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PAKISTAN: Mujib's Secret Trial

"Our people will react violently to this," a member of the Bengali liberation underground whispered to TIME Correspondent David Greenway in Dacca last week. The warning proved all too true. Sheik Mujibur ("Mujib") Rahman, 51, fiery leader of East Pakistan and the man who may hold the key to ending the bloody five-month-old civil war, had just gone on trial for his life before a secret military court in West Pakistan, more than 1,500 miles away. Late that same afternoon, a bomb exploded in the lobby of Dacca's Intercontinental Hotel.

Flash and Roar. Correspondent Greenway, who suffered a concussion in the blast, cabled: "I was standing in front of the cigar store in the lobby when, with a flash and a roar, the wall a few feet in front of me seemed to buckle and dissolve. I was flung to the floor. That was fortunate, because great chunks of bricks and concrete flew over me, crashing through the lobby and blowing men and furniture through the plate-glass windows onto the sidewalk.

"Part of an air duct came down on my head and I could not move. There was thick, choking smoke and water spewing from broken pipes. Soon the smoke began to clear. People milled about the crumpled, crying victims lying bleeding on the lawn. None, luckily, was dead. One girl, an employee of the hotel, had been completely buried under three feet of rubble. When they dug her out, all she could say was: 'I knew I should not have come to work today.' "

The timing of the bombing tends to confirm that Mujib's trial will further stiffen Bengali resistance to the occupying West Pakistani army. If there are any chances of a political settlement —and they seem almost nonexistent—imposition of the death penalty could dash them.

Strict Secrecy. Mujib's political role and his astonishing popularity in East Pakistan in a sense precipitated the civil war (TIME cover, Aug. 2). In last December's elections for a constitutional assembly, his Awami League won an overwhelming 167 of 169 seats in the East. That was enough to guarantee Mujib a majority in the 313-seat national assembly, and ensured that he would have become Prime Minister of Pakistan. It was also enough to alarm President Agha Mohammed Yahya Khan and the West Pakistani establishment, which has run the geographically divided country since its partition from India in 1947.

Yahya and Co. feared that Mujib's ascendancy would mean far greater autonomy for the long-exploited East Pakistanis, and the Pakistani army ruthlessly moved to crush the Bengali movement.

There is little doubt that Mujib will be convicted of the undefined charges of "waging war against Pakistan and other offenses." When he was arrested last March 26, hours after the army crackdown, Yahya publicly branded him a traitor and hinted that he "might not live." Observed one Western diplomat last week: "You know how hot the Punjabi plains are this time of year. You might say Mujib has a snowball's chance of acquittal."

Though everything about the trial is shrouded in secrecy, it was learned last week that the proceedings are being held in a new, one-story red-brick jail in the textile city of Lyallpur, 150 miles south of Rawalpindi. Islamabad sources claim that the strict secrecy is necessary to prevent Bengali rebels from trying to rescue Mujib. More likely it is because Yahya is unwilling to give

Mujib a public platform. When the sheik was tried in 1968, also on charges of treason stemming from his demands for East Pakistan's autonomy, the trial was aborted amid widespread antigovernment protests. But not before Mujib's British lawyer managed to make the government "look utterly silly," as one diplomat recalled.

Second Home. A man of vitality and vehemence, Mujib became the political Gandhi of the Bengalis, symbolizing their hopes and voicing their grievances. Not even Pakistan's founder, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, drew the million-strong throngs that Mujib has twice attracted in Dacca. Nor, for that matter, has any subcontinent politician since Gandhi's day spent so much time behind bars for his political beliefs—a little over ten years. "Prison is my other home," he once said.

If Mujib's courage and bluntness got him into trouble frequently in the past, at least his family was spared. Now that is not so sure. Last week Mujib's brother, a businessman named Sheik Abu Nasser, turned up in New Delhi with only the tattered clothes on his back. Nasser told how Mujib's aged parents (his father is 95, his mother 80) were driven from their home by Pakistani troops. Their house was burned, their servants shot and they have not been heard from since. Nasser did not know whether his wife and six children were dead or alive. He had hoped, he said, that Senator Edward Kennedy, who last week visited India's refugee camps on a fact-finding mission as chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Refugees, might be able to learn their whereabouts. But the Pakistani government refused Kennedy permission to visit either East or West Pakistan. Kennedy, who trudged through mud and drenching rains, was greeted by refugees carrying hand-painted placards,

KENNEDY, THANK YOU FOR COMING.

He and an M.I.T. nutrition expert with him noted the appalling effects of malnutrition on the children, many already blind from vitamin A deficiencies, others irrevocably mentally retarded.

Though Mujib is accused of advocating secession for East Pakistan, the fact is that he did not want a total split-up of Pakistan and never declared independence until it was done in his name after the bloodbath began. To keep his young militants in line, he spoke of "emancipation" and "freedom." "But there is no question of secession," Mujib often said. "We only want our due share. Besides, East Pakistanis are in a majority, and it is ridiculous to think that the majority would secede from the minority."

Yahya recently told a visitor, "My generals want a trial and execution." Still, there is a feeling that Pakistan's President might spare Mujib's life. With hopes for a united Pakistan all but ended by the civil war, keeping Mujib alive would leave open one last option —negotiating the divorce of East and West in peace rather than war.