

Bengalis Ashamed Of Burst of Revenge Against the Biharis

By **SYDNEY H. SCHANBERG**

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KHULNA, Bangladesh, March 16—Nearly everywhere in this Bengali city people are nervously trying to hide their shame.

No Bengali resident can be found who will talk of the details, and many pretend the incident never happened. But facts are emerging that make it clear that last Friday, in a dark burst of revenge against an ethnic minority many of whose members had collaborated with the Pakistani Army, the Bengalis attacked the Bihari colony here, setting fire to homes and killing indiscriminately. The killing was done mostly with knives, some of them large machete-like blades.

It is impossible to get an exact casualty count. Some people say many Bihari bodies were thrown into the Bhairab River and have been washed away. Trustworthy sources, including ashamed Bengalis, report that the toll of dead and wounded is at least several hundred.

This correspondent saw 100 Bihari wounded alone at the main hospital here (and no

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Bengalis Are Shamed by Recent Slaughter of Biharis

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Bengali wounded); and an extensive area of several blocks in the Bihari colony, known as Khalishpur, has been destroyed by fire and looting. The survivors have fled.

"Some say a thousand were killed," said a dejected leading Bengali citizen, who asked not to be named. "Some say more, some say less. It is not something we are proud of."

Virtually every city and large town in Bangladesh has been sitting on a similar powder keg ever since India's military victory over Pakistan last December created this new Bengali nation of 75 million out of what was East Pakistan. The non-Bengali population of over a million, who are known collectively as Biharis and who are now living in anxiety or outright fear, provided many of the collaborators who helped the Pakistan Army kill at least hundreds of thousands of Bengalis during the army's nine-month occupation aimed at crushing the Bengali autonomy movement.

Despite appeals by the three-month-old Bangladesh Government for restraint and tolerance, there have been sporadic revenge executions in several cities, including some that have touched off clashes in which Bengalis have been killed, but none of these had been on the scale of the Khulna incident.

Wounded Fill Corridors

At Sadar Hospital here, the corridors and aisles and even office rooms are filled with the wounded, men, women and a few children with blood-stained bandages on heads and limbs. The overcrowded hospital has no beds for them, so they lie on blankets and thin straw mats on the hard stone floor, eating their supper of sugared bread and milk.

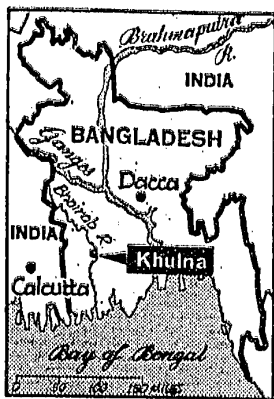
Most are still wearing the blood-stained clothes in which they arrived at the hospital. Some are too weak to speak and a few are dazed and incoherent.

"I am alone, I am alone," Sharfuddin Ahmed, 50, kept mumbling. "My family is all killed. There's no one to look after me. I am ill. Will someone come and help me?"

A few miles away, in the jute mill area where the Bihari colony is located, one section of the colony is bleak and completely abandoned. Some areas where thatch huts once stood, possibly market areas, have been burned to the ground, leaving empty fields marked only by small clumps of ashes and a few scraps of clothing.

The sturdier houses of brick and concrete are blackened by the fires set inside, which put ablaze the wooden furniture and shutters. The front of one of these one-story dwellings is pocked with bullet holes. Some of the goods of a looted grocery store are still lying strewn in the dust.

Not a light can be seen in the eerie area and no sound



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Bihari colony in Khulna was attacked last week.

can be heard except the occasional clomp of the boots of the Bengali soldiers who have been posted to keep the peace and enforce the curfew imposed after the killing.

"The people are worried and panicky," said one of the young soldiers of the Biharis. "We will stay and the curfew will stay until there is calm."

The soldier, who had fought in the independence struggle against the Pakistanis, said that his entire battalion of 800 men had been brought here from Jessore, about 40 miles away, on the day after the incident.

Bengali Life Seems Normal

In the Bengali areas around the Bihari colony, life appears normal. The movie house is doing its usual business, the market is busy and on the dirt sidewalks young men are playing caromboard, a game of the pool family played on a wooden table with plastic discs instead of balls and flicking fingers instead of cues.

"I saw nothing," said one Bengali merchant whose shop is right next to the gutted Bihari area. "The Biharis left this neighborhood two months before independence. Only Bengalis live here now." Bengali soldiers sidled up to monitor the conversation.

The Biharis who fled the ruined area are now living in refugee camps in another part of the Bihari section. The camps were set up by the Bangladesh Government, which is also providing food and medical clinics. These tent camps are cordoned off and closed to all but doctors and relief workers.

Many Bengalis in Khulna talk euphemistically of the incident as "a clash between two groups." "It was no clash," said a foreign relief worker here. "It was a slaughter."

With Bengalis understating the casualties and the Biharis exaggerating them (one wounded Bihari said more than 20,000 of his people had been killed), it is difficult to piece together an accurate picture of what happened.

For example, Dr. Sirajul Islam, director of Sadar Hospital, said that only seven of the wounded had died in the hospital and that three of them were Bengalis. However, reliable sources said that about 30 had died in the hospital and nearly all of them were Biharis.

Repercussions Feared

"It is an unhappy incident," said Dr. Islam. "Everybody condemns it. But if this thing is ventilated in an exaggerated way, it will have repercussion."

Because of Bengali reluctance to discuss the incident, it was several days before foreign newsmen in Dacca, the capital, became aware of its magnitude. Bengali newspapers have said virtually nothing about it except to report that a curfew was imposed after a disturbance.

What triggered the killing is far from clear, but many people here tell a story about the body of a Bengali man, his severed head lying nearby, being found early Friday morning outside a jute mill by Bengali workers. The Bengalis believed he had been killed by Biharis, the story goes, and the rampage began.

Other reports say the dead man was a union leader who was important among Bengali workers here. There has apparently been labor trouble between Bengali and Bihari workers at the jute mills. Some reports say Bengalis who fled to India to escape the Pakistani repression are now demanding back the jobs they say were taken by Bihari workers.

About 50,000 of the 300,000 to 400,000 people of this city in southwestern Bangladesh are Biharis, and a sizable number of them work in the jute mills here. Most are poor.

Some of the Bihari wounded

contended that during the Bengali attack, which by all accounts lasted at least four hours, the Bengali police either joined in the killing or stood by and did nothing. All that is clearly known is that the Bangladesh Army was quickly sent in to replace the police as a peace-keeping force.

The Khulna superintendent of police refused to discuss the incident with foreign newsmen, declining even to say whether he had made any arrests. The district commissioner, the top civilian official here, first agreed to meet with foreign newsmen and then avoided the interview.

"It's impossible now for the Bengalis and Biharis to live together here," said a Bengali businessman who had sheltered Biharis in his home during the uneasy days right after independence in December. "There cannot be harmony. The best course is to repatriate them to Pakistan."

The Pakistani Government, however, has indicated it does not want the Biharis, which leaves them in an unenviable limbo.

"Please, sir, help us," said Abdul Kadeer, a 25-year-old clerk in a jute mill, one of the wounded at the hospital. His head and right arm were bandaged; two fingers had been lopped off. "We are out of our minds. All Biharis want to go to Pakistan. Help us to go there."