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Refugees flee Kushtia on the banks of the Ganges. Widespread famine is now feared in East Pakistan, and Mr John Stonehouse, MP, left London yesterday to investigate the situation on behalf of Oxfam and War on Want.

The fading dream of Bangla Desh

CALCUTTA, 17 April
TROOPS from West Pakistan, loyal to General Yahya Khan, the country's military ruler, are now rolling up the map of Bangla Desh. They have ended, for the time being, Bengali dreams of secession and freedom in East Pakistan. In spite of their passionate hopes, the unwarlike Bengalis have been no match for the Frontier soldiers from the West—traditionally the best and most ruthless warriors on the Indian subcontinent.

But after a 200-mile journey through the tragic landscape of Bangla Desh, I am sure that from now on President Yahya will hold his eastern province only by force and that his rule will be harassed by continual resistance, however ill-organised and futile it may be. The Bengalis will never forget or forgive the happenings of the past few weeks.

COLIN SMITH, the first British newspaperman to reach Dacca since the foreign Press was expelled, reports on his hazardous journey to East Pakistan's isolated capital.

At about lunch time on Good Friday, I reached Dacca, the occupied capital of East Pakistan, isolated from the rest of the world on the orders of Yahya Khan. With me was Romano Cagnoni, an Italian freelance photographer based in London.

We had taken four days to travel the 100 miles there from the Indian border in jeeps, trucks, oxcarts, canoes, and for one memorable three-mile stretch—by pony. Apart from an Italian newsman shot through the chest during the fighting on 25 March and too weak to be expelled with the other foreign reporters, we were the first foreign journalists in the city for over a fortnight. Cagnoni had hidden his cameras in two assorted biscuit packets. We wore clean short-sleeved shirts, bor-

rowed from a missionary, in order to lend more credibility to our claim that we were technicians working for the Water and Power Development Authority.

What we saw in Dacca, and in the countryside in the week we spent travelling to and from it, convinced us that there would be no popular uprising in the capital for the moment. Memories of what the soldiers' guns can do are too recent.

Hiding arms

The war is now really coming to the end of its first phase—the national struggle, when patriotism overrode all political considerations and Awami Leaguers and Maoists fought, in theory anyway, shoulder to shoulder against a common foe. The second phase is just beginning:

a classic guerrilla operation waged by the Left with all the eruptions in East Pakistan society this will mean.

Certainly the bourgeois Awami League—whose stock is already low in some areas for its sad inability to defend the people—will be the first to suffer. Some villages are already planning to cache arms, and the Indian police say that there have been virtually no Naxalite incidents in West Bengal these past two weeks because all the Indian Maoist extremists are fighting across the border in East Bengal.

One of our first calls in Dacca was to the British Council, the driver of our baby taxi—a sort of rickshaw pulled by a motor scooter—having mistaken this for the British High Commission. There was a large Union Jack on

the door which, we learned later, hadn't stopped the four police guards in the building from getting shot.

When we reached the High Commission itself, some tempers were on edge. A senior British official in dark glasses shouted that our arrival would get them all killed and probably ourselves as well.

Another man said that it wasn't in their interests for people in Britain to know what was going on. They knew what was going on and that was all that was necessary.

All telex and telephone communications between Dacca and the outside world are cut and the Commission's staff, most of whom had evacuated their families, had just received their first mail for six weeks.

The only civilian aircraft landing at Dacca are Boeings belonging to Pakistan International Airways. Each carries 175

(Continued on page 4)

Guerrillas will fight on

(Continued from page 1)

young men who travel in white shirts and khaki trousers, but put on the rest of their uniform when they land. Passengers trying to book PIA flights to Dacca from Karachi are told the aircraft are full of 'officials.'

At the American Consulate, things were a little more relaxed and cold beers and a wall map were produced. Like most of the diplomats we spoke to, the Americans were generally agreed that the West Pakistan troops had killed about 6,000 men, women, and children, among them 300 to 500 students.

Some of the West Pakistan units seem to have been possessed by bloodlust directed against the Hindus of East Pakistan, recalling the massacres of 1947, at the time of Partition. The bodies of uncircumcised Hindu men have been found with their penes cut off.

Dacca is an old city of corrugated iron, bamboo, mud and stone. Some parts are so tumbledown they could probably be shelled for half an hour without making much noticeable difference. One phosphorus grenade or incendiary bullet into one of its bamboo slums and you've burned down a neighbourhood. Twenty-five blocks were destroyed in this way.

The day after the slaughter, the city's population of crows—dirty, fat, grey birds—seemed to double, and though the bodies were quickly removed, the birds have stayed on, flapping and cawing above the streets.

The normal population of Dacca, city of 800 mosques, is two million: two-thirds have fled to the countryside and those who remain live in terror of the military. The green and white Pakistan flags flying everywhere over the Bengali city are simply tokens of defeat and surrender. Some Pakistan Army officers do not seem to be restrained by a code of honour any more strin-

gent than one drawn up by Attila the Hun.

The killing began at the university at about one in the morning. The students, in bed in their residential halls, heard the Army vehicles approaching. Most of them thought the military were coming to make a few more arrests.

A few of the militants made sure that the rifles they had collected from the townspeople over the past few weeks were well hidden. Nobody thought he would have to fight. Nobody had more than a few rounds of ammunition, anyway.

Suddenly searchlights were played on the windows, dazzling the students so that they had to squint and turn away. Then came the Punjabi and Baluchi soldiers with their Chinese AK 47 automatic rifles, smashing the window glass with their butts and spraying the dormitories with fire.

A few students got to the rooftops, where they managed to squeeze off one or two shots with their old bolt-action rifles before they were picked up in the searchlights and killed. Others came running out screaming, with their hands up, only to be stood against the walls of their halls and mown down with machine-gun fire from tanks and armoured cars. Survivors were finished off with the bayonet.

Lecturers killed in the attack were: Dr G. C. Deb, head of the Department of Philosophy; Dr Mofizullah Kabir, head of the History Department; Dr A. N. Maniruzzaman, head of the Statistics Department; Dr M. Maniruzzaman, reader of the Bengali Department, and Dr Obinosor Chockrobhuti, reader of the English Department and Provost of Jagannath Hatt, the only Hindu residential hall. Five other lecturers, whose names I was not able to collect, are also thought to be dead.

Resistance at the HQ of the

East Pakistan Rifles (border police) and the city police stations was bloody, but short-lived. Even so, the West Pakistanis are said to have been surprised at the ferocity of the fighting. The races who formed the elite of Britain's Indian Army now live in West Pakistan and share the Imperial Englishman's contempt for the artistic little Bengalis, who usually manage to kill people only when they are scared or angry, as they are now.

Rape, loot and murder after dark

'The Army has taken its licks, too,' one diplomat told us. At a place called Kushtia—a railway town on the banks of the Ganges—the military paid dearly for underestimating the enemy when they split up a company of about 80 Baluchi infantry, stationing some in the automatic telephone exchange, some in the police station and some in other places. Vastly outnumbered, the groups were hacked to pieces one at a time.

Strolling through the crowded bazaars of Dacca, with our guides constantly trying to stop curious crowds from gathering round us and attracting the attention of Army patrols, Radio Pakistan's claims of 'business as usual' seemed reasonable enough. We came across some gutted buildings, but by European standards of devastation the damage was trifling.

Only when we reached the newer, central part of the city did we see the machine-gun posts at every crossroads and rows of empty houses in the Hindu districts, where some of the worst killing is said to have taken place.

But even the areas where the heaviest fighting took place have been tidied up with astonishing

speed. Only fresh horrors—like the layers of rotting bodies discovered by the staff of the Inter-continental Hotel in the city tip along the Narayanganj road—give some idea of the true picture.

There is a shortage of almost everything, from kerosene to food. Prices of some goods have doubled. The Holy Family Hospital, run by American missionaries, closed down a week ago when its stocks ran out.

The tanks have left the city for the moment. Apparently they went through it so many times that their tracks wore out and they had to be carried off on transporters. The curfew has been relaxed until 9 p.m., but most citizens consider it unsafe to walk the streets after dark because West Pakistan soldiers are robbing people of their watches and wallets at gunpoint.

During the day, troops patrol the streets in jeeps and trucks. There are also some armed Bihari volunteers rushing about in commandeered vehicles. If the West Pakistanis are ever forced out of Bangla Desh, then, in the name of humanity, they should take the Biharis with them, otherwise the Bengalis will surely massacre them.

These Urdu-speaking Muslims from the Indian State of Bihar came to East Pakistan as refugees in 1947, to escape Hindu persecution during the Partition troubles. The Biharis, mostly traders, soon took over vacant shops left by Hindus who had run the other way. Now the Biharis have repaid Bengali hospitality by acting as scouts and guides for the West Pakistanis, who are also Urdu-speaking and with whom they feel a greater solidarity.

There are Army checkpoints everywhere in Dacca, though, luckily, in most cases only the officers can understand English. A soldier stopped me outside the Dacca Improvement Trust offices and demanded identity papers.



COLIN SMITH

In Bangla Desh: 'Squads of youths learning their left from their right.'

He accepted my passport as good enough, though it had no entry stamp for East Pakistan. It was a long moment.

A 19-year-old student told me he was stopped on his bicycle by an aggressive young Baluchi, about his own age, who demanded to know why he wasn't flying the Pakistan flag from his handlebars. The soldier eventually let him go when he declared his willingness to have Pakistan written in capital letters in blood on his shirt. 'I told the Baluchi I didn't have a knife myself and offered him my arm for his bayonet. He let me go.'

Now that the fighting is over in the capital, West Pakistan soldiers have taken to entering houses after dark to rape, loot and murder. Girls are sometimes spared if they can recite Muslim prayers. Proof of circumcision is demanded from the men.

A European who took us to his bungalow for a drink pointed to a house across the road and said that inside it were the bodies of four Hindus—including two children—who had been shot the night before.

We started our journey to Dacca from the Indian border town of Krishnanagar. Here we met some Indian West Bengali supporters of the Mukti Foj, the Liberation Army. They were taking drums of petrol up to the border in pre-war three-wheeler German pick-up vans flying the red, green and gold banner of Bangla Desh.

From the trucks the fuel was

transferred to some bamboo ox carts which trekked off with their load to the East Pakistan village of Kusumpur. We went with them. There were no border checks and only a conical border stone indicated that we had crossed the Radcliffe Line.

There are stories of Indian ammunition going over in bottles of plasma and of companies of the Indian Border Security Force going across disguised as East Pakistan Rifles personnel—not difficult, because they both wear old British-style uniforms and would need only to change their shoulder flashes.

I asked the West Bengalis we went in with what they were going to do, and they said they had just come to show their support. Sure enough, after an hour they left us and turned back towards India. Crossing the border at all is a tremendously emotional thing for a Bengali of either side, because since the 1965 war it has been sealed off.

Our first night we spent at a police station where they had posted perimeter guards and thrown camouflage nets over their vehicles. After the confusion we had witnessed during the fighting at Jessore the week before, it all looked very promising. Later we were to learn that the efficiency of the Liberation Army usually depended on the distance it was away from any actual fighting. In this case Jessore was about 20 miles down the road.

All the way to Dacca our progress was impeded by Bengali hospitality. As any Sangbadik (news carrier) who has been in the area these past weeks will testify, the villagers rarely let the stranger escape without giving him food and drink and a few speeches about fighting to the last drop of their blood.

Even a Baluchi prisoner in a village near Kushtia was offered juice from a Dab (green coconut) before they killed him.

'He said that he had a small son and that President Yahya had made him come and fight. But one man said that he had a small son, too, and now he was dead. They told him to pray and he made his peace with Allah. Then he opened his shirt and bared his chest and the villagers dug their spears in here, here and here.'

For a while, we followed the route taken by a West Pakistan motorised column 48 hours before: there were burnt huts on either side of the road, and in the glass booth of a filling station office near the village of Kaligani we counted 32 bullet holes.

In some towns we were taken to see whiskery old men with swagger sticks shouting commands in English to squads of youths learning their left from their right as they drilled in

columns of threes. Then they would amble off under the trees, where another old soldier began naming the parts of a 25-year-old Lee-Enfield rifle.

But at the market town of Jhenida we met Captain Manubuddin—a 26-year-old former assistant superintendent of police. He was tall for a Bengali and looked a bit of a playboy with the lanyard of his police revolver threaded through the collar of a buttoned-down shirt. He is officially credited with starting resistance in his area. As soon as he heard of the Army's attack in Dacca, he opened his armoury and handed out the rifles.

He had a nice style, flopping his feet up into a leather-backed armchair in the local government offices where he had set up his headquarters and saying: 'Those bastard Punjabis and those bastard Biharis—we've got a lot to kill.'

His men were armed with anything from 12-bore shotguns to AK assault rifles, with which the East Bengal Regiment had been re-equipped. They had dug L-shaped slit trenches against air attack and stood out as being a well-organised bunch.

For the first 90 miles of the trip—up to the Ganges fishing village of Goalundo—wooden bridges had been burnt down, roads blocked with freshly felled trees, and wide anti-tank ditches dug deep into the tarmac highways. At times we had to detour for miles across dry paddy fields—an operation the Army will not be able to repeat in June when the monsoon starts in earnest.

We saw our first sign of Pakistani Army air activity as we

crossed the Ganges from Goalundo to Bilashpur in a packed old motor launch steered by a white-bearded captain who sat cross-legged on a bench behind the wheel. When we were in midstream, an Army helicopter—it looked like a Westland Wessex—came quite close and we joined the captain in the wheelhouse.

Coming back, a five-hour journey in a canoe, we stayed under the curved bamboo shelter all the time. When we reached Faridpur, we heard that Goalundo had been bombed. We went straight there and found that it had in fact been strafed with cannon and rocket-fire. The villagers showed us bits of aluminium from the rockets. The attack had taken place on Easter Sunday. Four people were killed and eight wounded.

There were flies everywhere, because some of the villagers had received direct hits from the cannon shells and bits of them were still in the ground.

A Mukti Foj man brought out a grey-faced youth with a blanket round his shoulders and lifted his shirt to show a small hole in his side where a piece of shrapnel had penetrated. He also had a bandage around a head wound. We put him in the back of a pick-up truck loaned to us by the Faridpur branch of the Awami League and took him to the hospital at Rajbari, where the nursing sisters in their white caps and habits looked surprised to see us. On the way we picked up half a dozen unarmed East Pakistan policemen and suddenly realised what a tempting target that blob of khaki at the back might make for an aircraft.