

Bangladesh Leader Jails Politicians, Puts Off Vote

By Paul Chutkow
Associated Press

DACCA, Bangladesh — Military strongman Ziaur Rahman has arrested more than 100 persons, some of them prominent politicians, since he took over in name as well as fact last month. He also appears to be gaining strength from a good harvest, a faint glimmer of hope in this impoverished nation.

Last month Rahman, an army major general who came to power in November 1975 after a bloody three-month struggle, made his position formal by becoming chief martial law administrator. At the same time, he arrested 11 prominent politicians. They included former President Khondakar Mushtaque Ahmed, an advocate of early national elections.

These arrests were followed by the detention of more than 100 middle-level political workers in an apparent effort to quash any resistance to the government's decision to postpone the elections originally set for February.

"Rightists and leftists have been seized to nullify the impact of the arrests," a government spokesman said. "There were all sorts of rumors going around. The arrests were more or less a preemptive strike."

In any case, elections had been made a secondary issue for much of the population, including some of the top politicians not in prison, by an emotional dispute with neighbor India over the sharing of Ganges River water and continuing border trouble.

"Today we want a soldier in command, not a politician," said a leader of the right-wing Moslem League. "The general promises elections at some time and that's all right with us." Rahman has said he plans to hold village-level elections early next year and national elections "in due time."

So far, Rahman's reputation for being honest and somewhat apolitical has headed off major fears that he has permanently abandoned representative government.

His exercise of martial law authority, aside from the political arrests, has been considered restrained with troops rarely making their presence felt in Dacca or in other major cities.

Foreign observers say Rahman's hold on power depends in large measure on the continuing rainfall needed for the rice crop, the staple of the 80 million people crowded into this low-size nation.

The numbing scenes of starvation which had turned Bangladesh into an international symbol of overpopulated poverty are less frequent now. But most people are still undernourished, disease-prone and defenseless against the floods, cyclones and drought which have long marked the region's history.

International experts say Bangladesh's economy is in its best shape since the country won its independence from Pakistan, with Indian military assistance, on Dec. 16, 1971.

The trade picture has improved somewhat because of increased exports and curtailed imports. Inflation has been checked, smuggling across the border to India has been cut down and widespread corruption has been reduced, the experts say.

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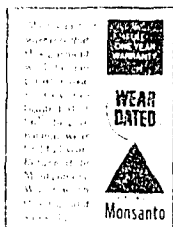
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