

Bangla Desh army faces total defeat

From MARTIN WOOLLACOTT, Calcutta, April 16

Armed resistance in the western areas of Bangla Desh is virtually finished. The headquarters of the so-called South-western command has moved to the small town of Meherpur, on the Indian border. Chuadanga, which briefly rejoiced in the title of provisional capital, has been bombed and by all accounts is about to fall to the Pakistani Army.

Rajshahi, north of the Ganges, fell after a brief fight in which the disorganised Bangla Desh forces apparently failed to distinguish themselves. The situation of Dinajpur, in the far north, is not known. But some reports suggest it may have fallen.

One mystery is what has happened to the substantial group of liberation fighters who were concentrated around the Jessore cantonment, and along the Jhenida-Jessore road. They had impressed most of those who visited them as the most likely of all the little private Bangla Desh armies to give the Government troops a fight. They may have been bypassed, or beaten in an engagement of which no news has yet come.

Chuadanga was reportedly shelled today. The vast majority of its population has fled, most of them to the countryside; some, particularly middle-class refugees, across the Indian border. What sort of force remains to meet the Government troops is not known. The bulk of the not particularly large force that was in Chuadanga may be in Meherpur.

Sadly the Bangla Desh liberation army seems to have committed, in the last week nearly every military mistake in the book — failing to blow up the Hardinge Bridge across the Ganges, failing to utilise control of the countryside to mount effective ambushes, and trying with limited equipment and completely unseasoned soldiers to hold road-block positions outside towns.

By all accounts they have not fought well, and their morale was not helped by the flight of some leaders who had earlier proclaimed their intention of staying by their posts, even if this meant death. What

Bangla Desh desperately needs now is one heroic stand by its liberation fighters somewhere in the West, although that is easily said and more difficult to do.

East Bengalis are becoming increasingly hostile to Western reporters whom they see as representatives of countries which did not lift a finger to stop the Government army. Their anger is, in an ideal sense, justified.

Too naïve

On the other hand, it illustrates a naïveté and dependence in the national character which Bengalis will have to get rid of if they are to fight effectively for independence. The simple fact that in a fairly hard world it is foolish to expect other countries to go on of their way to help you has not dawned on most of them.

The Government army will be in full control, in the military sense, of the west of the country within days. Earlier there were reports that Government units were acting with far more restraint than they had shown previously. But the burning of Rajshahi, and the shooting of at least some refugees trying to cross the river to India would indicate otherwise.

Martin Adeney adds: According to a lobbyist for the Provisional Government of Bangla Desh who has just arrived in

London, resistance in the eastern provinces is in a better state than in the west. Mr Zacharia Chaudhury, a former student in London who escaped to "liberated areas" when the Government army struck on March 25, says he has recently met Mr Tajuddin Ahmed, acting Prime Minister and secretary of the Awami League, at his headquarters in the East.

Mr Chaudhury had visited the eastern command headquarters of the liberation army where, he said, they were getting more volunteers than they could train. The forces were composed of units of the Bengal regiments in the regular army, East Pakistan Rifles, some militiamen, and new volunteers.

He confirmed that Chittagong town, the cantonment at Comilla, and the airport at Sylhet, were in Government hands. But the hilly tribal areas of the Chittagong hill tracts on the Burmese border were firmly held by liberation forces.

The Government troops were trying to consolidate before the monsoon. They moved from fixed positions but were unable to hold the areas they reached because of popular pressure.

In areas not under their control Government forces were carrying out bombing concentrating on bazaars and markets "At first," claims Mr Chaudhury, "the people were very frightened. But now they are quite used to the bombing. They are taking it quite stoically."