

I believe this was my report to the
City of Rye, N.Y.
12 July 1971

OBSERVATIONS - EAST PAKISTAN, EARLY JULY 1971

STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

INTRODUCTION

On my departure from Dacca for Geneva, UN colleagues asked specifically that I endeavour to communicate to responsible UN authorities in Geneva something of the present situation in East Pakistan as it was felt by those concerned that there were a number of misapprehensions regarding the present situation which perhaps could be clarified in a personal report.

Preparatory to discussions, I have endeavoured to summarize principal elements of an exceedingly complex problem situation which is neither static nor homogeneous and in which elements of possible assistance from UN and other agencies as well as bilateral sources are only gradually being identified. It is appreciated that the situation described does not fully correspond with the official views of the Government and, indeed, in detail, certain of the reports and observations noted here may be in error. In essence, however, I believe it reflects reasonably accurately the sense of the situation at this time.

Anticipating the future in regard to the very critical element of stability and restoration of civil order is hazardous. In brief, few with whom I spoke seemed hopeful that the present status could be expected to improve significantly in the very near future and indeed, some were deeply concerned that civil disorder might become more widespread and more serious. For planning purposes, however, I believe one has little choice but to assume the situation will at least gradually improve for the difficulties are already so considerable that significant deterioration might well essentially preclude application of an effective relief effort.

1.0 Problems now being faced in East Pakistan are staggering in their complexity. Based on personal observation and discussion between 29 June and 8 July, it appeared that even with prompt assistance and a truly major effort, as well as a settled and secure countryside, considerable food deficits, as well as increasing nutritional and infectious disease problems must be expected. A settled and secure countryside, however, is a major consideration and the fact was inescapable that the countryside as a whole is neither settled nor secure. The degree of disruption is difficult to gauge. On the one hand, one is assured repeatedly in the press that all has returned to normal and, indeed,

there are some specific indications from independent observation that some normal activities are beginning to be resumed in some areas. On the other hand, there are many fragmentary observations and reports of episodes which suggest continued severe disruption in many areas. It is difficult to assess the validity of many of the various reports as inevitably one expects exaggeration and rumour to be rampant during a time of disruption and intense emotional feeling. From personal observation and discussion with the many with whom I spoke, the following fragmentary indications have been sifted in an effort to convey something of the sense of the uncertain milieu within which planning for assistance and relief actions are being undertaken.

2.0 In Dacca, a degree of normal activity is returning. I am told this pertains also to Chittagong. In Dacca, traffic congestion is said to be steadily increasing, although not yet back to normal levels. However, comparatively few women are seen on the streets. The majority of shops have opened and in shops selling carpets and other more expensive goods, there is no indication of sharp price cutting or "panic selling". Residents say that food prices have not increased significantly in recent months although a few items are in short supply. There is no curfew although the streets are unusually deserted after dark. Each night, there are two or three explosions but what damage may have been done is difficult to determine. On one day while there, there was no electricity over a considerable area of the city for about 18 hours. This was said to be most unusual and had not, in fact, occurred during the more acute phases of the crisis. The cause was variously attributed to a bomb or grenade having been exploded in one of the power stations and/or to the collapse of a power pylon, said to have been cut with hacksaws. One night about 2300 hours we were stopped by a military road block on the road to the airport and, after scrutiny, allowed to pass on. The officer said that a bomb had recently been exploded. No damage was obvious. The Intercontinental Hotel, virtually empty in early June, is now largely occupied by a variety of Pakistani and expatriate guests including those from the UN, voluntary agencies, news correspondents and visiting delegations. I understand, however, that comparatively few of the diplomatic community and bilateral assistance staff have returned and almost none with dependants.

Hindu temples, seen in the past, have been thoroughly levelled and in various areas, bazaars, scattered buildings or groups of buildings have similarly been destroyed. Some construction work is in progress but whether at normal levels I do not know. Industrial production is said to be recovering in some

areas but none ventured a guess as to the percentage of recovery.

3.0 Government personnel are almost uniformly depressed and pessimistic and almost all are extremely guarded in their comments, even to friends. Most with whom I spoke reported the death of one or more relatives as a result of recent events. Stories of personal observations of atrocities during late March and early April are many. Various government units state that all but 5 to 10% of staff have returned but they have no knowledge as to the whereabouts of the others. Most who are missing are said to be Hindus. A few Hindus are currently working but I am told they are few indeed. There are a number of reports of workers having received letters threatening death if they reported to work - this refers to health workers as well as those engaged in handling of food grains. The letters were apparently distributed to lower grade personnel - higher grade officials with whom I spoke denied having received such letters although they had seen such letters sent to their employees. It is difficult to know whether such letters have played a role in the high absenteeism reported at some dock facilities, graneries, etc.

4.0 The situation in the countryside appears to vary considerably from place to place and indeed from time to time. What I would judge to be reliable observations which I was able to gather in the short time I was in Dacca provide only fragmentary glimpses but do suggest rather serious and continuing disruption of the normal administrative structure and communication at least in some major areas.

4.1 Between 3 and 8 July, one of the international staff travelled by road from Dacca to Bogra and across to Rajshahi and return. In the course of the trip, he stopped at health centres, hospitals and clinics. In the course of the trip, few except Army vehicles were noted and no trains were seen operating. From observation and discussion with those at health centres, resident missionaries and civil authorities, it was noted that no more than perhaps 10 to 20% of the normal population was present in most cities and towns with populations normally of 10 000 or more. Considerable destruction of houses was observed in many villages and few villagers were seen in villages or working in the fields along the main road travelled. In Bogra, a missionary physician stated that she was seeing numbers of cases of vitamin deficiency for the first time in 30 years of practice. The explanation provided as to the reason for food

shortages and population displacement was that, in this area where many Biharis are present, many were killed initially by Bengalis during the early weeks. Subsequently, when the Army extended its scope of control, many Biharis were trained and armed to serve as "Peace Committees" and Bengalis were driven out. The towns in this area are said to be principally in the hands of Biharis and Bengalis are said to be afraid to enter. At one rural health centre, it was reported that a Bengali health aid sent into the town in mid-June to try to obtain needed drugs had been killed. In the course of population displacement, many family food stocks were destroyed or abandoned and, it was said, many families normally maintained up to a 12 month food reserve. Hospitals and clinics reported drug stocks to be critically low as shipments had been interrupted - attendance at clinics continued to be at approximately half that usually seen. It was said that conditions such as these prevailed throughout much of the north and northwest (although a report from an AID staff member on a trip perhaps 2 weeks earlier indicated that in Rangpur, conditions appeared to be considerably more settled). In the course of the trip, there was full freedom of travel, a military pass readily permitted passage through roadblocks and, at no time, did the party experience apparent personal risk.

4.2 In the Matlab area (perhaps 50 miles south of Dacca), over 250 000 persons had been kept under daily surveillance for diarrhoea (as part of a cholera research programme) through house-to-house visits by selected local residents. This programme had been in effect for some years and was well received by local residents. Until about 3 July, no troubles had occurred in this area. Nevertheless, after the events which began in March, villagers became so secretive and unwilling to provide information that the programme had to be interrupted. The cholera treatment centre, however, remained open although the motor boat ambulances were not operative as the fuel pumps were removed to prevent confiscation. On 3 July, it was reported that Army units came to Matlab, stayed overnight and departed; "freedom fighters" came the following night and, after an intensive fire-fight at the local police station (one critically wounded woman bystander), similarly withdrew. The following day the Army entered and burned the bazaar and several houses. Some casualties were said to have occurred. The cholera clinic is now closed.

4.3 Malaria workers normally visit each house once a month throughout Pakistan seeking cases of fever and obtaining blood smears for diagnosis. Based on the number of slides collected during the past month and on available reports of activity, perhaps 1 million of 65 million (total under this type of surveillance) are now being visited in this manner.

4.4 So far as is known, expatriates in Pakistan have, virtually escaped personal injury. The only episodes known were the disappearance in March of two tea planters in Sylhet and a very minor injury experienced by one man when a grenade (?) exploded in front of the Intercontinental Hotel in Dacca during late March.

5.0 Problems of shipment and distribution of food grains is partially covered by the special report prepared by Ryan and Weiss during June. Assuming that the efficiency of the main ports of Chalna and Chittagong, as well as secondary ports can be increased and the necessary number of coastal ships can be obtained, internal transport beyond these points will pose the next formidable obstacle as it is reported that half or more of the commercial truck transport is not available and rail transport is severely curtailed. Some unknown number of small boats have also been destroyed or confiscated. It was noted that in the northwest many Biharis work for the railroad and are heavily concentrated at rail junctions while sites for offloading of grain may be out of the central areas and in Bengali settlements. In most areas, it is said that each fears to enter the area of the other. Normal train movement is said to be curtailed or nil for this reason. Both truck and train movement in and out of Chittagong are obviously important as noted in the Ryan-Weiss report. Both the road and railroad run very close to the Indian border. Over an extended area south of Comilla, reports from several quarters indicate continuing, severe disturbances. Neither the railroad nor the road were operative at the time of my departure although a Dacca-Chittagong bus route had reopened through use of secondary roads, questionably suitable for heavy trucks. In some areas of the northwest at least, a number of local food supply depots were said to have been destroyed and in Rajashi, only 7 of 67 ration shops, normally employed for distribution of food, were said to be intact.

Distribution of fertilizer, seeds and pesticides, as with other commodities, has been sharply curtailed. The credit system for purchase of these items has also been substantially disrupted. Coupled with reduced production in the

cyclone area and in disturbed areas, food production will obviously be substantially less. Estimates have been worked out but the uncertainties obviously preclude a very precise estimate.

The creation of adequate purchasing power is also a formidable hurdle. The jute crop, a major income earner, is now being harvested and will itself require timely transport - of which there is all too little for food transport alone. Work programmes are being planned but, under present unsettled circumstances will obviously be difficult to implement in some, perhaps many, areas. Food prices are already reported to be some 10 to 15% higher in rural areas immediately around Dacca than in Dacca itself. I was told that the reverse normally pertains.

Food deficits, and malnutrition would seem a certainty at this time although this undoubtedly will involve irregular areas, depending in part on the extent of local production, rather than being uniformly distributed over the country.

6.0 UNICEF is actively planning a feeding programme including high protein supplements. This would be conducted through schools and health centres. In addition to the problems of transport, there remain uncertainties as to the level of attendance. School attendance is reported to be no higher than perhaps 5 to 10% at best; attendance at health centres and hospitals is sharply down and, at one health centre, only a few miles from the centre of Dacca itself, attendance was only 50% of normal as of 7 July. Presumably, the feeding programmes would encourage attendance of a hungry population although some seemed uncertain of this.

7.0 Repeatedly, the importance of close UN supervision, of any transport brought into the country and of food distribution schemes was emphasized to ensure equitable distribution of food to Bengalis, Biharis and remaining Hindus. Problems of vehicles being commandeered for other purposes might well be encountered in various areas. A number of UN-supplied vehicles are still in possession of the military and minor incidents occurred in Dacca during my visit when military personnel stopped UN vehicles to demand transport.

It is by no means certain that if UN personnel were to be assigned for monitoring and supervisory purposes that they would be allowed to travel freely. WFP personnel informed that they were not permitted to visit a central

food supply Depot only 15 miles distant and on 8 July, efforts on the part of myself and the WHO Representative to visit the District Medical Office at Tangail (1-1/2 hours from Dacca) were in vain as it was understood confidentially that the military commander requested at least 2 to 3 days advance notice so that a military escort could be provided. At the time, Pakistani friends who had returned via this same route only days previously, reported that all was quiet in this area.

8.0 Reception centres visited by various UN personnel were said to be well staffed and well stocked with needed commodities. Very few refugees are present in any. It is reported that at several points along the border, one can cross easily and that many are both coming and going. Undoubtedly, a proportion are returning directly to their villages but no one knows how many. For planning purposes, it is doubtful that plans need be developed at this time to receive more than hundreds or a few thousand at reception centres.

9.0 With these necessarily fragmentary and incomplete glimpses of the difficulties inherent in the situation, some sense of the overall problems in planning and development may perhaps be obtained. At the same time, additional UN staff have arrived in Dacca and are experiencing increasingly difficult problems in respect to transport, availability of office space and secretarial assistance. Any further expansion will involve problems in housing; if staff is to be assigned out of Dacca, special provisions in regard to housing and communications will have to be made; the basic issue of freedom or relative freedom of movement outside of Dacca will need to be confronted.

Coordination will necessarily become more important as transport needs, for example, must be interlocked. Regrettably, as of 8 July, no joint meeting of UN agency staff had yet been convened. The Central Coordinating Committee of the government and UN met for the first time on 8 July. One can only assume that rather little consideration had been given to the substance of the meeting as WHO staff learned of the meeting only by accident one hour before but were subsequently asked to summarize their findings as the WHO team was leaving the same afternoon. Although the team had discussed their observations in full with the Secretary of Health and the Director of Health Services, the

Chief Secretary expressed his surprise in learning that a WHO team had been present for 10 days and was distressed that a special meeting regarding health matters had not been convened with him present. Obviously, problems such as these are not uncommon in the early phases of an operation such as this but it is also evident that much needs to be done if the several operations are to function as a coherent whole.

A number of other problems of a policy nature will also require clarification. Two that came to notice during the conclusion of the team's visit appeared to be pertinent to the activities of all UN agencies. The first, in point, is the problem of the Institute of Public Health in obtaining supplies from abroad to maintain cholera and smallpox vaccine production. Adequate funds are available in the budget but curtailment of foreign exchange poses serious problems. Should the UN undertake to procure such supplies, accepting rupee payment? The second relates to the proposed provision of a consultant to assist in installing equipment for the production of intravenous fluids. Presumably, he will be needed within the next two months. However, conventional procedures for processing the clearance of consultants is still in force - at least in part. A 3 to 4 months' delay would not be unusual, based on past experience. Can procedures for rapid clearance, such as were employed during the cyclone, be implemented?

10.0 Overall, while I believe that all concerned appreciate that significant problems lie ahead, I sensed that comparatively few are yet planning, organizing and expediting with the same sense of urgency that operations are conducted after disaster has occurred. Perhaps this is inevitable as the impetus provided by a disaster which has demonstrably occurred is attendant with news coverage, public demands for action, governmental inquiry, etc. To act with such dispatch to avert an impending disaster is perhaps to expect too much, however inevitable it may seem. Whatever, it is reasonable to suppose that within another four to eight weeks, the period of calm should end and the storm will begin.