

Bangladesh Official Visits Beleaguered Bihari Colony

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DACCA, Feb. 9—The Bangladesh government's attitude toward the non-Bengali community in Dacca's Mirpur suburb appeared to have softened today, and tension has diminished.

For the first time since the crisis of Mirpur began 12 days ago, a ranking member of the Bangladesh government visited the community yesterday. His reports seem likely to avert starvation and any further major gun battles there.

The government official found that most Mirpur residents are frightened and short of food and water; he found no evidence that military preparations were being made there for a last-ditch defense of the community against Bangladesh government troops, who are searching for weapons in the area.

"This entire, unfortunate situation," one official said, "resulted from an original misunderstanding when Bangladesh forces were fired upon.

Before yesterday, government officials had described the area as an armed camp of deserters from the Pakistani army and non Bengali (Bihari) men armed and determined to fight rather than surrender their weapons.

Official estimates of the armed dissidents in Mirpur ranged from 30,000 down to 2,000. No one was giving new

estimates today, but the old ones appeared to have been discarded. It was officially announced that most of the 1,500 men arrested during a partial evacuation are to be released within days.

Most importantly for the residents of Mirpur—who have been without food supplies, public water, electricity or phones for 11 days—a government spokesman said that such facilities are to be restored as soon as possible.

Orders have already been given to water and power authority officials to enter the area and restore normal services, a government spokesman said. He added that he expects food to begin to be distributed today.

The change in attitude toward the community of about 150,000 Biharis appears to have been caused by the civil government's first on-scene look at Mirpur. The original misunderstanding that government officials referred to was the exchange of fire. Jan. 29 and 30, when Bangladesh troops and police began their attempt to search for weapons.

Since the liberation of Bangladesh on Dec. 16, Mirpur residents had been protected by Indian army troops. They had surrendered about 1,000 weapons to the Indian army and were afraid that when Indian soldiers gave way to Bangladesh soldiers they would be

killed in revenge for the killings of Bangalis by Biharis during the nine months of the Pakistani army's brutal rule here.

Each side claims that the other opened fire first. Whatever happened, Bangladesh soldiers were killed and Biharis were killed.

The shooting increased Bihari fears that they were to be massacred and apparently caused the Bengali forces of the government to consider Mirpur a largely hostile, dangerous encampment.

Foreign relief organizations have been banned from the area for 11 days, but officials said they may enter the Bihari community today to distribute food. Government officials also said that reporters will be allowed to visit Mirpur soon. Reporters have been barred since the troubles began and have entered the community only by slipping unnoticed between army watchposts.

The search for weapons will continue, officials say, but it now appears that Bihari residents will be treated as largely innocent rather than largely guilty. The same man who earlier predicted hard fighting in two sections of Mirpur says now that he does not expect battles as the weapons search goes on.