

Bengalis Lose Last Key Base

Pakistan War Seems Ended Along Border

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ICHLAKHALI, East Pakistan, April 18 — Bangladesh surrendered its last important town without a fight today and the Pakistan civil war appeared to have ended in the western provinces bordering India.

As they have at town after town during the last 10 days, the Bengali rebels chose to retreat rather than defend Meherpur this morning.

From a small village half a mile from Meherpur, occasional mortars and short bursts of rifle fire could be heard, but the handful of East Pakistan Rifle soldiers still around said that no one was manning defensive positions in the town. It appeared that the advancing Pakistan army was firing the mortar shells to make completely sure that all defenders had time to flee.

The three armed soldiers passing through the small village seemed to have remained more to watch than to fight. As the mortar rounds fell slightly nearer, they piled into a truck with a dozen civilians and drove toward India.

Most of their comrades were already in India early this morning before a shot was fired at Meherpur.

An Indian border security camp appeared to be taking care of about 200 East Pakistan Riflemen. Tents had been pitched in front of the Indian base's main gate and a dozen assorted jeeps and land rovers flying the Bangla Desh flag were parked in the yard.

Many of the East Pakistan Riflemen had removed their identifying insignia, but the marks where insignia had been showed clearly and the East Pakistanis have colored web gear different from those of their equivalent—the Indian Border Security force.

An Indian officer refused to explain why the East Pakistani soldiers were being sheltered at his base. He said he had no instructions from his superiors.

The mud and thatch houses built in clusters along the muddy four mile from the Indian border to Meherpur were deserted except for people who had come back to pick up a second or third load of their property. The refugees carried rice, seeds, pots and cloth as they walked toward India. One prosperous family had salvaged a wooden bedstead.

At each distant explosion of a mortar shell, two young boys clutching tiny parcels started to run. They sprinted for a few seconds and then slowed to a walk without ever looking back at the bright sky and green treeline which showed no trace of the sporadic shelling.

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Bengalis Surrender Major Town

PAKISTAN, From A1

The abandonment of Meherpur concludes the rapid withdrawal of all resistance forces from the western provinces of Kushtia, Jessore and Khulna they largely controlled two weeks ago. Once the Pakistan army began to attack, the ill-armed, ill-prepared Bengalis turned and made for India.

In these provinces, almost no defensive measures were taken during the war's first 10 days when the rebels were mostly unmolested in all the major towns.

When the army began to move in earnest, it found less a war than a footrace—and it moved cautiously enough to allow most Bengalis involved in the resistance to escape. The Indian government estimates that 100,000 East Pakistanis have crossed into West Bengal in the last 10 days.

At a village crossroads within half a mile of Meherpur, a lone East Pakistan Rifleman was standing in full uniform, directing traffic on the narrow dirt roads. He was the only man with a gun this morning not walking toward Indian or already there.

"Are you the only soldier?" A civilian answered in English for him, "Yes." "Will more join you to fight?"

No answer came. But almost two hours later the soldier was encountered again. This time he was at the Indian border having caught a ride and reached there safely well before many of the villagers he had been with at the crossroads.

In an attempt to keep Bangla Desh (Bengal Nation) alive on East Pakistan territory, the rebels moved their provisional capital as they gave up town after town. These capitals were provisional because Dacca would once again be the capital after Bangla Desh forces liberated it.

Meherpur was the capital as recently as Friday, according to Bengali resistance officials. However, the provisional government leaders apparently were not willing to risk visiting Meherpur Saturday when they held their formal installation ceremony for the benefit of the press. The ceremony was in a mango grove less than 500 yards from the Indian border about five miles south of Meherpur.

Only mango groves, rice paddies and a few villages have not been abandoned to the Pakistan army in the western provinces. The Bengali leadership which took over the resistance is mainly from the towns and well-educated.

The leaders are now all in India and if the struggle they jumped to lead three weeks ago is to continue, they will have to build a rural base and harass the army which has already taken its main objectives.

However, there has been no indication that the Bengali resistance leaders have done more than verbally acknowledge that their struggle will be long and difficult.