

TIME

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The World: East Pakistan: Even the Skies Weep

IN New Delhi last week, one member of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's Cabinet was heard to remark: "War is inevitable." In Islamabad, President Agha Mohammed Yahya Khan spent the better part of a 40-minute television speech railing against the Indians, whom he accused of "whipping up a war frenzy." Along their borders, east and west, both India and Pakistan massed troops. Both defended the action as precautionary, but there was a real danger that a minor border incident could suddenly engulf the subcontinent in all-out war.

Several factors are at work to reduce the likelihood of such an explosion. The Indian-Soviet friendship treaty, signed early in August, deters India from waging war without consulting the Soviets. At the same time, rising discontent and political and economic pressures within West Pakistan have also placed restraints on Strongman Yahya Khan and his military regime. Nonetheless, war remains a distinct possibility. As Mrs. Gandhi said last week at a public meeting in South India: "We must be prepared for any eventuality."

Intolerable Strain. The current dispute has grown out of the Pakistani army's harsh repression of a Bengali movement demanding greater autonomy for the much-exploited eastern sector of the divided nation. The resulting flood of impoverished East Pakistani refugees has placed an intolerable strain on India's already overburdened economy. New Delhi has insisted from the first that the refugees, who now number well over 9,000,000 by official estimates, must be allowed to return safely to their homes in East Pakistan.

Before that is possible, however, a political solution must be found that would end the Pakistani army's reign of terror, wanton destruction and pogroms aimed particularly at the 10 million members of the Hindu minority in predominantly Moslem East Pakistan (pop. 78 million at the start of the civil war).

Once, Sheik Mujibur ("Mujib") Rahman, leader of the Awami League, the East's majority party, might have held the key to that solution. As the overwhelming winner of the country's first national elections last December Mujib stood to become Prime Minister of Pakistan; now he is on trial for his life before a secret military tribunal in the West on charges of treason.

Though Islamabad has ordered the military command to ease off on its repressive tactics, refugees are still trekking into India at the rate of about 30,000 a day, telling of villages burned, residents shot, and prominent figures carried off and never heard from again. One of the more horrible revelations concerns 563 young Bengali women, some only 18, who have been held captive inside Dacca's dingy military cantonment since the first days of the fighting. Seized from Dacca University and private homes and forced

into military brothels, the girls are all three to five months pregnant. The army is reported to have enlisted Bengali gynecologists to abort girls held at military installations. But for those at the Dacca cantonment it is too late for abortion. The military has begun freeing the girls a few at a time, still carrying the babies of Pakistani soldiers.

A Million Dead. No one knows how many have died in the seven-month-old civil war. But in Karachi, a source with close connections to Yahya's military regime concedes: "The generals say the figure is at least 1,000,000." Punitive raids by the Pakistani army against villages near sites sabotaged by the Mukti Bahini, the Bengali liberation army, are an everyday occurrence.

The fighting is expected to increase sharply in the next few weeks, with the end of the monsoon rains. Both the Pakistani army, most of whose 80,000 troops are bunkered down along the Indian border, and the Mukti Bahini, with as many as 60,000 guerrilla fighters, have said that they will soon open major new military offensives.

Plentiful Arms. On a recent trip deep into Mukti Bahini territory, TIME Correspondent Dan Coggin found an almost surreal scene. He cabled:

"Leaving the road behind, I entered a strange world where water is seasonal king and the only transport is a large, cane-covered canoe known as the country boat. For seven hours we plied deeper into Gopalganj subdivision in southern Faridpur district. The two wiry oarsmen found their way by taking note of such landmarks as a forlornly decaying maharajah's palace and giant butterfly nets hovering like outsized flamingos on stilt legs at water's edge.

"As darkness approached, we were able to visit two neighboring villages, with about 25 guerrillas living among the local folk in each. The guerrillas were mostly men in their 20s, some ex-college students, others former soldiers, militiamen and police. Their arms were various but plentiful, and they had ammunition, mines and grenades.

"A Mukti Bahini captain told me that the Bengali rebels are following the three-stage guerrilla warfare strategy of the Viet Cong, and are now in the first phase of organization and staging hit-and-run attacks. So far the guerrillas in the captain's area of operations have lost about 50 men, and larger army attacks are expected. But the Mukti Bahini plan to mount ambushes and avoid meeting army firepower headon.

"On my way back to Dacca next day, I came upon a convoy trucker who had been waiting for five days for his turn to board a ferry and cross the miles-wide junction of the great Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers. As we huddled under the tailgate to keep dry, a shopkeeper joined us. Gazing at the puddle forming beneath us, he said: 'Even the skies are weeping for this land.' "

Always Hungry. As conditions within East Pakistan have worsened, so have those of the refugees in India. The stench from poor sanitation facilities hangs heavy in the air. Rajinder Kumar, 32, formerly a clerk in Dacca, says he is "always hungry" on his daily grain ration of 300 grams (about 1½ cups). His three children each get half that much. "They cry for more," he says, "but there isn't any more."

Malnutrition has reached desperate proportions among the children. Dr. John Seamon, a British doctor with the Save the Children Fund who has traveled extensively among the 1,000 or so scattered refugee camps estimates that 150,000 children between the ages of one and eight have died, and that 500,000 more are suffering from serious malnutrition and related diseases.


It is now officially estimated that refugees will swell to 12 million by the end of the year. The cost to the Indian government for the fiscal year ending next March 31 may run as high as \$830 million. The U.S. so far has supplied \$83.2 million for the refugees, and \$137 million in "humanitarian" relief inside East Pakistan. Two weeks ago, the Nixon Administration asked Congress to grant an additional \$250 million.

Senator Edward Kennedy charges that the U.S. is sending another sort of aid to the subcontinent as well. In spite of a State Department freeze on new military aid shipments to Pakistan, says Kennedy, the Pentagon has signed new defense contracts totaling nearly \$10 million with the Pakistan government within the past five months. Kennedy's investigation also revealed that U.S. firms have received State Department licenses to ship to Pakistan arms and ammunition purchased from the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe.

Catalyst for Violence. Observers doubt that the situation would ease even if Yahya were to release Mujib and lift a ban on the Awami League. Where the Bengalis once were merely demanding greater autonomy, they now seem determined to fight for outright independence.

In his speech last week, Yahya also announced that the National Assembly would be convened in December, immediately following by-elections in the East to fill the Assembly seats vacated by disqualified Awami Leaguers. With the main party banned from participation, however, the election is likely to provoke more violence. Already the Mukti Bahini have vowed to treat candidates as dalals ("collaborators").

Nonetheless, Yahya may find himself compelled to put his government at least partly in civilian hands. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, leader of West Pakistan's majority Pakistan People's Party and Yahya's most probable choice for Prime Minister, has become more and more outspoken about "the rule of the generals." Recently he said: "The long night of terror must end. The people of Pakistan must take their destiny in their own hands." Formerly that sort of talk would have landed him in jail. Now even Yahya seems to have recognized that unless the military allows some sort of civilian rule it may face trouble in the West as well as in the ravaged East.

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