues of garbage and flies.

Food lines stretch for hundreds of yards and it sometimes takes hours for a refugee to get his rations.

More refugees are moving toward Calcutta as the other camps become choked. New camps are springing up on the outskirts of the city, just past the airport and in the Salt Lake area.

About 50,000 to 60,000 refugees have entered the fringes of the city, and at least 60 deaths have been recorded in this group.

A few thousand refugees have moved into the heart of Calcutta and are camping in the Sealdah Railway Station.

Indian officials are worried that the refugee epidemic may spread to the people of Calcutta in overcrowded, tense city of eight million that has its own fairly serious cholera problem.

TO SET UP AIRELIFT: Maj. Ivan Choromanski of the Air Force on arrival in New Delhi. He will help coordinate U.S. part of the relief mission for Pakistani cholera victims.

The New York Times
June 8, 1971
Nadla District, the area hardest hit by cholera.

Published: June 9, 1971
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