

Pakistan Begins New Drive To Dislodge Bengali Forces

By RAM SURESH

Agartala, India, April 18 (Reuters)—Pakistani troops, supported by the Air Force, launched a new operation today in an attempt to oust rebel Bengali forces from East Pakistani areas near this Indian border outpost.

Standing at the airport at the outskirts of Agartala, bordered on three sides by East Pakistan, the sound of bombs and bursting artillery shells could be heard and flashes and palls of smoke from several areas across the border were visible.

Bid To Seal Borders

One cloud of smoke, according to airport officials, seemed to be rising from the general area of Brahmanbaria, a large town on the Teetas River 10 to 15 miles away. Smoke also hovered over the area of nearby Comilla city.

The Pakistani Army movements in this area were seen by some observers in Agartala as a major, and possibly decisive, bid to seal the eastern borders of the strife-torn province. Reliable reports also indicate that Pakistan is trying to close off the western border areas.

Pakistani troops were believed to have destroyed every structure in sight along the border between Comilla district and Tripura state in India, of which Agartala is the capital.

From a watchtower at the border security outpost at Kamalasagar, 15 miles southwest of Agartala, the entire hamlet of Quasba could be seen to be burned or damaged.

Every house and hut in the once-prosperous settlement was in ruins. Green and white Pakistani government flags fluttered over several rooftops.

Residents on the Indian side said supporters of the Muslim League, which is said to be siding with the Army, had pulled down the "free Bengal" flags and hoisted up Pakistani flags.

According to local official

sources, a big "liberation army" group had been putting up stiff resistance at a bridge leading to Brahmanbaria. But today, the troops were reported to have crossed the bridge and overrun the town before moving toward the border.

Meanwhile, the "sovereign independent Republic of Bangladesh" (Bengali Nation) entered its second day of formal independence tonight. But even its prime minister, Tajuddin Ahmed, who was present at the proclamation ceremony just in-

(Continued, Page A 5, Col. 1)



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side East **Pakistan** yesterday, admitted that superior Pakistani firepower was pushing his liberation army back from the towns.

He claimed, however, in an interview yesterday, that the **Bangla Desh** troops still controlled the countryside.

Many refugees see the latest Army assault as marking the end of resistance in the area. But this correspondent saw several hundred men of the East Bengali Regiment—the only trained fighting force of the **Bangla Desh** nationalists—regrouping and preparing to counterattack.

Waiting For More Men

About 200 men, led by a captain and equipped with machine guns, were hiding behind a hillock a few yards inside East Pakistani territory.

The captain said they planned to attack the Pakistani company now in Quasba after some more men he was expecting had arrived.

The “liberation army” also was regrouping in other areas, and heavy fighting could be expected in the area in the next week, he added.

Informed local sources here discounted reports that there had been fierce fighting all over the eastern sector or that Bengalis had fought their way into big towns like Comilla and Sylhet. There had only been sporadic exchanges, they said.

The only major battle is reported to have taken place at Sylhet about five days ago. But the liberation forces are believed to have finally fled, leaving behind their few heavy arms.

Even men of the East Bengal Regiment reject reports that Pakistani Air Force planes had been shot down or captured by the independence fighters in East **Pakistan**.

