

'OPERATION REGROUP' BY BANGLA FORCES

FROM OUR STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A G A R T A L A, Apr 5.—The sector commanders of the area from Sylhet to Chittagong—Major Khalid Shaffesque, Major Ziaur Rahman and Major Safiullah—met for the first time on Saturday since fighting broke out on the night of March 25. They regrouped after having been split up during the first few days of the fighting and have now collected a force of divisional strength with sufficient arms and ammunition to carry out the first phase of a concerted drive to remove West Pakistani troops now isolated from each other in the cantonment towns of Chittagong, Comilla and Dacca.

This writer and a staff photographer for a German magazine met the three Majors at the liberation army headquarters in a palatial house on a big tea estate north of Brahmanberia.

Major Khalid, formerly of the East Bengal Regiment and Brigade Major at Dacca till the day the fighting began, is a 32-year-old handsome, tough-looking man and wears an automatic slung low over his hips and carries a Chinese submarine gun. Good humoured, mild and without the swagger one expects from a professional soldier, he is a man who quotes easily from Tagore, Shakespeare and Goethe.

"I am fighting for my country because I believe that it is no Government that kills its own people. The West Pakistani army broke all norms of civilized conduct when it killed civilians. A soldier professionally speaking has no business to murder. His job is to fight the enemy. If West Pakistani troops kill my people, then they automatically assume that we are their enemies and I am willing to fight the enemy", Major Khalid said.

The Major invited us to spend the night with him. And over a meal, simple because they are at war, and a few whiskies from a bottle rescued from some dark corner, he told us the story of his people's struggle.

NOT ON ENEMY'S TERMS

"I have over 2,000 men with me. I know I do not have heavy armour or artillery. But we don't intend to fight on the enemy's terms. We shall dictate them after we have starved them out in their defensive positions in the cantonments. But that is a matter of strategy which I am sorry, I cannot divulge at this stage", he said.

We saw the Major in action as he sent in his men under 25-year-old Captain Mahboob on a mission which may soon give them possession of the biggest airport in that area. He appeared to be in full control of all communications and able to move men and equipment at will. Though he lacks mechanized transport, he now has a fleet of vehicles that have been put at his command by people from towns and villages.

His second-in-command, Major Shafaat Jamil, also of the 4th East Bengal Regiment said in the sector under Major Khalid lies the entire territory between Maulvi-bazar and Dacca. As their

story is being written liberation army units under Major Khalid are moving towards Sylhet. They have been joined by men brought in by Major Safiullah who also managed to collect enough equipment to make an infantry brigade ready for combat.

Major Safiullah and his men led by eight other officers, now have the potential strength of more than a brigade. The brigade is expected to assemble and fan out into the rural areas in a drive that will take the liberation army, moving from three directions, to group together for a final assault on Dacca, Chittagong and Comilla. These three cantonments have lost all communications with each other.

According to the three Majors, whose spokesman is Major Khalid, driving the West Pakistani army out of the cantonment, where it has taken up a defensive position, will not be easy. However, they have two factors in their favour. First, the Pakistani army in Bangla Desh is under siege and all its means of communication and supply have been blocked by freedom fighters who have set up road blocks and uprooted rail track.

Secondly, the monsoon is expected in the northern parts in the

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Election Promises Not Exaggerated

FROM OUR SPECIAL REPORTER

NEW DELHI, Monday.—Mrs Gandhi claimed today that while there were people who had thought otherwise, the result of the General Election had never been in doubt in "our mind, because we had the feel of the pulse of the people". And, she added, its reverberations were being felt not only in the country but also abroad, where there were people who doubted her capacity.

She had not, however, made any exaggerated promises in her election campaign, emphasizing, in fact, that the road to the country's salvation from ancient ills (economic and social) would be hard.

The President's Address, on the debate, to which she was replying, also had merely hinted that "we would take steps" to fulfil election promises.

The House adopted a motion of thanks to the President after rejecting those of the 82 amendments pressed to a vote.

Mr Raj Narain (SSP), carrying his lost election fight against the Prime Minister into the debate, was in sharp conflict with her when on her claiming that large expenditure of money far from influencing the voter, had made candidates lose votes.

Obviously losing her temper when the SSP member, repeating his charge of wide distribution of gifts at Rae Bareilly (their constituency), asked if it was "for a face" the people there had voted, the Prime Minister rebuked her



MAJOR'S STORY OF WAR

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next fortnight. Even when we were there the sky was heavily overcast most of the time and there were a few thundershowers. With the coming of the monsoon the Pakistani army will be further immobilized as its supplies of petrol, food and ammunition dwindle.

The liberation army, with the support of the people of Bangla Desh, is, therefore, going to wait. It is in the waiting that one can judge the acumen and competence of these three officers who were at one time with the commandos for over four years and are experts at guerrilla warfare. Any direct action or confrontation will automatically mean loss of men and vitally needed arms and ammunition.

Major Khalid said: "We have repeatedly told our men that every bullet they fire must find a target. We know we don't have the firepower the enemy has and, therefore, must conserve what little we have till such time as we can muster more resources".

In the area from Sylhet to Chittagong the liberation army is a regular military formation and not a disorganized and indisciplined group of resistance fighters. Major Khalid and Major Safiullah said what they were conducting was a regular military operation. The civil administration was in the hands of those who had always run it. Police stations function as before, district administrative set-up and quasi-military forces made up of men of the East Pakistan Rifles, Mujahids and other carry on independently handling jobs like civil defence, infiltration by West Pakistani troops, security checks and watch and ward duties over vital installations.

COMPLETE FAITH

In my tour of this area, I met a number of leaders, including members of the Awami League elected to Parliament and the Assembly in the last election. They had complete faith in the liberation army. They were extending their full support to it and, as elected representatives of the people, were helping to organize village resistance units, collecting funds to keep the liberation army going, and in general mustering all the support that is possible from a civilian population in times of war.

There is no sense of panic in the outlying rural areas despite the steady influx of refugees from Chittagong, Dacca, Comilla and other towns. Most of the towns that were heavily shelled and looted by the Pakistan Army have been abandoned by 5,000 people left out of the 10,000 or more who lived there before the fighting began.

Farmers were plodding away at their fields as this season's paddy crop stood chest high and ready for harvesting in the next few days.

In the months to come there will be heavy and bitter fighting, like the action at Comilla on Thursday when paratroopers supported by heavy artillery fire and aircraft stormed the position of liberation army men on the west of the cantonment. Every single man was killed. There were only 50 ill-equipped men defending it, but before they allowed themselves to die they killed over 90 of the crack West Pakistani paratrooper unit. It is not easy to single out cases of heroism in the face of heavy odds but liberation army men tell the story of the Subedar at Comilla who after losing all his men killed 13 paratroopers before being mowed down by heavy machine-gun fire.

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