



Jason Laura/Rapho-Gullumette
Bengali refugees who had fled to India trek back through a ruined countryside to their homes in Bangladesh. "There will be serious hunger conditions unless the international community comes to the rescue."

Bangladesh:

'I'm Alive!' Is Still Big News

DACCA — "Maybe," said Sheik Mujibur Rahman, talking informally with some Western correspondents in his living room, "maybe it takes one man to lead his people to independence and another to build that nation afterward." That was almost 10 months ago, a few days before the Pakistani Army began its reign of terror in East Bengal.

Perhaps the Sheik spoke out of doubt of his abilities as an administrator. Perhaps he thought he was going to be executed. Whatever the reason, philosophical musings of this kind are a luxury the Sheik can no longer afford. Now he must be both of the men he described—the father of independence and the nation-builder.

There is no one else who can effectively guide the new state of Bangladesh out of its economic backwardness and misery and the terrible aftermath of the Pakistani pogrom. So far, Sheik Mujib — whose vast popularity among his people was never in question—has earned high marks as an administrator as well.

From the moment on Jan. 10 when he stepped off the plane that brought him home from imprisonment in West

Pakistan, he has assumed complete command. Decisions taken by his political colleagues, who had run the Government in exile in India, were swept aside. Pro-Moscow Communists appointed to government jobs by the then Prime Minister, Tajuddin Ahmed—as a reward to India's ally, the Soviet Union, for its support during the crisis—are being replaced. And Sheik Mujib, who was to have held the father-figure post of President, immediately assumed the position of Prime Minister in order to have control of decision-making, and demoted Tajuddin Ahmed to a lesser Cabinet post.

Sheik Mujib has shown unusual sophistication for a leader of a new nation, not only shunning any xenophobia but asking for friendship and help even from those nations, particularly the United States, that supported Pakistan throughout the upheaval.

The Bengali leader knows that relief and development aid will not flow into Bangladesh in meaningful amounts until the major nations of the world extend diplomatic recognition. Despite Pakistan's anger and protests, recognition seems to be snowballing—having started with the Communist countries of Eastern Europe but now being extended by Western nations as well.

The recognition coveted most by the Bengali people is that of the United States. The amount of good will here for Americans is amazing, in view of the Nixon Administration's policy. Bengalis of all walks of life—villagers, students, political leaders—tell every American they meet that they want American assistance. They are being pragmatic as well as friendly.

Some relief food is already here, delivered under programs started during the Pakistani occupation, but the stocks fall far short of the need. Relief experts here are chary of making alarmist forecasts, but everyone acknowledges that there will be serious hunger conditions in pockets all over Bangladesh in a few months unless the international community comes to the rescue. That means primarily the United States, with its surplus wheat.

Other postwar problems, of a social and political nature, are also confronting Sheik Mujib. There is, for example, the public thirst for vengeance against collaborators — the non-Bengali Bihari Moslems and the right-wing religious Bengali Moslems who helped the Pakistani Army kill at least several hundred thousand Bengalis. The jail in virtually every town is full of Biharis and other collaborators, put there for their own protection. Some Bengalis, particularly members of the Mukti Bahini (the Bengali guerrilla army) whose families were murdered, are still trying to hunt down collaborators.

Sheik Mujib has decided to bring many of the collaborators to trial to try to slake this passion for revenge. He has also called for the establishment of some kind of international tribunal to try the key Pakistani officers accused of major responsibility for the atrocities.

The Mukti Bahini are also a problem. Most of the tens of thousands of these freedom fighters have already turned to the peaceful tasks of reconstruction. But some are having difficulty adjusting to civilian life. Some units developed renegade habits, and their commanders have begun behaving like local warlords.

Last Monday Sheik Mujib directed all those Mukti Bahini who had not already done so to turn in their arms within 10 days. He praised the guerrillas lavishly and said he needed them in the new national militia, where they will be reorganized to do law-and-order and development jobs. But, cannily, he told them that anyone who persisted in keeping his weapon "will naturally be suspected by their fellow countrymen" to be members of the collaborator units armed by the Pakistanis. These "gangsters," the Sheik said, would meet with "unpleasant consequences."

Sheik Mujib is literally besieged every day by petitioners — people looking for jobs, mothers asking for help because their husbands or sons have been killed — but the 51-year-old politician has found time to meet with old friends. He told them last week of how he was almost killed on the night of his arrest last March, as bullets tore through the walls of his house — and how in December his jail superintendent in West Pakistan whisked him out of his cell into hiding less than two hours before the other inmates, all West Pakistanis who had joined in a Government plot, were scheduled to murder him.

Escape from death is an experience the Sheik shares with many of his countrymen today. It seems that every time a long-time visitor, like this correspondent, turns a corner, an old friend comes rushing forward, squeezes him a bear hug, and keeps repeating deliriously, "I am alive! I am alive!" With all its awesome problems and grinding poverty, Bangladesh is, at least for now, a country with a smile.

—SYDNEY H. SCHANBERG