

Reprisals, Starvation Haunt Dacca Minority

By Laurence Stern

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MIRPUR, Dec. 24—"Sir, we have an acute crisis of food. We are like frogs in a well."

This is the plight, as expressed by a professor of language here, of several hundred thousand men, women and children, all members of the Bihari (non-Bengali Moslems) minority living in this Dacca suburb.

Fear and hunger, bordering on starvation, prevail throughout Mirpur. Yesterday two adults had their throats slit by local Bengalis in the early afternoon.

Last Tuesday there was a burial for 10 men, a woman and a child who had their throats cut after being forced off a bus while on their way into Dacca to obtain food and other necessities.

The murders are suspected to have been committed by local Bengali residents, self-appointed avengers for atrocities committed by Bihari collaborators during the West Pakistan army occupation.

There are still a few moldering cadavers along the Dacca-Mirpur road. There is also the lingering stench of the dead who have been removed.

The road is the only access to food and the other necessities that have disappeared from the Bihari-occupied residential suburbs.

"We are in a concentration camp," an elderly resident of Mirpur told an Indian captain with whom I toured the area. "There is not even food for the babies."

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"Yes, I understand," the captain replied courteously. "But now you must stay here for your own protection. We will try to help as best we can."

Later the captain said, "It is too bad. But if we didn't keep them in their communities, these Bengalis will kill them."

Indian troops are patrolling lightly in Mirpur and their presence seems to provide some minor comfort to the caged population, whose numbers are estimated anywhere between 250,000 and 500,000.

Officials of the new Bangladesh government have been admonishing the Bengalis against killing and harassing the Biharis, who are either confined to their neighborhoods or have been herded into internment camps—all ostensibly for their own protection from reprisals.

The Red Cross has made small distributions of rice in the Bihari community. But Red Cross officials say they have neither the food nor personnel to meet the vast needs.

"We distributed most of the food store to the previous government. We hardly have any stores left. What there is on hand, the Pakistan prisoners of war seem to be enjoying."

There are some 30,000 Pakistani soldiers interned in the military cantonment from which, until the surrender last week, they ruled Dacca. They are being fed and exercised and prepared for shipment out of East Bengal.

Indian guards at the entrance to cantonment are keeping the local populace away.