



**SHEIKH MUJIB**  
... hedging on trials?

# *Fate of Biharis At Stake*

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Washington Post Foreign Service

NEW DELHI, April 5—The foreign ministers of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh today sat down together for the first time since war split the Subcontinent nearly two and a half years ago. They began discussions aimed at settling the destinies of more than 350,000 people.

The tripartite talks are billed as strictly "humanitarian." There are 300,000 non-Bengali refugees in Bangladesh, cut off from Pakistan by the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war; some 47,000 Bengalis stranded in Pakistan, and 10,000 Pakistani prisoners of war still to be repatriated from India.

But in fact, all their fates hinge on the future of a much smaller group—195 Pakistani POW's awaiting trial in Bangladesh for alleged war crimes.

According to sources within the closed discussions, the key issues are whether Bangladesh will agree formally to abandon the trial and whether or not Pakistan will agree to accept more non-Bengali refugees—the so-called Bihari Moslems—from Bangladesh.

Although Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is understood to have agreed in February to abandon the trials, informed sources suggested Bangladesh might revive the issue unless Pakistan increases its quota of Bihari.

According to Indian Foreign Ministry sources, just over 63,500 of the 400,000 Biharis who have asked to be repatriated have been allowed to enter Pakistan. Pakistani sources, however, claim that Pakistan has already admitted 70,000 directly from Bangladesh, another 27,000 who had made their own way through Nepal and has issued clearance for 45,000 more from Bangladesh.

"We originally agreed to no more than 74,000," said a Pakistani delegation source. "Now we've got 142,000, and they're still pushing us. How much more do they want to jam down our throats?" The source added that the Pakistani delegation would not agree at the current talks to admit any more Biharis. "Any movement on that count will have to take place at a meeting of the prime ministers of Pakistan and Bangladesh," he said. No such meeting is known to be planned.

India's role in the tripartite talks is curious. During the two years between the war and Pakistan's recognition of Bangladesh, at the February Islamic summit conference in Lahore, India has negotiated with Pakistan on behalf of Bangladesh. And it has acted as custodian not just for the 90,000 prisoners, but for the 195 awaiting trial as well.

Indian sources at the talks said that unless Pakistan makes a move toward reestablishing diplomatic relations, India has no intention of taking the initiative at this time. "Frankly speaking," one source said, "we're far too concerned about our own domestic political and economic troubles to worry about Pakistan—or Bangladesh for that matter."

The Pakistanis have taken offense at this seemingly aloof attitude. "The Indians are trying to act like elder statesmen," one delegation member said. "They're making it look like they're sitting in the middle, dispensing justice to two junior partners."

In sum, all signs point to hard bargaining and the possibility of producing nothing concrete.

The hapless Biharis are the true flotsam of the 1971 Bangladesh war of independence. Former residents of the impoverished eastern Indian state of Bihar, they moved to what was East Pakistan when the Indian Subcontinent was partitioned in 1947.

During the war, many Biharis sided with the Pakistani military authorities and earned the lasting enmity of the dissident Bengalis. Now, most of them are confined to squalid refugee camps in Bangladesh and have asked to be "repatriated" to Pakistan. As most of them are penniless and unskilled, Pakistan does not want them.