

Horrors of East Pakistan Turning Hope Into Despair

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DACCA, Pakistan, Oct. 10—The horror of life in East Pakistan shows every sign of becoming permanently institutionalized, and most if not all the foreigners who came hoping to help are on the verge of despair.

In particular, the chances of reversing the tide of millions of destitute refugees who have fled to India seem remote. Most governments consider the refugee problem the main catalyst in the atmosphere of war prevailing on the subcontinent.

India charges that military terror in East Pakistan since the central Government moved against the Bengali separatists March 25 has driven nine million refugees across her borders. Those people, the Indians say, are an intolerable drain on already vastly overtaxed economic resources and a force that could result in a political catastrophe or internal warfare.

The New Delhi Government has hinted that as a last resort it might try to change the situation in East Pakistan by force to induce the refugees, whom Pakistan numbers at less than a third of the Indian figure,

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Bengali liberation fighters on patrol in East Pakistan, about a mile from Indian border

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IN EAST PAKISTAN: A group of West Pakistani soldiers patrolling a village that had been partially burned. It is near the Indian border, and was a center of Awami League. Photoreporters

Horrors of East Pakistan Life Turning Hope of Relief Groups Into Despair

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to leave India, Pakistan has hastened her own preparations for war. Major troop movements have been reported here and in India in the past few weeks.

The Soviet Union, China and the United States, among other nations, are deeply entangled in the feud. The United Nations and other international organizations have been working with great urgency to alleviate the misery and, especially, to prevent a war.

Dozens of governments have teams of experts, technicians and diplomats working in East Pakistan. The United Nations East Pakistan Relief Operation alone has 75 officials here.

There is some disagreement among the hundreds of foreign officials about the techniques by which the refugees could be repatriated. But there is apparent unanimity on one subject: that East Pakistan should overcome its reputation as a place of endless horror and suffering.

To that end many Governments, including that of the United States, have pressed the Pakistani Government at Islamabad for fundamental changes in East Pakistan, among them these:

No Real Progress Discerned

¶The end of police and military terror directed against thousands of political suspects and millions of non-Moslem members of ethnic and religious minorities.

¶A reasonably representative government in Dacca, capable of restoring the faith of East Pakistan's population in the future of democracy.

¶A much more convincing effort by the central Government to relieve the physical suffering wrought on East Pakistan's predominantly Bengali population by flood, cyclone and war in the last year.

The consensus among the foreigners working here is that there has been no real progress in any of those areas.

Whispered conversations with Bengalis still have to do largely with alleged atrocities by the occupation army, which is largely made up of West Pakistanis and is hated by most of the population.

One tale that is widely believed and seems to come from many different sources is that 563 women picked up by the army in March and April and held in military brothels are not being released because they are pregnant beyond the point at which abortions are possible.

A Government spokesman denied the report and challenged any accuser to name the place where the women are supposed to be held. On the other hand, a number of Bengali gynecologists are known to have been performing many abortions on girls held at army installations and released.

Two of Three Released

In a clandestine meeting elaborately arranged to elude military surveillance, a Bengali farmer told this correspondent about one such experience. Talking with great reticence and glancing around in fear that he had been led into a police trap, he said:

"The army came to the village on the night of April 11. One patrol led me away from my house to identify something, and when I got back I found my sister was missing. Another girl, the daughter of a neighbor, was gone, and there was a Hindu family whose girl was missing.

"In the middle of May they released my sister and the neighbor's daughter, but the Hindu girl is still gone. The two girls who came back are both pregnant and will have their babies. At the place where they were kept there were 200 or 300 girls doing the same thing. They had to wash clothing and to make love to soldiers two or three times a day."

"My sister doesn't know where she was kept," the farmer added.

Many Dacca residents, including foreigners, tell of hav-

ing seen young women taken away by military policemen without even an identification check.

Other people, obscure and prominent, are also subject to arbitrary arrest, although President Agha Mohammed Yahya Khan proclaimed a general amnesty for political prisoners last month and his action was warmly applauded by foreign diplomats seeking political accommodation in East Pakistan.

The diplomats, who now say that the amnesty was purely cosmetic, report that the Government not only has failed to release any important prisoners but also has continued arresting politicians, professors, lawyers and others by the hundreds.

According to a number of reports, some from foreign observers, a number of persons under amnesty have been arrested and shot.

The Most Prominent Prisoner

The most prominent prisoner is Sheik Mujibur Rahman, universally acknowledged as the political and spiritual leader of East Bengal. Sheik Mujib's Awami League party won a sweeping election victory last December for National Assembly seats allocated to East Pakistan and he had been scheduled to become Prime Minister of all of Pakistan.

Most diplomats and other foreigners believe that a resolution of the East Pakistani crisis can be found only if Sheik Mujib is permitted to exercise the role of leadership in East Pakistan to which he was elected. But he remains a prisoner undergoing a secret military trial and facing a possible death sentence.

Members of his family, while not accused of any crime, are held as virtual prisoners here.

Such political repression has extended not only to the banned Awami League but to any politician or group likely to embarrass the military regime.

The effect was dramatically underscored last week by a former chief of the air force, who decided to try running for public office in view of the Government's announced intention of moving toward democratic processes.

The officer, Mohammad Asghar Khan, a retired air marshal, is known throughout Pakistan as a patriot and political moderate. He commanded the air force in 1965 during Pakistan's brief but bloody war with India and has always insisted that Pakistan remain one country.

Program Was Censored

Mr. Asghar Khan, a West Pakistani and a leader of the movement that brought about the collapse of President Mohammad Ayub Khan's Government in 1968, offered a conciliatory program calling for major development efforts in East Pakistan and genuine political freedom for its people, but it has been completely censored. On Friday he announced that no candidate could run unless he could reach the public through the press, so he was withdrawing.

"Today is a black day for democracy in Pakistan," he said, "when even I, with a mild program breaking no martial-law regulations, am frozen out."

When the army occupied East Pakistan and banned the Awami League, the election was, in effect, annulled. Some elected assemblymen were cleared by the army to take their seats, but most had fled to India or joined the guerrillas.

In July, President Yahya Khan announced that by-elections would be held to fill the seats.

Government - approved candidates and parties, most of them strongly right-wing and fundamentalist Moslems and all heavily escorted by troops, have begun giving speeches in East Pakistan, and are reported on at length in the controlled press. All have advocated a war to the finish against "miscreants" and "Indian agents" — words invariably used by the Government to describe the Bengali guerrillas.

Meanwhile, the anguish of

war continues in the countryside.

The guerrillas are taking an increasing toll of the occupation army and medical circles report growing numbers of bodies of soldiers. The guerrillas are also said to be assassinating members of the local "peace committees," civilian groups made up mostly of non-Bengalis and assigned to carry out army administration of occupied areas.

When troops or peace committees are attacked, the army burns hamlets to the ground in reprisal, and local reports usually tell of heavy losses of life.

In the prevailing circumstances, according to most foreign observers stationed here, the refugee crisis and the other major problems are not susceptible of solution, however much foreign assistance is poured in. It is especially unlikely, they say, that East Pakistan's Hindu minority, about 10 per cent of the March population of 75 million, will ever return in any numbers.

The Hindus were particular targets of the soldiers. Hindu communities and shops burned out by the army stand deserted, their temples smashed. The Government has made it plain that Hinduism will no longer be tolerated in East Pakistan; to reinforce the point, the new civilian Governor, Dr. A. M. Malik, did not appoint a Hindu to his interim cabinet.

Centers No Longer Visited

A foreign relief worker, reflecting the failure of the Government's amnesty, said: "We no longer bother to visit the Government's 60 or so refugee reception centers. It's obvious they aren't coming back in more than a tiny trickle — none in some areas."

"At one place," he added, "we discovered the Government had a staff of professional refugees that they brought out whenever visitors came to show that something was going on."

"The army authorities tell you there are 2,000 refugees at some camps," another expert related. "You go there and find a handful of people wandering around, and under continued questioning the authorities agree maybe there are only 200."

"After hearing as many deceptions as we do, it quickly reaches the point at which we cannot take the Pakistan Government's word for anything, however trivial."

There are universal complaints that even in the matter of humanitarian relief the army has commandeered all available trucks, cars, motor launches and boats — the only available means of moving food or supplies until foreign relief vehicles can be brought in.

Blame Put on India

The Government insists that all or most of the troubles would disappear if India would end her "provocations" and stop infiltrating men and arms into East Pakistan.

The Pakistanis say India's warlike actions are demonstrated by her unwillingness to allow United Nations or other foreign relief workers to enter the border zones near East Pakistan. Pakistan, on the other hand, has admitted relief teams.

Some diplomats believe that a partial solution would be the imposition by the United Nations of a military peace-keeping force between East Pakistan and India, through which refugees could move if they chose. It seems unlikely that either country would agree to such a move.

The pessimism among foreign observers is formidable.

"There is really nothing anyone with any amount of money can do for East Pakistan," a relief expert commented. "It seems to be an irredeemable land whose people are doomed from birth, and as the population of the subcontinent doubles every generation, it will only get worse."

"My own feeling," he added, "and I know lots of us share it, is that the outside world might just as well pull out now and let things here take their inevitable course."