Witness Calls E. Pakistan 'Terror Beyond Description'

By Lewis M. Simons
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A young American woman just returned home after two months captivity in an East Pakistani prison said yesterday that the Bengali population has gone through "terror beyond imagination" during the army occupation of the province.

"It looks like Bangla Desh will be a reality," said Ellen Connett. "They'll get their freedom. And God knows they deserve it after the horrors they've been through."

Her main concern she said, now that India appeared near certain victory in East Pakistan, was the fate of some 10 million refugees. "It's a terrible problem" she said. "They're going to need all the help they can get."

Mrs. Connett, 28, was interviewed by telephone from the home of her parents Mr. and Mrs. William Lanle, in Dumont, N.J., after a flight from Calcutta, and "about two hours sleep last night."

"I'm feeling absolutely marvelous," she said.

Her husband, Paul, said she had lost weight, "about 20 to 30 pounds—her arms and legs are awfully thin," but that she was in good spirits.

Mrs. Connett and a British friend, Gordon Slaven, 20, were released from prison last Tuesday when Bengali guerrillas and Indian army forces entered the East Pakistani border town of Jessore. They had been imprisoned Oct. 9 after being captured by Pakistani soldiers in the town of Simulia.

Slaven and Mrs. Connett were members of Operation Omega, a London-based organization formed to aid the Bengalis of East Pakistan. When taken prisoners they were carrying 200 saris—clothing for the coming cold season.

At the time of their capture, Connett, a British school teacher, was himself illicitly inside East Pakistan, with Bengali guerrillas, but not a member of Operation Omega.

"They're a pacifist group," he said. "I felt we would need armed support if we were going to bring in any help. And I guess my wife's experience proves I was right."

Mrs. Connett said she was treated "quite well" by her captors. "Many of the lower level prison officials were decidedly pro-Bangla Desh," she said. Her weight loss was due to the fact that she couldn't eat very much of what was offered — rice and curried lentels.

She said she was kept informed about the progress of the war by Slaven. "He was kept in the men's compound," she said. "But he had a friend, a Bangla Desh supporter, who managed to pick up radio reports and these were passed to me."

But when Jessore was "liberated," on Tuesday, Dec. 7, there was no need for radio news. Mrs. Connett said, "We knew the people would rejoice if they heard that the Bengali army was still there."

The Pakistanis, she said, had actually deserted Jessore the day before. "The Indian commander just walked into town, not even carrying a gun."

Mrs. Connett said she was one of 680 prisoners in the Jessore jail. Of this total, 550 were being held without trial, 20 women.

Most of the women arrested were Hindus who were seized when they returned to East Pakistan from Indian refugee camps to go about reestablishing their homes, she said. Pakistan had claimed that all refugees were welcome back to the East, before the war erupted.

[London Daily Telegraph correspondent Peter Gill reported from Calcutta that 50,000 refugees have returned to "liberated" areas in the last five days from camps in the Indian state of West Bengal. Quoting a Western relief worker, Gill said the refugees were returning "on their own initiative." India is supplying the returnees with blankets and food.]

Discussing the plight of Bengali refugees in India, she said, "They must go back. They have no alternative. The Indians want them out."

Asked whether she believed India would forcibly eject the refugees, Mrs. Connett said, "No, they'll do it nicely. But they'll do it."

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Dressed in a sari, Mrs. Ellen Connett arrives at London airport on her way from Calcutta to her parents home in Dumont, N.J. She was released last Tuesday after two months imprisonment in East Pakistan.