

Pakistani refugees endure chaos and cholera Faces emptied of All Hope

**'They are dying so fast
that we can't keep count'**

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Photographed by **MARK GODFREY**

CALCUTTA
 The Bengali villager lowered the handkerchief from his mouth long enough to mutter one word, "cholera," and hurried on his way. The deserted crossroads in Indian West Bengal was only three miles from the East Pakistan border. Over that border, for weeks now, terrified and dispirited refugees had been streaming in search of sanctuary from the brutality of West Pakistani soldiers. The short-lived state of Bangla Desh

was dead, but among these sorry folk the dying continued.

To the left of the crossroads lay Karimpur, a refugee camp abandoned when cholera erupted among the 15,000 East Pakistanis sheltering there. Leaving 700 dead lying in the open, the survivors had fled in panic. The cholera traveled with them.

Vultures in a brooding, strutting flock brought sickening certainty that this road we drove along was no innocent country thor-

oughfare. The flesh-eaters were glossy, repulsively replete. Further on appeared the first of many piles of discarded clothing, sadly eloquent of the cholera victims who needed them no longer. Then through the car window came a breath of tainted air, the cloying reek of death unseen yet certain somewhere out there in the rice field. We passed the corpse of a baby, the clean-picked skeleton of a young child, and then dead refugees wrapped in mats and saris and look-

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ing like parcels fallen from a speeding truck. A single-decker bus ground along, people crammed tightly inside and perhaps 70 more clinging to finger-holds on the back and roof. Above the mouths masked with hands or cloth, the eyes were frightened. A stream of vomit abruptly gushed from a window. Cholera travels easily.

"They are dying in such numbers we can't even keep count," said an Indian social worker who hitched a ride with us. "It could have been avoided if the government had told them where to go. But they just kept walking and walking in the hot sun. They became exhausted. They drank from infected

pools. Often they die in a single day because they are so weak."

The very beauty of the countryside, primed to greenness by premonsoon rains, majestic banyans and pools bright with blue-flowering lilies, seemed to mock the tragic human affairs in its midst. At the village of Kanthali a crowd of refugees argued and pleaded for places on a truck. Those already sick lay on the roadside in pathetic family tableaux of despair. For them money could not buy transport, so the still healthy haggled for the right to survival. The only hope for the dying was to reach a hospital in Krishnanagar. In the villages along the road neither vaccine nor medicine was available. Carried on improvised stretchers, ox carts and rickshas, cholera victims converged on the hospital. Those who were not dead on arrival were taken beneath the bamboo-and-canvas marquee and placed on the grass to fight for life. Hollow-eyed and only semi-conscious in the listless torpor of total exhaustion, they lay and retched. Relatives fanned the black fog of flies from their faces. Among them, hearteningly calm and well-laundered, nurses with life-saving bottles of intravenous saline solution moved through the great tent's sweltering dimness. Perhaps half the patients were children. One little girl lay arms akimbo, her wide-open eyes dulled by death. "She was about 7 years old and our ambulance found her dying alone," explained the staff nurse. "It was too late." A fatigued doctor lapsed into hand-wringing incoherence, "... the wretched condition of these people ... we were not ready ... even a sick dog or cat gets better treatment ... we feel we have failed them."

Dr. S. Chakraverty, government medical officer

at the hospital, attributed the rapid spread of the cholera epidemic to sanitation problems and the refugees' vulnerability. "Many of them have walked barefoot for 300 miles without adequate food or shelter. The whole town has been soiled by them. Krishnanagar has become a town of fear." Because no more cases were certain to double the load in a day, a two, a second tent was put up at Krishnanagar. And after three days of treatment, those who survived were being moved into the new tent to make room for desperately ill arrivals.

The scale of the disaster across this swath of India (see map) is staggeringly hard to comprehend. Cholera is only the first epidemic; it now afflicts other areas along the entire 1,350-mile India-East Pakistan boundary. Doctors point to the possibility of similar



East Pakistani refugees fled across the border into India at many points. Many are concentrated near Krishnanagar, an area ravaged by cholera.

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there, typhoid and polio in the offing. With the refugee total mounting daily, an estimated 4.5 million West Bengalis have fled into India. More than three million of them have surged into this small sector of West Bengal, itself a state which has over a million unemployed, plus the urban sinkhole of Calcutta. It was as though the entire populations of New Jersey and Connecticut had suddenly migrated to New York. In West Bengal alone, deaths from cholera and gastroenteritis have been officially placed at 8,000, but unofficial estimates range up to 8,000. Refugees are reported breaking through cordons placed around Calcutta, raising the likelihood of cholera

there are people trudging the burning hot roads. "They surrounded our village on three sides and set fire to it. When we ran out they fired with machine guns and killed many." And from a girl whose eyes streamed tears: "They chased after us and one tried to hit me with his *lathi* [stick]. I had my baby over my shoulder and the blow crushed his head."

Many of the uprooted are aged. One such couple moved at a painful pace, the old man hobbling on a crippled left leg and a wizened old lady bent double and edging along on a 15-inch-long stick. They had not known each other before, but both had been separated from their families in the confusion of es-

lights caught the body of an old man. We wondered and stopped, but it was not the same man.

From their different stories a terrible picture emerged. The initial Pakistani army attempt to crush the Bangla Desh independence movement by killing its leaders had apparently bloomed into a full-scale religious attack on East Pakistan's Hindu minority. In recent weeks almost all of the refugees have been Hindus evicted from their homes by Mus-

There are as many tales of sorrow and persecution at the hands of the West Pakistani troops as

dark-ringed from the strain of caring for 600,000 refugees. "We are consolation for one another," the old man explained. "We beg for food and walk before the sun gets hot." Two nights later our head-

have been Hindus evicted from their homes by Muslims acting under the orders and threats of the army.

Booty-hunting Pakistani soldiers intercept refugees before they cross into India and rob them of

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cash, clothes and jewelry. They have even taken cooking pots and snatched saris from the shoulders of fleeing women. The worst allegations of kidnapping, detention and mass rape of girls are not conclusively proved. Yet many families allege their daughters were carried off, and a relative shortage of young girls in the refugee camps has been noted.

A fresh terror is the monsoon rains. Seven days ago 20,000 people moved onto a bleak open field only 30 miles from Calcutta. They were to be the occupants of a new camp called Kalyani Five. The ground was dry, but the monsoon was imminent and the shawl of gray sky overhead was bruised and ominous. The only shelter available was rough-sewn bulrush mats. Even as these were being distributed, sheets of rain hurled by gale-force southwest winds swept over the field. For the three million or more refugees who live in low-lying camps like Kalyani, time began to run out.

The pounding rain beat Kalyani Five to a liquid mud, searching for the chinks in the frail improvised tents, reducing the refugees to a state of sodden, shivering misery. Lightning flashes revealed whole families intertwined for warmth. Children, many of them naked, whimpered from the wet and the 15° drop in temperature. As waters crept higher, poisonous snakes came among the people.

Meanwhile, under a phalanx of threadbare umbrellas, men gathered in a surging mass around the only relatively permanent shelter in Kalyani Five, a bamboo-and-canvas structure housing the rice supply. For men whose families had not eaten for three or four days, food was tantalizingly close. They patiently queued and requeued throughout the day. But there was no rice issue—the only officer with the necessary authority failed to show up.

The episode was unfortunately typical of the way the creaky Indian bureaucracy has hampered the most well-meant attempts to help. Coupled with the slow and as yet pathetically inadequate response of Western nations (the U.S. came through initially with a mere \$2.5 million but has since allotted an additional \$15 million), it offers many refugees hope for little more than slightly delayed death. Already there are numerous cases of rice supplies running out, of starving families denied aid because their papers were incorrectly stamped.

The man responsible for Kalyani Five is the magistrate of Nadia District in West Bengal, Dipak Ghosh, an energetic 34-year-old whose eyes are

dark-ringed from the strain of caring for 600,000 refugees. "Kalyani is on our conscience. We just cannot give them shelter. I make 12 trunk calls and send 14 telegrams every day for tarpaulins, but there are none to be had."

Ghosh has fought hard and will fight on, but he is unmistakably weary and dispirited: "Can we cope? The civil administration ceased to be able to cope long ago. The influx was under control until two weeks back, but since then the roads have been so jammed with refugees we could not get through and it's total chaos." Dropping his hand to the desk in resignation, he added, "I don't know what will happen. I feel physically sick when I see these children without any clothes lying on the wet ground. Clearly, many of them will die."

Ghosh and others believe that the problem is vastly beyond the capability of the administration, and that the Indian army must step in. All other work in Nadia, for instance, has been stopped to free staff for the refugees. And worse is yet to come. Even under dry-season conditions, the sheer cost of handling the refugees mounted to eight million rupees a day (\$10,664). This, for a nation whose per capita income is among the lowest in the world, is a major imposition. It has inspired talk of radical alternatives by the Indian government. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi has given notice that India is unwilling to accept the refugees on any but a short-term basis. Hawks are talking about a war that would force Pakistan to stop expelling refugees and to accept the return to their homes of refugees already in India.

In the refugee-clogged districts social tensions are reaching a flash point, although the sympathy of the West Bengalis for the newcomers has so far been enormous. In the village of Kanthali, for instance, a tubby, globe-faced man named Nalini Mohan Biswas, who runs a farming and trading business, welcomed 125 cholera victims into the courtyard of his home when they collapsed while passing through town. Biswas himself was unprotected by a vaccination. Even so, he nursed the stricken refugees so conscientiously that only four died.

But such rare and extraordinary efforts are only pinpoints in a vast tragedy. Narayan Desai, secretary of a national volunteer group, has no doubts about the gravity and explosiveness of the refugee issue: "I see a series of calamities, beginning with huge health problems. I imagine that thousands will die every day. Perhaps it is already too late."

Rising waters and a wait for no rice

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