

Biharis Fear Bengali Reprisal After Indian Troops Go Home

By Lewis M. Simons
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MOHAMMADPUR, Bangladesh—"What will happen to us when the Indian army leaves?—We will die. We cannot become Bengalis."

The frightened Bihari businessman who made this fatalistic assessment of his people's chances for survival in Bangladesh succinctly expressed the fears of more than 1 million people who have become prisoners in their own homeland. As supporters of a United Pakistan during the nine bitter months of the Bengali fight for independence, the Biharis have been branded collaborators. They believe they are all marked for death.

For three weeks, since the surrender of Pakistani forces to the Indian army in Dacca, the Biharis have been blockaded by terror—real and imagined—in effectively sealed-off ghettos.

Companies of Indian troops patrol the ghettos, holding back vengeful Bengalis seeking reprisals for Bihari crimes—real and imagined.

But the Indians will not stay in Bangladesh indefinitely. And this realization strikes chillingly and deep among the occupants of Mohammadpur, Mirpur and the Adamjee jute mill, the three Bihari enclaves.

Lack of Money

For the moment, their deprivations are principally economic. A foreign visitor to the three colonies is immediately besieged by inhabitants complaining bitterly about their lack of money.

"We cannot go to our offices to get our back pay," said a middle-aged man who had been a chief clerk in an East Pakistani government bureau. "We cannot go to our banks to withdraw our money," protested another, the owner of a clothing shop in Dacca.

If East Pakistan had a semblance of a middle class, the Biharis undoubtedly formed its backbone. They were the shopkeepers, the managers, the engineers, the school teachers.

As they see it, they worked hard for their positions and for the better clothing, the neat suburban houses and occasional automobiles they were able to buy.

"We are not a lazy people," said a 23-year-old student, Rezaur Rahman Fayaz. "We are not beggars. And they hate us for that."

But as many Bengalis see it, including a number of the educated class, they came by their riches through opportunistic switching of allegiances. "During the Raj they played up to the British," said a young Bengali college professor. "Then it was the Indians and after partition the Pakistanis. Now it is Bangladesh. But it is too late."

The Biharis, too, sense that it is too late. When

their plight was first discovered by Western newsmen in the days immediately after the Pakistani surrender, they emphatically declared their allegiance to Bangladesh and ran up flags of the new nation over their homes. But the pretense has ended.

"None of us wants to stay," said Dr. Mohamed Khalid, a physician who has lived in Mohammadpur since the partition of India in 1947. Khalid said at least 75 per cent of the nearly 1.5 million Biharis in Bangladesh would go to West Pakistan if the government here would release them. The rest would return to Bihar, the Indian state of their origin.

But their chances of getting out of Bangladesh, in the first place, and being admitted to either Pakistan or India, in the second, are slim. Bangladesh leaders have proclaimed that the new state would be a secular one, unlike Pakistan which was based on the Islamic religion. Although the Biharis are Moslems, they differ from the Bengalis in that they speak a different language, Urdu instead of Bengali, and have different cultural strains in their religion. "Our Islam is pure," said M.A. Latif, a resident of Mirpur. "The Islam of the Bengalis has been influenced by the Hindus."

Latif, 24, is employed by the U.S. Aid Mission in Dacca. He has appealed to the mission to help get him and the rest of the Biharis into Pakistan. "But my boss told me it involves the governments of the United States, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh," he said. "And the chances are not good."

The Biharis present the Bangladesh government with an embarrassing dilemma. If they remain in the country after the Indian army pulls out, the chances of reprisals against them are high. The publicity from further atrocities in this blood-soaked land could do only harm.

On the other hand, if they were to be expelled, assuming either India or Pakistan would accept them, this would make the claim of a free and open society a joke.

The Biharis and the Indian commanders assigned to protect them are banking on Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to resolve the problem. Mujibur is believed to be the only person who could order the Bengalis to back down, and have any chance of being obeyed. "I believe the Sheikh will put it all right," said Maj. Ajit Singh Mahal, the Indian Guards officer in charge of security at Mohammadpur.

Mahal, a tough, spit and polish Sikh, complained that he is constantly harassed by Mohammadpur residents worried about their financial affairs. At one point during a prolonged appeal in his field office by a prosperous-looking businessman dressed in gray pinstripes, Mahal rose to his feet and

without a word strode into the lavatory, locking the door behind him.

"It's the only way to get rid of them sometimes," he said with a sheepish grin upon emerging a few minutes later. "They are great whiners."

But the major is not entirely without sympathy for the Biharis. He conceded that occasional killing and looting still went on inside Mohammadpur, despite vigilance of his troops. "They are certainly in an undesirable position," he said. "Most of them are used to a high standard of living and conditions here are difficult."

Yet, compared with the wretched conditions of the 10 million Bengali refugees who fled to India under the guns of the West Pakistani army and of the 20 million refugees within Bangladesh who have been escaping from one village to another in fear and desperation, the plight of the Biharis loses much of its significance.

The regular residents of Mohammadpur and Mirpur still live in their own homes. Many say they have taken in friends and relatives who have poured into the two principal Bihari colonies from outlying districts. The majority of outsiders, however, are housed in refugee camps set up in school buildings, town halls and other public buildings. The government has provided basic food supplies and a small amount of pocket money, and the Indian army and the International Red Cross are providing medical attention to the 12,000 refugees at Mohammadpur and the 15,000 at Mirpur.

Similar programs are being carried out at the Adamjee jute mill, a huge walled-in factory town now housing some 30,000 Biharis and other non-Bengalis.

About half of the occupants are mill employees and their families. The rest moved in when Bengali workers fled from the Pakistani army. Once the mill reopens, the government will be faced with the difficult task of reinstating the legitimate workers and getting them to work in peace with the non-Bengalis who belong there. Maj. R. Kanwar, the Indian officer in charge of the mill's security, said the government has supplied "subsistence level" food and the army is helping "the desperate cases."

Despite frequent and loud complaints that they are starving to death, a thorough tour of all the camps disclosed no visible signs of starvation. The chief physical ailment at the camps, according to an Indian army doctor at Mohammadpur, is malnutrition, resulting from lack of protein. "But you must bear in mind that many of these people suffer from malnutrition all the time," the doctor said. "They have no idea what a proper diet is."

"Cholera, which flared

briefly at several of the installations, has apparently been halted and Red Cross-supplied inoculations are being administered daily. Questioning revealed that fewer than a dozen persons have died of cholera.

So far, the most widespread ailment is not physical at all, but mental. "Most of these people are suffering from deep depression," said the army doctor at Mohammadpur. They need some assurances that all is not lost.

Maj. Mahal, the Mohammadpur commandant, said the responsibility for this lay with the Bangladesh government. "I have appealed to them repeatedly to let high officials here assure them. But they do not come."