



# TERROR IN BANGLA DESH

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by  
Murray Sayle





The Pakistan military regime recently repeated its claim that East Pakistan is rapidly returning to "normalcy" after its prolonged military operation against "rebels and miscreants" and that the way was now open for refugees to return from India and resume their normal lives.

I spent a week touring one of the areas from which many thousands of refugees fled and found that this is untrue: that in fact a repulsive political system is rapidly taking shape which may well make it impossible for them to return.

If the refugees do ever go home, it will be to places like Lotapaharpur village, a collection of mud-brick houses with palm-thatched roofs six miles north of Khulna, East Pakistan's biggest river port. Lotapaharpur stands a little way off the main road between Khulna and Jessore which I found busy with military traffic, big shiny American trucks full of soldiers from West Pakistan, armed incongruously with Chinese automatic rifles, and an occasional civilian carrying a .303 Lee-Enfield rifle.

I drove along a side road perched high on an embankment, across a landscape looking like a green and silver chessboard, lush standing crops alternating with ponds and flooded fields.

Here and there a few farmers were ploughing the wide wet prairie with cows and water buffaloes; but there seemed very few people at work for such a crowded country.

Then I stumbled on Lotapaharpur. It was just off the road, up a muddy track which twisted through the palm trees. The village is like any other in East Pakistan. A score or so of houses stand in a neat circle on an earthen platform a few feet above the flood-plain. But there were no men in loincloth, no women in bright saris, no brown children and ginger dogs playing among the banana trees.

I have seen many East Bengal villages which have been burnt, or which seem to have strangely few people. This was the first I saw which was seemingly undamaged and completely deserted.

#### NO CLUE

With my interpreter I looked around. A coloured picture of the elephant-headed God Ganesh, the remover of obstacles, showed that this had been a Hindu village. But why had the villagers gone? There was no clue in the empty houses. Then, timidly, a woman in a tattered sari, with three young children at her heels, came forward.

She was a Muslim and a refugee herself. Her husband had been killed and she had run away and found this empty village, as we had, by accident. She had been living on some rice the Hindus left behind. But it was finished and she was at her wit's end to feed her children. She did not want to go to the authorities because she was afraid they would find out her husband was "Joy Bangla" — "Victory to Bengal", the slogan of the banned and smashed Awami League.

Then more people came up, Muslim farmers from a village a few hundred yards away named Aramghata

The story they told was like many I have heard in the past week.

Two local men named Ali Hamed and Shaukat both claimed possession of a corrugated iron shed. Some time in April Hamed had returned to the village accompanying two truckloads of West Pakistan soldiers. An argument broke out between the soldiers and the villagers, there was shooting by the soldiers, and six villagers were killed.

Two of the dead were members of the local council: Indu Babu, a farmer, and a relative, Profulla Babu, headmaster of a local high school. Both are Hindu names. The other 150 Hindus in the village fled with a few belongings as soon as the soldiers went.

I asked them why they were telling me about this incident. They said I had not heard the end of the story. Some Muslims from their village had come up to see what was going on. The soldiers grabbed four of them and told them to recite something from the Holy Koran.

They said the four Muslims were terrified but managed to begin "Bismillah Irrahman Irrahim . . ." (the opening words of the Koran). They said the soldiers shouted: "These are not Muslims! They have been taught to say this to trick us!" They then shot all four.

The villagers told me they were angry about this, as they had never had any trouble with their Hindu neighbours. Hamed, they said, now had the iron shed. They said he carried a rifle and they thought he was a "razakar" (volunteer), a term we meet again.

What had happened to the Hindus' land? The villagers pointed to the surrounding emerald green fields.

valuable cash crop. It had been  
martial law administration  
of 2,000 acres in the absence  
of Rs. 1½ an acre. But the buyers had not got  
much of a bargain. They could not hire people to  
harvest most of it and the rest was now flooded and  
worthless.

### TRUE POSITION

Lotapaharpur summarized for me the true position about the refugees. No one here really expects them to return in any numbers, because there is an atmosphere of terror in East Pakistan, because the material difficulties in the way of their returning are almost insuperable, and their homes, farms, crops, small businesses, and other assets are being transferred under paper-thin legal devices to people who have strong motives to make sure they never come back — in fact to their political and religious enemies. But the military administration has indeed opened "reception centres" and "transit camps".

I drove up to Benapol, close to the Indian border, to inspect these preparations. I was received by the officer in charge of the whole Khulna district, Lt.-Col. Shams-uz-Zaman, in his headquarters near the frontier. Col. Shams said there were frequent mortar exchanges with the Indian troops over the border — always, he said, begun by the Indians.

"They certainly need us here to defend them," said. "These Bengalis don't know how to fight. Now, from the North-West Frontier, where fighting

But at least the  
The election results

is in our blood. I have been using a rifle ten. We've got guts."

Col. Shams directed the military operations past three months in this area, beginning with "securing" of Khulna town during the period 25-29. He told me that it was only in the upper half that his troops had been able to get the upper hand all over the district from "miscreants and rebels".

It appears that it was Shams who began the system of razakars by distributing police rifles to civilians in Khulna — "good chaps, good Muslims and loyal Pakistanis," he explained.

There are now, according to the military authorities, 1000 razakars in East Pakistan, 300 of them in Khulna district. They are paid Rs. 3 a day (25 pence at the official rate) and receive seven days' training which consists entirely of learning how to shoot a Lee-Enfield rifle. Their work consists of "security" — guiding the West Pakistan troops to the supporters of the Awami League. They are to be under the orders of local "peace committees" which are selected by the military authorities on the basis of "loyalty to Pakistan". These people are representatives of the political parties which in the last elections, with an admixture of racial records and bigoted Muslims who had that strong arm methods are needed for the region — a mixture weirdly reminiscent of "B Specials" and political terrorists.

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Khulna district

the non-criminal political base of the peace committees and razakars really is: the now banned Awami League won all eight seats in the district and scored 75% of the total vote cast. The three branches of the Muslim League got 3 to 4% between them and the fanatical Jamat-e-Islam 6%.

I asked Shams whether he expected refugees to come over the border at Benapol — the main road from Calcutta to Dacca, opposite some of the biggest refugee camps in West Bengal — when his men had blocked the road with a truck and were covering it with machine-guns.

He said they would have no trouble coming by "unauthorized routes" which included rowing down rivers and wading through rice fields. "Miscreants, rebels and Indian infiltrators" could not, however, sneak across so easily because he was maintaining constant and vigilant patrols. "Let them come, we're ready for them," he said.

My notes leave it unclear whether he meant the Indian Army, or the refugees.

I walked back with a captain assigned to me by Col. Shams from the border to the Benapol refugee reception centre, about a mile away.

"We have a problem here," said the captain, who wore a heavy upcurving moustache and parachutist's wings. "Look at them," he said, indicating Bengali farmers in conical straw hats squatting to plant rice in the flooded green fields. "They all look the same to us. How can we tell the miscreants and rebels from the ordinary people?"

## FORLORN DOGS

The entire population of the Benapol reception centre was five forlorn dogs.

The captain said the centre was probably closed because of its proximity to the border and directed me to a camp further back at Satkhira. I drove to this camp and found that there were 13 refugees in residence, three of them Hindus. The number tallied with the arrivals and departures noted on the camp's admissions board. As I walked around I got a snappy military salute from two razakars, two young men armed with shotguns. I was told that they were there to guard the camp. (From whom? From miscreants, rebels, etc.,) and to help with security checks. I was asking the people in charge of the camp (ordinary Bengali municipal workers whose sincerity I fully accept) whether the presence of unknown armed men asking about people's political views was, in the climate of East Pakistan, the way to make a returned refugee feel at ease when the sudden arrival of another 100 refugees was announced.

These people looked well fed and dressed and told me they had all come from the same place in India, Hasnabad, just over the border, had all been there the same time, 22 days, and had all come back together.

None of them could produce an Indian ration card because, they said, they had not been given any. I asked the people in charge of the camp, which has enough room in an old school house and adjoining buildings for 2,000 people, whether refugees who had not actually been over the Indian border were eligible for help at the Satkhira centre. I was told they were not.

From Satkhira I proceeded to Khulna, administrative capital of the district. On the way I passed a bridge being hastily rebuilt. It had been blown up by saboteurs ten days ago — presumably by members of the Mukti Fauj, the "Freedom army," which now claims to be operating underground. Local people told me — I thought with some glee — that the bridge had been defended by 25 razakars who had fled at the first burst of gunfire. I was unable to confirm this when I later met the razakar high command.

A quarter of the population of the whole district, which was more than three million at the last census, is missing, dead or gone to India. The local civil authorities estimate that one half of the land in the district is not being cultivated. On orders of the Government in Dacca arrangements are being made to put abandoned land, shops and property in the hands of "caretakers" who are to be selected by the peace committees.

The ordinary work of civil administration is close to a standstill. The Senior Magistrate, Rajendra Lal Sarkar (a Hindu) is missing, believed killed, while Khulna was being "secured".

The senior Muslim magistrate, Chaudri Senwar Ali, has been arrested by the army and his whereabouts is at present unknown.

The police chief, Superintendent Abdul Akib Khondaker, has been transferred and the District Commissioner, Nurul Islam Khan, has been informed that he will be transferred.

#### MUSICAL CHAIRS

This is part of the game of administrative musical chairs going on in East Pakistan. Officials of Bengali

origin like all the above men are being moved about at dizzying speed.

Of the 300 clerical workers employed by the local authority, 66 were Hindus. Only two are now left and the rest, if still alive, have been automatically suspended.

I have been repeatedly told that there exists a confidential directive that "members of the minority community" — official jargon for Hindus — are to receive a "stringent security check" before being given a Government job, which would amount to a thinly veiled blacklist.

This is officially denied. However, a young Hindu, Arabinda Sen, came first among 500 entrants in the competitive examinations for clerical jobs with the Khulna administration last February. He is still unemployed, although the administration is desperately short-handed.

The work of the Khulna civic authorities has been severely hampered by army requisitions of their equipment. All the launches of the district administration used for food distribution, flood control work, and similar needs (half the district can only be reached by boat) have been taken over by the army and navy who have mounted .50 calibre machineguns on them and are using them on river patrols for "miscreants". The civil authorities are urgently trying to get them back, or get new boats, as there are alarming reports that farmers down river have not been able to repair many dykes round low-lying islands. If salt water were to flood this land it would ruin it for many years to come.

A tugboat belonging to the Pakistan River Services was sunk by a shell from a Pakistan Navy gunboat in the centre of the town. The local naval chief, Com-

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A tugboat belonging to the Pakistan River Services was sunk by a shell from a Pakistan Navy gunboat in the centre of the town. The local naval chief, Com-

mander Al Haj Gul Zarin, told me that his men had to sink the tug because miscreants had seized it and were attempting to ram a naval vessel. Local boatmen said the normal crew were aboard the tug but failed to answer a challenge, never having heard one before, as they steamed noisily past the naval base.

The work of the local peace committee and razakar high command could hardly be said to have achieved "normalcy" either. Two of its members, Ghulam Sirwar Mullah, vice-chairman of the district council, and Abdul Hamid, vice-chairman of the Khulna municipality, were killed by unknown masked assailants within the past month. And the official records indicate that 21 members of local peace committees throughout the district have been killed in the same period, while 12 are in Khulna hospital at the moment suffering from gunshot wounds and four with wounds caused by knives or daggers.

But a razakar field commander, Abdul Wahab Mahaldar, aged 31, whom I met leading his platoon to an operation, told me he believed that 200 razakars and peace committee members had been killed in Khulna district in recent weeks. Mahaldar said that his own group had a body count of two "miscreants" killed.

This may correspond to two allegations of murder which have been lodged with the Khulna city police against razakars. The police were informed that two school-teachers were shot down without warning or provocation.

The police cannot, however, investigate these cases as a military directive states that complaints against razakars are to be investigated by the military authorities. Nor can the Khulna civil police proceed with the investigation of charges brought against Moti Ullah,

a non-Bengali member of the Central Peace Committee of Khulna, of possession of explosives on the day before the army began "securing" the town.

#### A 'GOONDA'

Moti Ullah has previously been charged with aggravated assault and demanding money with menaces and was actually on bail on the explosives charge when appointed to the peace committee. There was an explosion at the back of his house where neighbours alleged he was storing dynamite for use in riots. The same man had been refused a gun licence on grounds of bad character, and a police report describes him as a "goonda" — a professional criminal specializing in violence.

I have been unable to arrive at even an estimate of how many people have been killed in rioting and army security operations in Khulna and the surrounding district. One observer, a magistrate confined to his riverside home by the army-imposed three-day curfew, counted 48 bodies floating down the river in one 10-minute period during the height of the operation. There are many areas in the town which have been burnt out — in what is described by the authorities as "slum clearance" — and one road leading to the Khulna newsprint mill has been completely demolished on both sides for more than a mile.

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to me (not by Col. Shams) as none killed and seven wounded.

In the period around the army operation, Khulna hospital admitted 159 cases of bullet wounds, 25 gunshot wounds and 70 puncture wounds of the kind caused by knife, dagger or bayonet. It is likely that some of the deaths were caused by fighting or massacre of non-Bengalis by Bengalis, as well as by non-Bengalis killing Bengalis, and by the army operation. But it seems clear the army had all the fire-power. The truth may never be known as no official inquiries are under way about casualties or damage, in sharp contrast to the normal practice of the Pakistan police who have to submit a written report every time they fire one round and may only do so with the permission of a magistrate.

Even more obscure is what happened in the down-river port area of Mangla, which is reached by boat from Khulna. The whole waterfront and market area of this small port has been burnt out, and shell holes can be seen in some waterfront buildings of brick and reinforced concrete.

The local police chief, Sub-Inspector Hadi Khan, is a non-Bengali promoted in the past month from a job not requiring an examination test of literacy to one that does, although there have been no examinations. He told me that the damage, proportionately the worst I have seen so far, was caused by an accidental fire ignited when a lamp overturned in the market place, "or something like that".

But Commander Zarin of PNS Titumir said: "We had a sharp engagement with the miscreants of Mangla. The rascals opened upon us with a shore battery — a big home-made gun made out of some sort of iron pipe.

But it blew up when they tried to fire it and burnt half the place down."

The Commander laughed heartily at this reminiscence. He could offer no explanation for the shell holes in waterside buildings. I could not pursue the matter in Mangla because on this occasion I had to put up with the unasked and unwanted presence of two soldiers wished on me for my "security". They clung to my heels like leeches and in their presence local people shrank away.

It would be wearsome to catalogue any more of the weird explanations offered by the Pakistan military authorities of what has evidently gone on and is still going on.

#### WELCOME DOUBTFUL

On the refugees issue, it is clear that only a very brave or very foolish refugee would even try to return as things are, and that his welcome would be very doubtful if he did. Only a peaceful joint operation by India and Pakistan will get any substantial number of refugees home and this seems totally out of the question as things stand.

Even more alarming is the development, with the peace committees and razakars, of two parallel Governments in East Pakistan; one the normal civil administration, which is well-intentioned, reasonably efficient, but now speedily approaching complete impotence; the other a regime of paid informers, bigots and thugs answerable to no one and apparently above whatever law is left in East Pakistan.



The pacification methods used on the North-West Frontier by the British of long ago, burning villages and gunning down their inhabitants, are bad enough when imported into a heavily populated and peaceful place like East Pakistan. The introduction of the political methods of Hitler and Mussolini even less defensible.

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