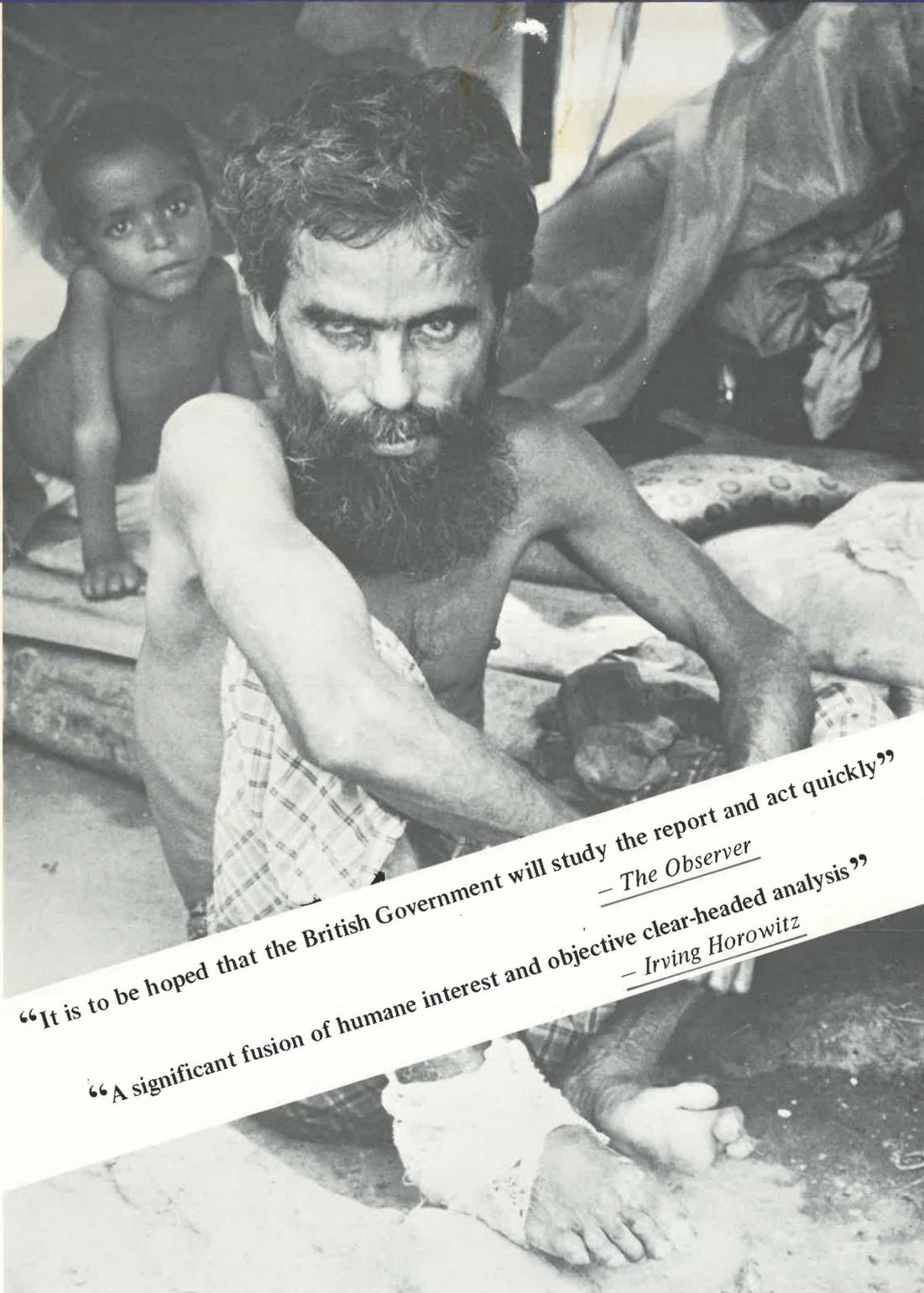


# THE BIHARIS IN BANGLADESH



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- To secure justice for minority or majority groups suffering discrimination, by investigating their situation and publicising the facts as widely as possible, to educate and alert public opinion throughout the world.
- To help prevent, through publicity about violations of human rights, such problems from developing into dangerous and destructive conflicts which, when polarised, are very difficult to resolve; and
- To foster, by its research findings, international understanding of the factors which create prejudiced treatment and group tensions, thus helping to promote the growth of a world conscience regarding human rights.

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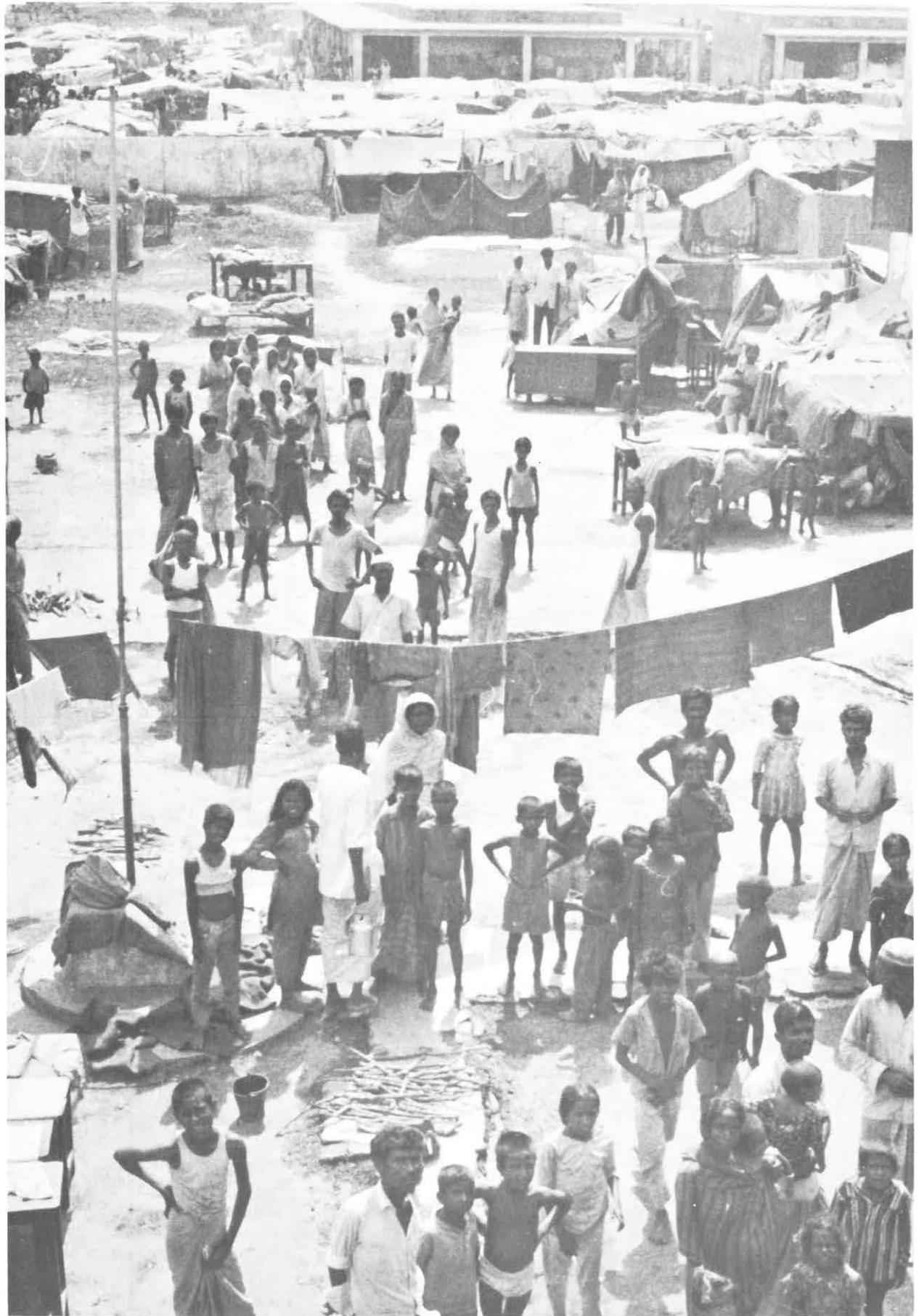
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# THE BIHARIS IN BANGLADESH

by Ben Whitaker,  
Iain Guest,  
a Doctor,  
and Rt Hon David Ennals MP

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**From the Universal Declaration  
of Human Rights,  
adopted by the General Assembly  
of the United Nations  
on 10th December 1948:**

*Article 1*

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

*Article 2*

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

*Article 10*

Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

*Article 19*

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

*Article 20*

(1) Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

(2) No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

## THE BIHARIS IN BANGLADESH

The predicament of the Bihari community in Bangladesh contains some of the ingredients of classical tragedy. Although there is still time to work out a solution, there seems a frightening atmosphere of inevitability about the festering situation in which they are poised, together with a danger that the Biharis' own pessimism may prove to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. If a disaster occurs, the world cannot claim it has not received advance warning. Remedial action, however, is yet possible; and the total number involved is far smaller than that of the refugees from Bengal during the war. Pakistan, India and Bangladesh all share the responsibility to find a constructive outcome, though international assistance can help to bring this about.

Mahatma Gandhi, who did all he could to stop the earlier communal slaughter in Bihar at the time of Partition, declared that civilisation is to be judged by its treatment of minorities. The tragedy of the Biharis is that no country is anxious to have the remaining ones who have not yet been settled. Their dilemma is compounded by their lack of any political leverage or allies. Their only hope is by appealing to humanitarian concern. Twice over an attacked minority which supported the losing side, the Biharis' own morale is now so low that they themselves are making little effort to solve their problems. Some of them have greeted outside visitors with the request "Give us poison". Nevertheless, many Biharis have middle-class skills which, once they come to terms with their changed situation and the present bitterness fades, could enable them to play useful parts in society. Indeed, in this respect – as also in their knowledge of how to seek international sympathy – they are better placed than many other minorities in the world.

B.W.



# Biharis in Bangladesh

Bay of Bengal

Burma

The antagonism felt towards the Biharis in Bangladesh has social, political and linguistic roots in the past history of the subcontinent. Prior to Partition, in the Indian state of Bihar which is the original homeland of the Biharis, Moslems constituted a minority of four million (about 13 per cent) out of the population of nearly thirty million. Although they formed an important element in the urban community, except in the administrative district of Purnea they were greatly outnumbered by Hindus. When therefore Bihar was assigned to India at the time of Partition in 1947<sup>1</sup>, although many Bihari Moslems stayed put, large numbers migrated to East Bengal which became the Eastern wing of Moslem Pakistan. Another considerable community who, because of unemployment in Bihar, had gone to Calcutta in search of work, later moved on to East Bengal when they began to feel insecure. The first exodus was precipitated by communal massacres of some thirty thousand of them by Bihari Hindus between 30 October and 7 November 1946, in retaliation for the slaughter of Hindus by Moslems at Noakhali in East Bengal. The Bihari massacre was widely reported in the press and this provoked the killing of Moslems in West Bengal and elsewhere. As a result other Urdu-speaking<sup>2</sup> Moslems from several states fled to East Pakistan at the same time, but all these fugitives came to be known collectively as Biharis, because the majority of them came from Bihar.

The British left India on 15 August 1947. In all, nearly one million people were killed during the period of Partition. A total of some eight million Moslem refugees moved from India into Pakistan, and a similar exodus of Hindus and Sikhs took place in the reverse direction. The number of Moslems who moved to East Pakistan was approximately 1,300,000, of whom one million came from Bihar and its neighbourhood. Some 3,300,000 Hindu refugees migrated from East Bengal to India; but ten million other Hindus remained there (and some forty million Moslems stayed in India).

---

<sup>1</sup> Up until 1939 Indian plans for independence were based on a united country. In the 1940's, however, the minority religion's Moslem League began a campaign to demand a separate state called Pakistan. The Western and Eastern wings of the eventual Pakistan, separated by 1,200 miles of Indian territory, each contained roughly half the nation's population of 110 million people (cf. India's 530 million). Bengalis in East Pakistan often complained that the national government used unduly to favour the Western wing, where the country's capital was situated. Bihar was originally a part of the Bengal Presidency under British rule, being made a separate state of Bihar and Orissa in 1911. By the Partition Agreement of 3 June 1947, government employees of British India were given an option as to their future allegiance. Further rioting occurred in Bihar in 1950, 1959 and 1964.

<sup>2</sup> Historically, many Biharis in India had adopted the Urdu language and Moslem religion of their Moghul conquerors. Some did so in order to escape from the Hindu caste system and to obtain posts under the ruling Moghuls; others were the descendants of soldiers, officials and writers who arrived with the armies from Central Asia. They managed to retain a remnant of the Moghul monopoly in the administration and the police; but as, increasingly, entry to the civil service became by open competitive examination, so they gave way to Brahmans and other literate Hindus. Biharis defended Urdu as the symbol of their difference from Hindus, and many sent their children to separate Urdu schools. Urdu and Hindi are not dissimilar as spoken languages, but employ a somewhat different vocabulary in their literary forms, and Urdu is written in Persian script whereas Hindi is written in Sanskrit. In 1948 Mr Jinnah declared that Urdu should be Pakistan's only state language, and imposed it upon a reluctant East Bengal as a bond of national unity and Pakistani culture.

When Moslem Biharis arrived in East Pakistan in 1947 (to be followed by other migrations, especially after the communal riots in 1950 and after the 1965 war) there was no vacant land available for them to settle. Instead they found jobs such as small traders, civil service officials and clerks, doctors, and skilled workers on the railways and in the mills. Some of them were useful to the Pakistani administrators of Bengal, who gave them posts in much the same way as Asian minorities were used by European colonists in Africa. Other opinion is that, like Jewish minorities, they succeeded through harder work induced by their feeling of insecurity. As a consequence of their preferment by the Pakistanis, they suffered growing unpopularity during the rise of the Awami League, which was predominantly a Bengali nationalist movement. Most Biharis supported the pro-Pakistan Moslem League in the December 1970 elections, but some Awami League Members were elected in Bihari areas. Although Biharis never played an active part in politics – none of them became a Minister or leading politician either in Central or East Pakistan – their general loyalty remained towards the continuance of a united Pakistan, mainly from a feeling of self-preservation.

After Yahya Khan on 1 March 1971 postponed the promised National Assembly, Bengalis turned on the Biharis as Urdu-speaking targets that were readily available as symbols of the Pakistani domination. Over 300 of them were killed by extremist mobs at Chittagong in early March 1971. There were other attacks at Jessore, Khulna, Rangpur and Saidpur. A further slaughter at Mymensingh caused a large influx of Biharis into the Mirpur suburb of Dacca. The Urdu-speaking community claim that in all several thousands of their people were killed by pro-Bengali supporters of secession prior to the Pakistani army's ruthless intervention on 25 March 1971. Further reprisals against the Biharis followed when Yahya Khan arrested Sheikh Mujib and outlawed the Awami League.

For local support, the Pakistani army created an auxiliary force, the Razakars, one wing of which (Al-Shams) was mainly – but not entirely – composed of young Biharis. Some Biharis were only conscripted into this by force; others ran considerable risks to shelter Bengali friends from persecution, and some even surreptitiously helped the Mukti Bahini by night. But when civil bloodshed broke out on a large scale in 1971, there is no doubt that numbers of the Razakar Biharis seized the opportunity to take their revenge on the Bengalis, slaughtering, raping and looting alongside undisciplined Pakistanis.

The Pakistani authorities had also made a practice of appointing Biharis to replace educated Hindus in many key jobs in the administration, as well as in the railway workshops and jute mills. For its part, the Bihari community remained blind to the growing rise of the Bangladeshi movement under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman – and indeed a few of them today still appear unable to accept that Bangladesh is a permanent fact. Three million has become established as the number of people who were killed in all during the period of terror between March and December 1971. It is a situation where rumours and exaggerations, from all sides, easily take root – and continue to do so. The Pakistanis say the total was very much fewer. The true number will never be known; but it is the accepted legendary figure which continues to have an effect on Bangladeshi emotions. Even after the Pakistani army had capitulated in East Bengal, the Al-Badr massacred several hundred Bengali intellectuals in Dacca, and the Bihari community as a whole continue to be popularly blamed in particular for the deaths of these Bangladeshi martyrs<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> On 18 December 1971 'Tiger' Kader Siddiqui, the leader of the Kader Bahini (a group of Bangladeshi student guerrillas), in revenge killed several captive men before a crowd in Dacca Stadium – an act which was seen widely on television and in the world's press, but for which he has never been tried. In fact, the Al-Badr was a predominantly Bengali Razakar organisation. Both the Chattra League (the Awami League students' organisation) and the Chattra Union (the independent students' organisation) appealed to the Bangladeshi government to take firmer action both against corruption and against Siddiqui, following incidents in which several students were killed by the Kader Bahini at Tangail, a forested area which is virtually under Siddiqui's control.

On Bangladesh's independence in December 1971, most of the West Pakistani civilians there were evacuated to India, along with the defeated army. But the Biharis were left behind as castaways. Outside observers feared there would be a general massacre; but this did not take place, although several thousand of the Bihari leaders were arrested and their shops and homes were robbed and occupied. The Indian army, while it remained, protected the Biharis from reprisals as much as possible: for their safety they were grouped in enclaves in which some of them still continue to live. Water and power were cut off from these areas, but the Biharis were too terrified to move out of them in search of food or work, for fear of being killed or held for ransom. Their former houses and shops were occupied and their property looted by Bengalis whose hatred against the Biharis was repeatedly being refuelled by the nationalistic local press. The dispossessed Biharis in the camps have now sold for food almost all the belongings with which they fled.

Following the Indian army's withdrawal on 27 January 1972, a sharp struggle took place in the Bihari enclave at Mirpur. When Bangladeshi soldiers and Mukhti irregulars on the night of 28/29 January carried out a search to enforce the Sheikh's order that all arms must be surrendered, they were forcibly resisted by Pakistani remnants who had taken refuge there. At least one hundred persons on each side were killed, and this incident seems to have had an important effect on the Sheikh's own attitude towards the Biharis. It had largely been the authority of the Sheikh, together with the universal respect in which he is held in Bangladesh, which had previously prevented any massive blood-bath of vengeance after the Pakistani collapse. At first the Bangabandhu<sup>4</sup> had been personally well disposed towards reconciliation with the Biharis – his wife is reported to have been helped by some of them during the period of terror – and his first speech on his return in triumph to Dacca emphasised the place all peoples had in Bangladesh. But he made little effort since then to translate this ideal into practical steps. nor to give any real public lead to encourage Bengalis to distinguish those Biharis who were collaborators of the Pakistanis from the larger number of Bihari families, including widows and children, who can have committed no crime. The words 'collaborator' and 'miscreant' rapidly became the shorthand means of denouncing any element – including economic rivals or political opponents – whom the militant Mukti Bahini wished to see eliminated. Government speeches castigating 'trouble-makers' and 'lawless elements' were often interpreted by extremist nationalists as referring to the Biharis rather than their hooligan persecutors.

Several thousand Biharis were arrested as alleged collaborators and were taken to prison or disappeared. The Bangladeshi press, with the sole exception of the left-wing Sunday paper *Holiday* (which has shown up till now a courageous independence), is both chauvinistically Bengali and also subservient to the government. Incidents against the Biharis by self-appointed Bahinis often followed any new publicity in the local papers about the atrocities committed against Bengalis during the war. Neither these accounts, nor the inflammatory speeches of militant Bengali leaders, suggest anything other than that all Biharis are collectively guilty. On 1 May 1972 a Lai Bahini (Red Shirt movement) leader told a cheering crowd in Dacca that his organisation would arrest and try all the people at Mirpur if the government would not. Sheikh Mujib gave us<sup>5</sup> an assurance that Biharis are entitled to equal protection under the law and that he had ordered a special camp of Bangladeshi police to guard them; but the Biharis themselves stated that their complaints receive little or no redress. The lawless elements who are

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<sup>4</sup> 'The friend of Bengal', as was the Sheikh's popular name.

<sup>5</sup> The mission (consisting of the Rt. Hon. David Ennals, Mr. Faruk Chowdhury, Mr. Paul Connett, Mr. Sarul Hoda, and the author), investigated the situation of the Biharis in Bangladesh, and the Bengalis in Pakistan, in April and May 1972. Copies of the mission's report, price 10p., are available from Mr. S. Hoda, 306 Maritime House, Old Town, Clapham, London S.W.4.

present in any society have become doubly dangerous in Bangladesh because of the large amounts of arms and ammunition which still remain in their possession since the war. Considering that seventy per cent of the East Bengali police were killed in the fighting, and that many of the most experienced Bengali army officers were among those held in Pakistan, order in Bangladesh is generally good. But the police, for whatever reason, did not always give priority to protecting the Biharis, many of whom still feel vulnerable and dare not retaliate or defend themselves.







Completely reliable figures on the present whereabouts of the Bihari peoples in Bangladesh are not easy to obtain. Estimates arrive from unknown sources and quickly become accepted as history. Some Biharis claim that they formerly used to number up to five million people. But definitions of the term 'Bihari' vary very widely, and can also include other non-Bengali immigrants or Urdu-speaking groups.<sup>6</sup> (There are other minorities in Bangladesh as well: approximately 300,000 Buddhists in the Chittagong Hill Tracts district; some Christians – Anglo-Asians or Garo tribes; and much smaller numbers of Ismailis and Chinese.) An unknown number of Biharis are at present still in hiding or are trying to disguise their identity. At some of the Bihari camps, totals may have been inflated in an attempt to get food. But, at mid-1972 the most reliable figures of the present disposition of the Biharis were as follows:

In enclaves on the outskirts of *Dacca* there were approximately 278,500 Biharis. The two principal enclaves are some six miles to the north of the capital, not far from the airport, at *Mirpur*, a traditional Bihari area (where there were some 150,000, of whom 10,000 were living in tents), and at *Mohammadpur* (where there were 95,000, of whom 44,000 were living in eight camps). The camps provided only some psychological protection, since they were unguarded and easily entered. Those at Mohammedpur were the worst in Bangladesh, especially the central reception camp, which was overcrowded with new arrivals of refugees and dispossessed families. Here 10,000 people were living ten or more to a tent, many of them in makeshift erections perched on roofs likely to be swept away into a sea of muddy excrement during the monsoon. (20 inches of rain can fall in a storm, accompanied by high winds.) The camps held a large number of widows, and over ten thousand babies: half the population was under the age of sixteen. There were individual cases of malnutrition, but the International Red Cross (ICRC) was distributing a daily ration of up to six ounces of food per adult and three ounces per child – though not of rice or wheat, which would be the best diet. This provides 500 calories – less than half a basic European daily diet, but more than vast numbers are receiving in Calcutta and elsewhere in the subcontinent. There had been some cases of smallpox and cholera at Mohammedpur, but saline supplies were adequate. The worst short-term problems were those of shelter (the central camp had only 297 tents and needed 5000); and water and sanitation – the former Girls High School camp had only one tap and two latrines for 17,000 people. Above all, there was an urgent need for better drainage and protection.

A harder problem to solve is the deep-set psychological trough of self-pity and despair most of the Biharis have developed in their ghettos. A typical young Bihari in one camp asked "What is to become of us? Pakistan will not have us, India will not have us and we will be either liquidated or starved to death here". There was almost an average of one incident reported daily of a Bihari being attacked or robbed, and few Biharis had the courage to venture outside, even to contact the authorities to tell them their problems. The government complains that very few Biharis are willing to come forward as leaders or spokesmen; but this is because their previous leaders have been arrested as collaborators of the Pakistanis, and others are reluctant to run a similar risk. Some Biharis at Mohammedpur told me that 95 per cent of them wanted to go to Pakistan and 5 per cent to India; but others stated that they personally were prepared to swear allegiance to Bangladesh if they could be sure that Bangladesh would afford them full rights and protection. The ICRC estimated that 60 per cent wished to go to Pakistan.

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<sup>6</sup> The 1961 Census gave 800,247 persons out of 50,840,235 in East Pakistan as stating that their mother tongue was other than Bengali. The largest groups were Urdu (310,628) and Hindi (140,845) – both 'Bihari' groups; and Assam – Burmah tongues (136,475) – not Bihari. The census also listed 627,389 "Pakistanis born in the Pakistan-Indian subcontinent beyond the limits of the Census of Pakistan", of whom 434,081 were born in Eastern India.

The physical conditions at Mirpur were better than those at Mohammedpur, but the security situation was worse. Awami League members seized many Bihari homes, and there were continual subsequent reports of looting and harassment. Unconfirmed accounts allege that, on 18 April 1972, some Biharis were killed here by a mob when returning from a visit to their relations in prison.

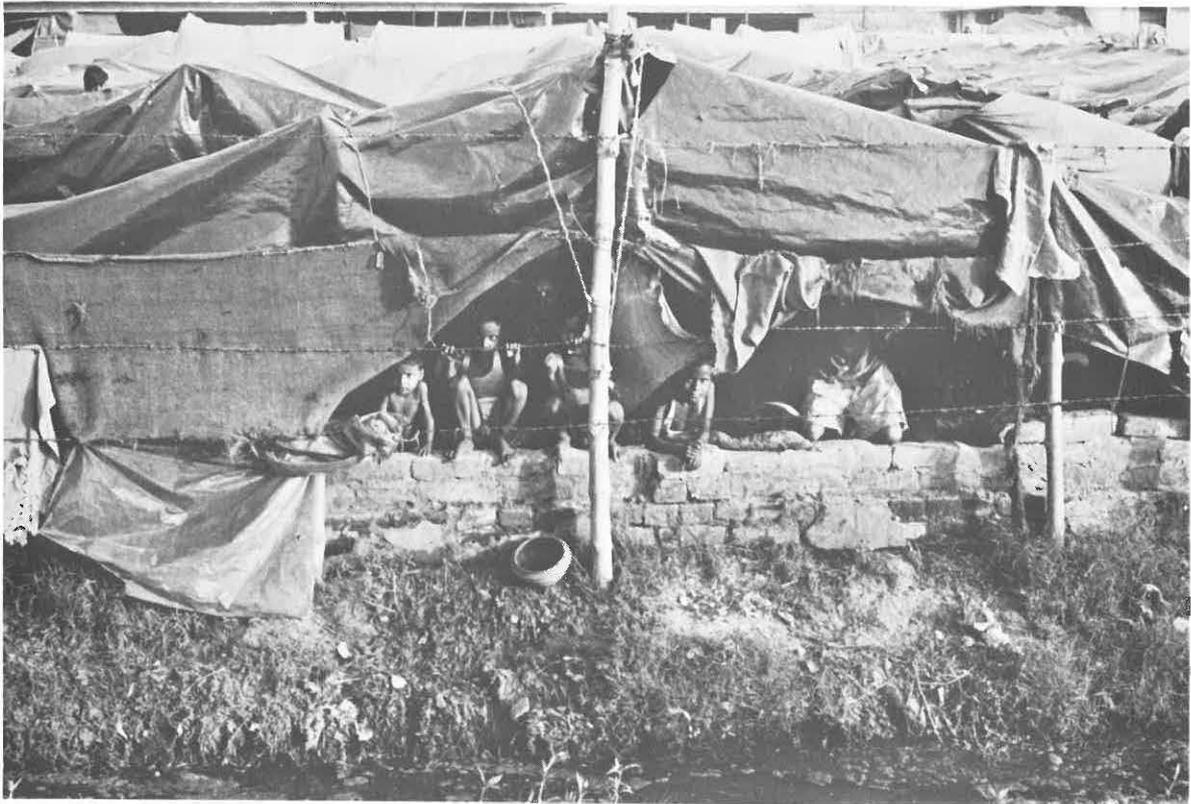
Women were also alleged to have been kidnapped from *Murapara* camp, 20 miles away, where there were 9,500 Biharis. In the Dacca area, a further 16,000 were living at *Adamjee*; and 3,000 richer Biharis at *Isphani*.

The feeding and medical conditions in all the camps were thought likely to deteriorate seriously when the ICRC finally withdrew, since the Bangladesh Red Cross (a wholly political Awami League organisation) had taken little or no interest in them, and a large part of the relief supplies are at present believed to disappear through corruption.

In and around the area of *Saidpur*, in the north-west of the country (see map on page 6) there were estimated to be some 275,000 Biharis. Because here they considerably outnumber the Bengalis, their situation is better than elsewhere in Bangladesh, despite the unburied skeletons which lie around as reminders of the recent carnage. Although there were still tensions – a Bihari was arrested and beaten by the police for talking to us – there were also some encouraging signs. The Biharis at least enjoyed freedom of movement. A local co-operation committee, consisting of equal numbers of Biharis and Bengalis, was nominally in existence. Some excellent pioneering reconciliation work had been carried out by a voluntary organisation called *Bangla Jyoti* ('Light of Bangladesh') which had worked with the local trade-unions, and set up classes where Awami League students were teaching Bengali to non-Bengalis. (The latter's Urdu is the chief socially divisive factor which prevents them from regaining their jobs – even



*Unburied reminders of recent history, Saidpur*



an Urdu accent can cause a man to be ostracised in Bangladesh at present). Employment in Saidpur depended on fully reopening the railway workshops there, which used to employ 7,500 men, but which were only partly operative. There was an increasing shortage of food, due to the unemployment; those who used to work on the railways had not been paid since December 1971 and had now exhausted all their savings.

At *Rangpur* not far away, there was a much smaller isolated group of some 7,000 Biharis, living in four colonies, who sent our mission a message: "We are passing our days in a miserable condition. Our future is dark and we do not find ourselves safe . . . . unruly elements are harassing, teasing and snatching away our belongings . . . . Many of us died due to want of food and medicine . . . . We made several representations to the government officials but all in vain. They did not even trouble to see our camps."

At *Chittagong*, Bangladesh's second city and chief port, there were some 60,000 Biharis, living in five colonies. Sixty per cent of the Biharis inhabited their own houses, while the rest were accommodated in schools or warehouses. They complained of diminishing food supplies and of looting and a lack of security.

At *Khulna*, the second port of Bangladesh, some 60,000 Biharis were situated. It was at Khulna that the most serious recent killing took place. More than one thousand Biharis were reported to have been killed on 10 March 1972 — allegedly at the instigation of militant students following an incident involving an *agent provocateur*.

At *Ishurdi* there were 30,000 Biharis; at *Bogra*: 14,000; at *Rajshahi*: 4,500; at *Mymensingh*: 3,100; at *Comilla*: 1,200; at *Sylhet*: 1,000; at *Jessore*: 700; and at *Dinajipur*: 180.

The number of Biharis known to be in enclaves in 1972 therefore totalled some 735,180. A few continue to be employed in jobs in Dacca. The number of non-Bengalis in the whole of Bangladesh was probably between one and one-and-a-half million, compared with some seventy million Bengalis.

The ICRC in 1972 carried out a census of the Biharis in the camps. This estimated the number who either normally live in West Pakistan, or have close family (i.e. husband/wife, parents/young children) or strongly compassionate links with Pakistan, at about 25,000. Not all the remainder had close ties with India — most Biharis alive now were born in Bengal. A few thousand Biharis fled to Nepal. A trickle of others have managed to make their way over the frontier into India, with only half-hearted attempts by the Indian authorities to stop them, although many have been arrested on arrival. But India has no wish to encourage a precedent of any large-scale migration: the Biharis became an issue in Indian elections, and questions in the Delhi Parliament have asked what firmer measures the government intends to take against their entry.

By the New Delhi Agreement of 28 August 1973, it was agreed to transfer 'a substantial number of non-Bengalis' in Bangladesh who 'have opted for repatriation to Pakistan', in exchange for the Bengalis in Pakistan and the return of the Pakistani prisoners-of-war and civilian internees in India.

But whereas Bangladesh was prepared to receive all the 128,000 Bengalis who registered for repatriation in Pakistan, the number of Biharis which Pakistan would accept initially was 83,000 (58,000 military personnel, former civil servants and members of divided families, plus a maximum of 25,000 'hardship cases'.) By the eventual conclusion of the UNHCR repatriation operation at the end of June 1974, a total of 108,750 non-Bengalis had been transferred from

Bangladesh to Pakistan (9000 being moved by sea, and the remainder by air). Since the ICRC had listed the number of Biharis who sought repatriation by the UN airlift at 470,000, this left at least some 350,000 of them stranded.

Pakistan declined to enter into any further substantive discussion of the issue at the summit meeting between the Bangladeshi and Pakistani Prime Ministers which took place in Dacca in June 1974.

In the Bihari ghettos and shanty encampments in Bangladesh, serious shortages of food and medicine together with grim physical conditions still remain – as they do for large numbers of Bengalis also – but there is now less psychological tension among the Biharis than there used to be in 1972, and people from the camps move freely about Dacca in search of work.





The remaining Biharis' future options appear to lie between migration back to India; an exodus to Pakistan, or possibly to some other Islamic country; integration with, or assimilation by, Bangladesh; or some combination of these courses. Ideally each Bihari should be able to choose which he or she prefers.

*India* at present appears unlikely to accept more than a marginal number, though she should be urged at least to allow individual families to be reunited in Bihar on compassionate grounds, in the same way as she has on occasions made representations for Indian immigrant families to be reunited in the United Kingdom. The Indian government's attitude – in marked contrast to their recent humanitarian policy towards the much greater problem of ten million Bengali refugees – remains adamantly opposed to allowing any sizeable number back to Bihar. Although it could be represented to India that she would gain a considerable prestige victory over Pakistan if she were to receive Moslem refugees – an argument that would especially appeal to those Indians who still wish an end to Partition – the Indian government remains firmly against the idea for internal political reasons, and declares that the Biharis must lie in the bed they opted for in 1947. It is possible that the Indians' own attitude might soften if Pakistan and Bangladesh agreed to accept the bulk of the Biharis.

The *Pakistanis* certainly have a moral obligation to take at least all those Biharis whose loyalty to them in Bengal was the cause of their present predicament. The Pakistani government owes them more than expressions of concern. Many of the Biharis originally migrated to Pakistan (as an ideological state) rather than to Bengal. In turn, Pakistan used the Biharis as a spearhead of their policy in Bengal, deliberately encouraging them to continue as a separate community, rather than to integrate, by heavy government expenditure in areas such as Mirpur. The removal of such Biharis should help to make the remaining Biharis more acceptable in Bangladesh. Sheikh Mujib told us in 1972 that, as far as he was concerned, any Bihari who wished to leave the country "could do so tomorrow". In October 1974 he said: "We have some 700,000 non-Bengalis – you call them Biharis – living in my country. Those who have opted for Bangladesh are its citizens. But the 300,000 who chose Pakistan through the International Red Cross are still in Bangladesh because Pakistan will not accept them. How can I keep the people who are not my citizens? Pakistan has to accept them; there is no alternative."

However, even if a further exchange can be negotiated politically, it must be recognised that this entails a risk for the Biharis. Few of the 100,000 Biharis who moved to West Pakistan after Partition have found satisfactory work there and many of them are still living in an enclave at Orangi, near Karachi. Even more disturbingly, the 2,500 Bihari families who managed to reach there from Bangladesh in 1971-2 were crowded in a camp nearby that had little protection from the scorching heat and was in many respects as bad as that at Mohammedpur. There was no work available, and the Biharis were surrounded by an increasingly hostile local population. There is a danger that any large new influx would provoke much sharper Sindi resentment; and thus any wholesale transfer – even if feasible – might simply shift the Biharis' problems from Dacca to Karachi, where they might once again find themselves facing unemployment and walls of communal hostility. Pakistan can point to the fact that it has taken in 10,900 non-Bengalis who fled to Nepal after the 1971 war. Greater international assistance to help Pakistan with resettlement problems might facilitate more families to move to Pakistan by normal immigration, though for many the cost is prohibitive.

The *United Nations* and its agencies can, for their part, have no official status regarding the Bihari issue, without the Bangladesh government's consent (since it is an internal matter, and no nation has alleged that they are 'a threat to peace'). However, at the time of international concern about the Biharis' situation, the Bangladesh authorities allowed the UN to provide the Red Cross



*Bihari camp near Karachi, Pakistan*

with food grain for distribution in the Bihari areas. The Bangladesh government is reported to have suggested to the UN that it might take over permanent responsibility for looking after the Biharis. But the UN is in no financial position to afford another open-ended UNRWA commitment, similar to the Palestinian one.

The least hazardous possible future for the remaining Biharis would appear to be for those who are still identified with the Pakistanis, or have close family ties with West Pakistan, to be moved there as soon as possible, where there is a reasonable chance that a limited number could be absorbed. India should accept as many as she can. The remainder should take a pledge of loyalty to Bangladesh and try to become part of the new nation. Dr. Kamal Hossain said that a country of 75 millions ought to be able to reabsorb at least a quarter of a million.

For most minorities, integration rather than assimilation is seen as the ideal. Tagore, who is much respected in Bangladesh, once said "The problem is not how to unite with all differences, but how to unite with all differences intact". But the Biharis are in such a vulnerable predicament that they would be well advised to assimilate as far as possible by, for example, having Bengali language classes in all their groups. For many Bangladeshi, the crucial test of allegiance of non-Bengalis is their willingness to learn and accept the Bengali language. Urdu is the badge associated with an alien and aloof middle-class. People still remember the riots which followed the Pakistan government's attempt to impose the Urdu language on Bengal, which has a strong pride in its language and culture. For the great majority of the Biharis, all their social and economic links and experience lie in Bengal rather than in the former West Pakistan. But until they stop believing that transfer to Pakistan will be the *deus ex machina* solution, they will show little readiness to begin tackling the tasks involved in becoming Bangladeshi. The obstacles to their rehabilitation in Bangladesh, though not to be minimised, need not be insuperable provided that the Biharis accept that they have no realistic alternative to making Bangladesh

their home. The vagueness of the wording of the Delhi Agreement of August 1973 continues to nourish among the majority of the Biharis an unfounded hope of eventual transfer to Pakistan. It is true that the new discovery of some mass-grave, or the war crimes trials' evidence, or the general difficulties of Bangladesh, may trigger off further incidents against Biharis there. But on the other hand the future stability of Pakistan also appears to have its problems, with Sindi elements increasingly ill-disposed toward the Biharis, and with demands for autonomy coming from Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Province.

If any solution is to have a chance of success, however, it will require a much more constructive lead to be given by the Bangladesh government concerning the treatment of its non-Bengalis. At present, the Dacca administration appears to have no real policy towards the Biharis. Hardly any officials troubled to visit the camps. Credit must be given to the Bangladesh government for enabling our mission and the press to visit any Bihari enclave we wished.<sup>7</sup> It is apparent that some ministers are sensitive to press reports about the plight of the Biharis, particularly in the United Kingdom with where they feel close personal links. They are also aware of the damage these reports do to international goodwill, and that Bangladesh's economic reconstruction depends on aid from abroad (although India and the Soviet Union, Bangladesh's two largest donors, have not joined in the criticism). It has also been pointed out that it would be a propaganda victory for Pakistan if Bangladesh were shown as being unable to absorb even some of the Biharis; and that any ill-treatment of them might trigger off unfortunate repercussions for any Bengalis still in Pakistan.

But the main feeling behind the Bengali indifference to the Bihari problem is that they deserve their present plight. Time and again when we suggested some practical steps towards reconciliation, we were answered by a reiterated account of some past killing with which Biharis were alleged to be connected. The most frequently mentioned is the disappearance of Zahir Raihan, Bangladesh's foremost film director, who was lured into Mirpur on the promise of discovering his brother, an Al-Badr victim. Sheikh Mujib himself said he thought it remarkable that, "apart from one or two incidents, there had been no genocide in revenge when Bangladesh triumphed".

Since the Pakistanis are out of reach, the Biharis make the most readily accessible scapegoats, particularly at a time when the euphoria of victory inevitably is succeeded by privations. The members of the Ennals mission considered that "probably the single most depressing aspect of present-day Bangladesh is the number of rational and intelligent Bengalis – whose loyalty during the liberation struggle is in no doubt – who are too frightened to speak out on this issue." Individual Bengalis in private express their unhappiness about the Biharis' plight, but others resent that outside concern should be focussed on this rather than Bangladesh's general hardships. Coupled with this attitude many Bengalis – and not just those who are self-interested because they have taken Bihari homes or jobs – have little sympathy with the Biharis who, they feel, are complaining because they miss the privileged position and preferential treatment they used to enjoy under the Pakistanis, in the same way as the Anglo-Indians felt a loss of position when the Raj ended in India. The large number of Marxists in Bangladesh in general consider that the Biharis' complaints are only protests against the relative deprivation felt by a middle-class now brought down to share the impoverished lot long borne by the peasant masses. In the jute mills and railway workshops many skilled jobs of importance to the Bangladeshi economy were held by Biharis, who are hard to replace. But a large number of Bengalis believe that, with independence, jobs in Bangladesh should go to Bengalis in the same way as independent African

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<sup>7</sup> I am not certain with how much enthusiasm the United Kingdom government would have welcomed a Bengali mission wishing to see Long Kesh.

countries want Africans to take over posts formerly held by Asians or Europeans. With truth, they point out that there are large numbers of homeless and workless Bengalis also living in their homes destroyed in the fighting, some of these Bengali camps' conditions are as bad as those of the Biharis, except that they lack the fear endemic in the latter. The unemployed in Bangladesh number over ten million. And shortage of food is not confined to the Biharis: the price of rice has risen with devastating sharpness.

Any constructive outcome for the Bihari problem will be very much eased by being in the context of a successful reconstruction and expansion of the Bangladesh economy.<sup>8</sup> Here is a way in which international concern could help. A report to the United Nations in 1972, by sixteen specialists led by Dr. Erna Salier, concluded that Bangladesh's present commercial and industrial level has suffered a fall of perhaps 50 per cent from the scarcely adequate 1970 figures, and that agricultural output was down some 25 per cent. The report found that the new government has virtually no foreign exchange reserves and wholly inadequate domestic financial resources. Recently, the shortage of foreign exchange has developed chronic proportions.

East Bengal's basic lack of development stems from the nineteenth century, when economic and cultural changes were centred round Calcutta and in West Bengal. With absentee owners and negligible local industry, East Bengal was the colony of a colony. In recent years Bangladesh has been the victim of a succession of calamities: the 1970 cyclone, the 1971 war, the oil-price rises of 1973 and floods leading to starvation in 1974. The longer-term economic and employment difficulties of Bangladesh centre round the threat faced by its principal industry, jute, from plastic substitutes; and from the fact that its other main industry, tea, no longer enjoys a protected market in Pakistan.<sup>9</sup> Future development will have to concentrate upon agriculture: 90 per cent of the Bangladeshi population live in rural areas. Fortunately, the land is potentially one of the most fertile in the world – though the yield per acre at present is among the lowest. Given flood-control and irrigation, the delta area could develop fish-farming, and other districts have the ideal climate for growing fruit and cattle-fodder. At present, fertilisers are used on only 4 per cent of the land; irrigation on scarcely 2 per cent; and 44 per cent of the agricultural population are permanently unemployed – a situation which tenancy reform and the formation of rural co-operatives could help to change. The 'Green Revolution' makes land reform all the more urgent a priority if increased yields are not going to result in escalating inequality. And land reform would also, in particular, help to relieve the urban pressure in Bangladesh on employment and housing, and thus be of direct benefit to – amongst others – the Biharis.

But no outside assistance can be of any value in helping the Bihari problem, unless it accompanies a genuine effort by the Bangladeshi government and people. On 7 March 1971

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<sup>8</sup> West Pakistan used to control nearly all the industry of the Eastern part, including most of the jute production. Similarly, almost all the higher economic and civil service posts were held by West Pakistanis. While East Pakistan, through its production of jute, provided approximately 60% of foreign earnings, it received only about 30% of the country's public expenditure. Considerably the greatest proportion (approximately three-quarters) of foreign aid funds used to be devoted to the West. In 1969/70, *per capita* income in West Pakistan was 61% higher than in the East (almost double what it was ten years before), while prices there were lower. Between 1949 and 1969, the estimated transfer of real resources from East to West was \$2,100 million.

<sup>9</sup> Bangladesh, now the eighth most populous nation in the world, produces 80 per cent (1.5 million tons) of the world's total production of jute. The main food crop is rice (about 10 million tons a year) and sugar cane (about 7 million tons). In 1969 there were only approximately one thousand industrial establishments, providing jobs for some 200,000 workers; agriculture employed 82 per cent of the working population.

Sheikh Mujib stated publicly: "Bengalis, non-Bengalis, Hindus and Moslems are all our brothers. It is our responsibility to protect them all." There are a number of practical steps which the Bangladesh government should take now if it is to give reality to expressions of reconciliation:

- (i) An effective official body, with Bengali and Bihari representatives, must be set up without delay to tackle the housing, employment, and language problems of integrating those Biharis who wish to become Bangladeshi citizens.
- (ii) Those who wish to leave, and for whom there is a future in Pakistan, should be helped to do so now, in order to ease the situation of the remainder.



- (iii) India should be asked to contribute to relieving the tension by accepting as many humanitarian cases as possible.
- (iv) Those Biharis who remain should be told how they can demonstrate their loyalty to Bangladesh, and in return should be given help to become full citizens. The middle-range skills possessed by the Biharis could be of considerable benefit to the Bangladeshi economy, and would in fact be more likely to reduce the number of unemployed Bengalis than to increase it. Bengali language classes should be provided as soon as possible. One very intelligent inhabitant of Mohammedpur camp said that, more than policemen, the Biharis needed qualified social workers. In tackling the local grass-roots problems of reconciliation some individual Bengalis, including members of the Bangladesh National Federation of Women have offered to help; and assistance from some of the powerful student leaders could be crucial. 'Concern' and other agencies have recently started makeshift schools, where some 15,000 Bihari children are being taught in Bengali. Some of these schools could now be handed over to local

organisations such as the Bangladesh Volunteer Corps. But meanwhile the camps remain at Mohammedpur and elsewhere, and paradoxically are becoming a greater social problem with the passage of time: “Those who have left were the natural leaders”, as an Irish priest working there points out. “There’s been a creaming-off process. The result is a sociologically-crippled community sustaining itself on dreams of Pakistan.” Above all, if Bangladeshi government leaders would have meetings with some Bihari representatives, this might enable the latter to believe they have a future in Bangladesh. It would be the best possible augury for the future of Bangladesh if the nation’s birth could be accompanied by a magnanimous concept of reconciliation.

A further public lead of toleration and statesmanship from the subcontinent’s leaders is now needed – both by the Biharis, and for the subcontinent’s reputation. Certainly, in understanding the predicament of the Biharis, it must be viewed in the context of its origins and of the enormous other problems at present faced by Bangladesh, Pakistan and India. But, whatever the causes and whatever the events of the past, the present situation of the human debris of the 1971 war benefits nobody, and could develop into a tragic disaster.



Shakir Mia's anger remains unabated. In 1971 he was abruptly expelled from a well-paying job in a garage in Dacca and ended up with about 30,000 other Biharis in the Jenna camp at Mohammedpur on the outskirts of the city. He has lived ever since in squalor. He and his family of 8 sleep and eat in six square feet of space – a small dark corner in a cavernous warehouse housing 32 families. The building was put up in the apparently vain hope that it would not be permanent. Shakir Mia is not the man to ask for confirmation if you think the lot of the Biharis is improving. But it probably is. It has always been extraordinarily difficult to determine numbers still in camps and ghettos. But whereas the figure at mid-1972 stood at 735,180, the latest estimate from 'Concern', the relief agency primarily involved with the Biharis, shows that it had fallen significantly to just over 300,000 by the end of 1976.

But numbers, of course, are no true measure of the political and social impact that can be made by a small, isolated and angry ethnic group like the Biharis. Two facts probably distinguish them from the many other categories that continue to bear the brunt of Bangladesh's unstable politics and chronic poverty. First, they are the most tangible reminder of tragic civil war. Second, the conditions in which the 300,000 Biharis live are reckoned by most hardened agency workers to be the 'most visibly miserable' anywhere in Bangladesh. It is a cliché to say that poverty breeds violence, and generally the cliché is not born out by the examples of Bangladesh and India. But Bihari camps are still seen by many as constituting as intractable a political problem for Bangladesh as Palestinian camps do for Jordan.

From the time of the civil war in 1971 it has been necessary to put the Biharis into the wider context of Bangladesh's overall state. Until the death of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in August 1975 the most significant external influence on the country was the relationship with the erstwhile masters, Pakistan. It is well known that the Biharis readily entered into the Pakistan system of government in the East. During and after the 1971 war they were seen as symbols of Pakistani domination. Retribution, when it was exacted, was swift and terrible. Such actions have been well documented, but it is easy to distort and exaggerate the connection between Biharis and the relationship between Bangladesh and Pakistan. That relationship has immeasurably improved since the advent of Major General Zia Rahman as head of state in November 1975, three months after the death of Mujib. Zia's policy has been to put more distance between Hindu India and Moslem Bangladesh, the wartime allies, and encourage a return to normality with Moslem Pakistan.

Since Mujib's death the major external pressure on Bangladesh has come from India, and the really divisive issue has been the waters of the river Ganges. The river is common to both countries, but it emanates from Nepal and India. Mujib came to an agreement with Mrs Gandhi for sharing the water, which is vital for agriculture, but the agreement died with him. Arguing that India needed the water to remove silt from Calcutta harbour, New Delhi began to divert many thousands of gallons from the Ganges at the Farraka Dam in mid-1975. Pressure to restore normal relations with Pakistan grew with this supposed threat from India. The atrocities of the war were forgotten within an incredibly short time. Mujib's call for an international court to try Pakistani officials of war crimes had failed to win support. Diplomatic relations were resumed, and a Pakistani embassy established in Dacca early in 1976. Talks began on aid to Bangladesh. All this has probably been thrown into the melting pot by the dramatic elections in India and Pakistan. Following the Indian result, relations between India and Bangladesh appear to have taken a turn for the better. Meanwhile, the Pakistani Prime Minister Bhutto is clearly beset by huge problems at home – problems which are bound to divert his attention from India and Bangladesh.

So much for the tangled politics of the subcontinent. The question is, what bearing does it all have on the Biharis? The answer is probably very little. As the dispute with India over the Ganges has succeeded Pakistan as the chief source of external hostility, so the Bangladeshi public have ceased to see the Biharis as standing for Pakistani colonialism. This works both ways. The significance of the Bihari camps as a political symbol is undoubtedly more deeply felt by the Biharis themselves than other Bangladeshis. This is good in that it renders any further explosion of anger or discrimination against them highly unlikely. On the other hand, it also means that the publicity and pressure to integrate them or repatriate them to Pakistan has also dwindled. In fact, the dichotomy between integration and repatriation is probably false. Biharis like 70 year-old Shakir Mia talk wistfully of repatriation. But such repatriation as was going to occur has probably already occurred. It is far too soon to talk of another generation growing up in the camps without first hand experience of the connection with Pakistan. But to most of the Biharis, repatriation has probably come to mean a return to their previous positions of responsibility in the East, or at least an alleviation of their misery, rather than a viable political alternative.

It should not be concluded from this that the Biharis are no longer a political issue. They are, if only because foreigners continue to probe. It still remains impossible for American agencies like CORR, which distribute large amounts of emergency rationing to mothers and children, to deal directly with the camps. Neither can the United Nations, through the World Food Programme; nor can individual governments, through a vague fear that the Biharis could suddenly become an embarrassment. Into the gap has come Concern, an Irish agency, which fields one of the largest staffs of the 126 agencies operating in Bangladesh, and acts as a channel for money and food from other less non-aligned agencies and governments. So how realistic is integration? There is probably, though not definitely, a feeling of community within the camps, despite their awfulness. This is a question of proverbial difficulty. It is almost certainly true that elements have a vested interest in keeping the problem alive, if only because they have made a fat profit from relief supplies. Concern officials say that "forces within the camps are keeping them together and fostering apartness". This, by implication, will make integration more difficult. But there is undoubtedly more to it. Attempts to move the squatters from the bustees (slums) have come face to face with the unaccountable fact that even the most appalling conditions soon become home. The Biharis speak a different dialect, and like any other ethnic group will probably choose to stick together. But the conditions in which they live must improve. The relevant word is therefore development as much as integration. A balance must be struck. As a result, Concern runs handicraft centres for Bihari women within camps, but also introduces teaching of Bengali into their school curricula in Chittagong and Saidpur.

The most potent force acting for the Biharis' development is not the unpredictable relations with India and Pakistan, but Bangladesh's own improving economy. It has been pointed out, correctly, that there have been many victims of Bangladesh's poverty. The lack of money, the sluggish economy, the death of management skills, and the retarded infrastructure — all these have bred a long list of casualties, ranging from city slums to rural children. Whatever its preferences, a bankrupt government will find it impossible to do much about anything. Late in 1976 Concern officials noted the first real moves by the Bangladeshi government to re-employ the skills that the Biharis had acquired under Pakistan. Meetings with the Ministry of Relief began in March. Shortly afterwards, 140 Biharis were given temporary jobs at the railway workshop in Saidpur, centre of the country's extensive railway system whose effectiveness under Pakistan was largely due to the Biharis. This important move was probably prompted more by the expansion of the economy than the opening of the Pakistan embassy early in 1976. According to a confidential World Bank report for the meeting in May 1976 of the 15-country Aid Consortium to Bangladesh, the country's Gross Domestic Product had risen by 12 per cent over the previous year. Electrification was said by the government to be the fastest growing sector of the economy. The railways were moving again. Apathy had been replaced by optimism. And the undoubted energy of Major-General Zia Rahman (who declared himself President in April 1977) was making life uncomfortable for the desk-bound bureaucrats who had plagued Mujib's administration. It appears, then, that the skills of the Biharis will be increasingly called upon. Nothing will persuade the Bangladeshi government to make special efforts in their direction more than self-interest will, and this is a far more relevant plea than to 'bury the hatchet'.

The improvement in Bangladesh's overall fortunes should not be overestimated. To a large extent it is due to two years of good harvests – and harvests are still dangerously dependent upon the whims of nature. The structural problems of the economy are still severe, particularly for the rural poor: the number of landless labourers has crept up from 39 per cent to 42 per cent of the total workforce in the last two years, and wages remain pitifully low at less than £100 a year. Food aid continues to enter the country in quantity, undermining the efforts of local farmers and making food self-sufficiency highly unlikely. The population growth rate continues at 3 per cent a year – and is not going to come down until there is a concerted effort to combine family planning with improved health facilities, since it is high infant mortality that makes villagers bear more children than appears good for them. But these are problems for the rural areas. Admittedly, over 90 per cent of the population lives here. But the Biharis do not. They are primarily townspeople. The irony is that their brighter prospects stem from the government's apparent determination to persist in development strategies that are aimed more at urban than rural problems. This may not be best for Bangladesh, but it is undoubtedly best for the Biharis. Their opportunities should now open up – if they, as well as the Bangladeshi government, can forget why they are where they are.

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## V. THE SITUATION IN THE BIHARI CAMPS IN JUNE 1977 by a Doctor working in Bangladesh.

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In April 1976 the Ministry of Relief in Dacca called a meeting of the main relief organisation involved with the Biharis in Bangladesh and encouraged them to participate in the improvement of living conditions in the camps. This welcome move, openly acknowledging that housing and sanitation problems exist, resulted in an impressive building programme being managed by Heed, Concern, the Mennonites, Salvation Army, CORR, the Rangpur and Dinajpur Rehabilitation service, Save the Children Fund and the Terre des Hommes Federation – to name but a few of the voluntary agencies in Bangladesh which continue with their Bihari rehabilitation work. There was a feeling that by making the camps habitable the problem would be perpetuated, along the lines of the Palestinian refugee camps. But a year later (June 1977) the Bihari camps are still largely unfit for human habitation, in spite of recent efforts.

There are now in all 66 Bihari camps in Bangladesh and it is difficult to imagine how it can be possible for the Commonwealth nations to allow such monstrosities to continue to exist in a Commonwealth country. The Biharis living in these camps are now entering the sixth monsoon. In spite of all efforts by the voluntary agencies, who have replaced the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Bangladesh Red Cross in the camps, conditions remain unbelievably bad. In Geneva camp two-thirds of the huts still need repair, latrines are broken and the water supply is unhygienic. The population of the camp is stated to be 38,740. In Bogra the huts are collapsing and there is no apparent means of drainage for the camp sewage. At Rangpur the Biharis have been evicted from the warehouse they were sheltering in and the re-formed Ispahani camp No. 3 has serious housing and sanitation problems. In Bansbari camp at Saidpur there are still sick, malnourished children in evidence, in spite of all the medical work in the town. In Mistripara camp at Saidpur the sewage disposal is a serious health threat.

Forcible attempts have been made to disperse some of the camps in Saidpur, Rangpur and Dinajpur by the Bangladesh government, but it is reported that the new smaller camps set up to disperse the Biharis face the same problems of housing and sanitation as the original camps.

The question of the Biharis' rights to the properties abandoned by them at the end of the 1971 war is far from being settled. The largest Bihari property owners stand a fair chance of regaining some of their assets; for example in Khulna a Mr. Siddique has successfully regained his cinema hall and other properties. Other affluent Biharis are engaging U.S. attorneys to press their claims through the Bangladesh courts, but for the ordinary camp-dweller the chance of regaining his old house or shop are not so promising. What is needed now is a recognition of the housing crisis in the camps by the Bangladesh Government's Ministry of Relief; and the participation of Commonwealth and other countries in a re-housing programme for the camp-dwellers.

It is not contended that in the Bihari camps there is now a serious food problem, though the committee of Adamjee camp continue to report starvation among the Biharis there, and the Chairman of Mirpur section XI Medical centre appeals for international aid for the children who are suffering from utter poverty and malnutrition. In May 1977 reports of death from starvation were given in many of the camps visited at a distance away from Dacca; but these reports are as fictitious now as the camp population figures submitted for official uses. In Dacca and Mirpur camps each month 6 lbs., 8 oz. of wheat per adult is distributed, and half of this for the children. In these locations Biharis can get ration permits, though it usually costs them more in bribes than a Bengali would have to pay. But in Bogra the Biharis get less than the full allocation of wheat and are forced to sign that they have received the full amount; and gratuities have to be paid to obtain even this. In Saidpur only those Biharis in a 'transit' camp who opted previously for repatriation to Pakistan, received wheat. Since August 1976 the wheat allocation of the remainder of the Saidpur Biharis has ceased. In Rangpur there has been no wheat allocation for the last two months. In Jessore the wheat stopped in August 1976; in Dinajpur it stopped in October 1976; in Khulna one month's allocation is given every 2 or 3 months.

The education problems in the camps have become less serious recently due to the acceptance of Bengali as a medium of teaching, in replacement of Urdu. The Bangladesh Volunteers Service runs two primary schools in Geneva camp in Dacca; but in the nearby Town Hall Camp, where space is extremely restricted, local pressure has resulted in the construction of a school for Bengali children from outside the camp. The camp children will not have access to this school. In Bogra at the Jamil Madrasa, the largest religious College in the north of Bangladesh, which was built by a Bihari (Haji Bashir), there is now not one Bihari student. This College is situated in the Latifpur colony, a Bihari camp.

The question of 'repatriation' to Pakistan is a problem now of such complexity as to exercise the ingenuity of the most skilled of statesmen. Since the airlift ended in 1974 only a trickle of the most affluent Biharis have been able to buy their way to Pakistan, under the auspices of the ICRC. In Saidpur 'transit' camp there were 1,300 – 1,400 Biharis stranded and in Mirpur 1,200. They were cleared for repatriation to Pakistan but the airlift in 1974, having moved 110,000 Biharis to Pakistan, ended before these people could go. Many of them were former member of para-military bodies who, having been released from prison earlier, may experience problems in integrating into Bangladesh society. In all 20,000 Biharis still in Bangladesh were cleared previously for repatriation to Pakistan. The recent disturbances in Pakistan and the difficulties experienced in resettling the Biharis who were repatriated in 1974 make it seem unlikely that the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mr. Z.A. Bhutto, will ever fulfil his pledge in 1972 to take as many Biharis from Bangladesh as might wish to go to Pakistan. Certainly, he rejected any further repatriation when he visited Dacca in 1974; and the Pakistan Embassy in Dacca, both last year and this, have given no hope of any change of policy in this respect. The Bangladesh government, since the coups of 1975, has also not pressed for repatriation and it is impossible to get this question raised in the Bangladesh press.

There remains the possibility of movement out of Bangladesh of some of the more impoverished of the Bihari camp-dwellers to countries other than Pakistan. The previous movement to Pakistan consisted of the more affluent members of Bihari society. If the Commonwealth countries are interested in this type of solution for those Biharis who will find it difficult to re-settle and integrate into Bangladesh society, the selection process will be even more arduous than that undertaken in 1973 by ICRC for repatriation to Pakistan.

For those who are not in greatest need, for those who have employment or some prospects for the future, the first essential is the construction of new housing for the camp-dwellers. If possible, these new complexes should be mixed – Bangladeshis and Biharis – and sited away from the traditional Bihari locations, with mixed schooling as well. The re-employment of Biharis on the Bangladesh Railways should also be re-examined: there are reports that some Biharis cleared for re-employment at the Saidpur Railway workshop have had their applications postponed, and the Provident Funds of former Bihari Railway workers could be refunded to them.

The most urgent consideration is the planned dispersal of the Bihari camps throughout Bangladesh. The effect of more than five years of such degradation on the camp-dwellers is horrific. And the future social consequences for Bangladesh society of such centres of filth and corruption could be serious. The consequences for the Biharis themselves are already obvious. The Bihari camps, controlled by corrupt and powerful self-elected committees, are revolting places to work in; the evidence now is that a number of relief agencies, unable to cope with the activities of the committees, are anxious to scale down further their already reduced programmes in the camps. The problems of the Bihari camps in Bangladesh are sufficiently serious to warrant the attention of the Commonwealth as a whole. The Government of Bangladesh has now announced a housing programme for low and middle income groups in urban areas, involving 95% bank loans. Could not some of this financing go to the construction of mixed housing for Bangladeshis and Biharis? And for the poorest of the Bihari camp dwellers, is there no solution within the Commonwealth, as suggested by Mr. Bhutto in 1972? The total Bihari population of Bangladesh is now estimated at between 200,000 – 300,000. Most of these are not now destitute and with properly sited housing their integration into Bangladesh is a practical proposition.

Nearly ten years on from April 1972 when Ben Whitaker and I made our report on the problems of the Biharis in Bangladesh, and four years on from the assessment made by Iain Guest and the doctor, the problem still remains.

Describing the physical conditions in an article I wrote for *The Times* on my return I said, 'The same camp, Muhammadpur, no more than five miles from the centre of Dacca, is still a sea of mud and excrement, an open sewer surrounding broken down shacks with corrugated iron roofs, housing tens of thousands of desperate people waiting, still waiting, to go to their country of choice.'

It would be quite wrong to suggest that nothing has happened since 1972. I saw there both leaders — Bhutto in Pakistan and Shaikh Mujibur Rahman in Bangladesh (both now dead) and both agreed to a 'one for one exchange': one Bengali to be returned to Bangladesh for one non-Bengali transferred to Pakistan. There were the Simla and Delhi agreements in 1973 and 1974 and most of the 4,000,000 Bengalis went east to Bangladesh. Many hold crucial posts in government. In return the Pakistanis agreed to accept the following categories of Biharis — (a) those born in West Pakistan, (b) former military personnel, (c) central Government employees, (d) divided families, and (e) hardship cases.

A total of 534,792 people applied for repatriation. Of these 118,866 were accepted as coming within the categories. Subsequently others were accepted for admission to Pakistan, and 121,212 were transferred from Bangladesh to Pakistan between 1974 and 1979. An additional 41,860 were admitted, some via Nepal, Burma and Sri Lanka, and others who accompanied the prisoners of war held by India. So the Pakistanis claim to have received a total of 163,072 — a figure that from the Bangladeshi point of view is inflated because they did not all come from Bangladesh. Some have quit the camps in Bangladesh and resigned themselves to living there permanently. We now have left about 300,000 people who call themselves 'stranded Pakistanis' living in 'transit camps' waiting to be permitted to go to Pakistan. They now have a militant leadership and, under the title of the Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee, they claim to have branches in the Bihari camps spread throughout the country. If the thousands who greeted me with banners welcoming me by name are any indication they have a very effective organisation: it was they who assembled many thousands in Saidpur last year for the 'long march' across India to Pakistan. Needless to say, they were stopped at the frontiers.

I have been in continuous touch with developments since my visit in October 1980. In 1980 I met both Presidents — it was before the tragic assassination of President Zia ur Rahman, but I have good reason to believe that the attitude of his successor, President Sittar, is no different. Initially, seeing Ministers and senior civil servants in both countries I was given a totally hard line — until I saw both Presidents, Zia ur Rahman of Bangladesh, and Zia ul-Haq of Pakistan. The President of Bangladesh said that 'this problem cannot remain unsolved'. The two governments were now on friendly terms and 'humanity demanded a solution': but he added any settlement programme must be supported by the world community. Both Bangladesh and Pakistan were too poor to take on new burdens; and he said this after we had talked about the terrible floods which hit Bangladesh this year — the worst since 1974. But Pakistan must take the first step, since the responsibility for further resettlement of the Urdu speaking population was theirs. He suggested that the Pakistani Foreign Secretary should soon visit Dacca 'to study this as well as other subjects'.

The lead up to my talks a few days later with the President of Pakistan was not encouraging, but I was immensely heartened by the very sympathetic and positive approach of President Zia. He spelt out the existing position of his government and rightly took pride in the responsible way in which his government had provided land, houses and jobs for the new arrivals. But he agreed with me that more now needed to be done: that the situation of 300,000 people claiming to be Pakistanis could not be allowed to drift on and on, and that a new attempt must now be made to achieve a final settlement. He said he was prepared to discuss the matter further with Bangladesh. He was prepared to 'take as many of these people as was possible' provided Bangladesh accepted responsibility for the rest.

The major condition he would impose was that someone must finance the operation. It was not only a matter of transport for the Biharis who moved to Pakistan, but Pakistan and Bangladesh must be helped with a constructive resettlement programme. I told the President of the informal discussions I had had with the UN High Commission for Refugees, who had already shown their concern for this problem, and my belief that voluntary organisations would also respond following an agreement between the two governments.

Since then there has been some progress. The Foreign Secretary of Pakistan did pay his visit to Dacca and this resulted in the movement in October and November 1981 of another 7,000 from the camps to Pakistan. On a visit to Pakistan in the autumn of 1981 the President confirmed to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (Mr. Poul Hartling) what he had said and subsequently confirmed to me in writing. There is also an agreement in principle to establish a Tri-partite Commission – Pakistan/Bangladesh/UNHCR – to assess the dimensions of the existing problems and a project officer has now been appointed, with the support of Oxfam and the Mennonite Central Council, to work out a detailed resettlement programme in Bangladesh and Pakistan since any settlement must involve resettlement away from the camps in both countries.

An interest in providing financial assistance has been shown by several of the oil-rich Islamic states, particularly Saudi Arabia: but no cash can be forthcoming until there is an agreement by the Governments concerned through the proposed Tri-partite Commission.

Furthermore twelve national and international organisations agreed at a UNHCR conference in Geneva in May 1981 to join a working party to help with cash and kind in a Bihari resettlement programme as soon as progress was made at the political level.

Everything takes time – and the fact that things move so slowly when the human need is so great makes one angry and frustrated: but there is now at the highest level a will to find a solution which may avoid the necessity of yet another edition of this Report on the Biharis four years from now.

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## SELECTED DOCUMENTARY FILMS

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(B—broadcast, D—distributed)

Telco number

- 720675 Lasse Budtz's film on Bangladesh includes a visit to the ghettos of the Biharis (40 minutes). B—2 Feb. 72 Danish TV (in Horisont), TV Centre, Mørkhøjvej 170, Søborg 2860, Denmark.
- 720871 David Lomax reports on the plight of the Biharis in Bangladesh (11 minutes, colour). Interviews with a Bengali banker, with Dr. A. Alberton of the Catholic Mission at Khulna, Syed Huda (a Mukti Bahini commander) and M.A. Sunhan (a Bihari leader). B—8 Feb. 72 BBC-1 (in 24 hours), Wood Lane, London W.12.
- 720949 "*Bangladesh*" (colour) was filmed near Dacca and focuses on the fate of collaborators, refugees and minorities. B—31 Jan. 72 ABC News, 1330 Avenue of the Americas, New York 10019.
- 722449 "*Is This What We Fought For?*" (58 minutes, colour) includes a report on the condition of the Biharis in refugee camps and a Pakistani doctor who risks her life helping Biharis and who is denied medical supplies. B—12 June 72 BBC-1 (in Panorama), TV Centre, Wood Lane, London W.12.
- 730961 "*Joy Bangla*" (39 minutes, colour) looks at the country's economic and political situation and includes an interview with Jalil Uddin, a Bihari spokesman. B—20 Feb. 73 Swedish TV (in Dokument Utifraan), 105-10 Stockholm, Sweden
- 741466 "*Bengali—Bihari*" (9 minutes 2", colour). A. Heyer's report shows Biharis refugee camps, Dacca, Killo camp, Mirpur camp, Interviews with Biharis and a minister. B—29 Mar. 74 ZDF (in Auslandsreport), P.O.Box 4040, 65 Mainz, Germany.
- "*Pakistan/Bangladesh*" (12 minutes 22", colour) shows the massive airlift, organized by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, to repatriate Bengalis and Pakistanis. P—UPITN (in Roving Report 7341/A), 48 Wells St., London W.1.

The above film list was provided by Richard S. Clark, TELCO, 19 Gurnells Road, Seer Green, Bucks HP 9 2XJ, UK.

Enquiries regarding these films should be addressed to the broadcaster or distributor listed and not to TELCO.

Ben Whitaker is the Director of the Minority Rights Group. Born in 1934, he was formerly a barrister and extra-mural Lecturer in Law for London University. From 1966 to 1970 he was Labour Member of Parliament for Hampstead, and the UK Junior Minister for Overseas Development 1969-70. He is the author of *The Police in Society, Crime and Society, Parks for People, The Foundations*, and the editor of *A Radical Future* and *The Fourth World*. He went to Bangladesh to investigate the Biharis' situation for MRG in 1972.

Iain Guest was born in 1947. After reading Classics at Oxford, he travelled and worked in Asia, the Middle East and in South and North America. He was co-editor of the *New Internationalist* for three years. He visited Bangladesh in November and December 1976.

David Ennals is Labour Member of Parliament for Norwich North, and was the UK Secretary of State for Social Services 1976-79 and Minister of State at the Foreign Office 1974-76. He had previously been the Secretary of the UK Council for Education in World Citizenship and of the United Nations Association. He is the author of *United Nations on Trial*. He visited Bangladesh in 1972 and October 1980.



The photographs are by Paul Connett, except for those on pages 1, 11 (lower) and 14 which are by Ben Whitaker. Unless otherwise stated, they are of the Bihari camp at Mohammedpur in 1972.



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Second revised edition, April 1975.  
Third revised edition, July 1977.  
Fourth revised edition, January 1982.



## The Reports already published by the Minority Rights Group are:

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<sup>1</sup>The Internationalist; <sup>2</sup>New Society; <sup>3</sup>Times Lit. Supplement; <sup>4</sup>Belfast Newsletter; <sup>5</sup>Irish Post; <sup>6</sup>International Affairs; <sup>7</sup>Sunday Independent; <sup>8</sup>S.Asian Review; <sup>9</sup>The Friend; <sup>10</sup>Afro-Asian Affairs; <sup>11</sup>E. African Standard; <sup>12</sup>Sunday Times; <sup>13</sup>New Community; <sup>14</sup>The Times; <sup>15</sup>Information; <sup>16</sup>The Observer; <sup>17</sup>Irving Horowitz; <sup>18</sup>The Guardian; <sup>19</sup>Peace News; <sup>20</sup>The Freethinker; <sup>21</sup>The Spectator; <sup>22</sup>The Geographical Magazine; <sup>23</sup>New World; <sup>24</sup>Melbourne Age; <sup>25</sup>The Economist; <sup>26</sup>Neue Zürcher Zeitung; <sup>27</sup>Resurgence; <sup>28</sup>Feedback; <sup>29</sup>Time Out; <sup>30</sup>Evening Standard; <sup>31</sup>Tribune of Australia; <sup>32</sup>The Scotsman; <sup>33</sup>The Financial Times; <sup>34</sup>New Statesman; <sup>35</sup>The Nation; <sup>36</sup>Bernard Levin; <sup>37</sup>BBC World Service; <sup>38</sup>International Herald Tribune; <sup>39</sup>City Limits; <sup>40</sup>Education; <sup>41</sup>Times Ed. Supp.; <sup>42</sup>The Middle East.

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