



Bengalis from the Jessore area at an Indian refugee camp at Benapol. The canvas-topped, makeshift dwellings in the background are housing about 5,000 refugees.

Fears of famine in East Pakistan

International relief agencies, unable to continue their rehabilitation programmes to help East Pakistan to recover from the October cyclone, are now gravely concerned at the prospect of widespread famine and epidemics in the wake of the civil war.

The situation can be summed up simply, if brutally: the East Pakistani economy, always in crisis, has broken down. The political, social, and distributive infrastructure — ranging from local councils to bridges — is in the last stages of destruction. The main port of Chittagong is paralysed while 26 ships with supplies lie at anchor outside.

Premonsoon rains are hampering what movement is possible. The monsoon, due next month, is almost certain to rot what relief food is landed and left unhandled in the docks — in addition to bringing the usual six-monthly cyclone with its trail of death and further waste.

There were frequent comparisons yesterday with Biafra, as with the Nigerian civil war, official relief agencies such as the Red Cross are hampered because they cannot do any-

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thing without approval of the host Government.

The Government of President Yahya Khan is determined to crush resistance in East Pakistan, an operation necessarily entailing widespread ruin since virtually the entire population seems united behind the vision of an independent Bangla Desh.

There is no shortage of food or medical supplies. The Government in West Pakistan turned back a relief aircraft of the International Committee of the Red Cross at Karachi on Wednesday. The plane returned to Geneva, and the ICRC is now trying, through every diplomatic means available, to secure approval for relief operations to begin.

The involvement of the ICRC is recognition of a war situation. This is the organisation which works according to the Geneva Convention and operates only in war zones. It was the channel for much relief to Nigeria.

The League of Red Cross Societies in Geneva, the Federation of National Red Cross groups, meanwhile, has had to

postpone indefinitely its long-term programme of civil rehabilitation in the wake of the autumn cyclone. The league has up to £2 millions lying idle.

In Britain the Disasters Emergency Committee, comprising the British Red Cross, Oxfam, Save the Children, War on Want, and Christian Aid, having spent about £800,000 on specific projects, has another £700,000 which it is unable to spend because of the fighting, lack of information, and lack of access.

There was no sign yesterday of either the British or American Governments' bringing pressure to bear, either singly or collectively, on President Yahya Khan's Government to allow relief teams to start operating in areas firmly under his military control.

Mr Frank Judd, Labour MP for Portsmouth West, said at Gosport that Britain should be prepared to suspend the aid programme to Pakistan, first, to highlight concern at the treatment of East Pakistan, and secondly to demonstrate Britain's refusal to be implicated in the economic support of a regime bent on "cruel suppression".