

Fighters of Darkness

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THE 'guerilla bands of the Mukti Fauj (freedom fighters) have become the armies of the night in East Pakistan. The army is in control of the 78 major towns and most of the larger villages, but -- especially in the provinces of Tippera and Noakhali southeast of Dacca--the guerillas are getting stronger. Hit-and-run tactics and sabotage threaten the West Pakistani army's communications; in this way, the people of "Bangla Desh" hope to erode the western wing's dominion over them. The Mukti Fauj effectively control the narrow corridor between Noakhali and the port of Chittagong; and bands in Sylhet, Rangpur and Chittagong, although less strong, have harassed the army there.

Most guerilla bases are inside East Pakistan; a few groups operate from the Indian side of the border. The bases reflect their determination. "A" camp is a base for former East Pakistan Rifles militiamen, surrounded by lush green jute fields and hidden in a grove in East Pakistan. A young guard snaps to attention at the bamboo gate.

A small Bangla Desh flag hangs from the eaves of one of two long thatched huts in the camp. Inside the huts, about 250 men in sarongs sleep on woven mats laid over the hard packed earth. Near each man lies his weapon, uniform and assorted personal gear. Each hut is 80 feet long by 20 feet wide and sleeps about 60 men.

The camp motor pool also has a sentry, guarding two jeeps, one truck and two farm tractors, all of which have been taken from East Pakistan civil or military forces. Several large tents in the centre of the camp constitute the headquarters area and the officers' quarters, equipped with old tables and chairs. There is a dispensary, looked after by the camp's doctor; Abdul Mannan. "It was only after the events of March 25 that these men revolted," Dr Mannan explained. "Only after the Pakistani army attacked the Bengali police and the East Pakistan Rifles' headquarters in Dacca and killed large numbers of people did they kill their West Pakistani officers and begin their resistance."

The camp is clean, and there is good discipline. At six in the morning the men line up and those on patrol that day are briefed -- standing to attention as a sergeant reads the names and mission assigned each man. A pep talk follows, in which the men are exhorted to remember they are fighting for independence and must make great sacrifices.

Patrols leave the camp twice a day, at daybreak and dusk. Most last 12 hours, but intermittently there are forays deep into territory controlled by the Pakistani army, and these take four or five days. Each rebel unit consists of about 20 men, but it may be split into smaller groups in the field for some missions. One group will be assigned to watch for Pakistan army patrols which could threaten the camp. The main patrols seek out small army forces or single vehicles on the roads. They may plant mines, but their main tactic is the ambush.

Two former Pakistani artillerymen who have defected, Kamuj Jaman, 24, a veteran of the Indo-Pakistan war in Kashmir, and Sader Ali, 22, who had three years' army experience, estimate the men in their camp "have killed more than 200 Pakistanis in the last three months". This figure is probably inflated since most of the fighting takes place at night when it would be difficult to count the number of dead. A closer estimate would be about 50 killed -- probably fewer. In Vietnam it is assumed that two men are wounded for every man killed. And it is unlikely these fighters, poorly equipped, could have put a 600-man battalion out of commission.

"We get most of our new arms and ammunition from Pakistan army dead and wounded," Kamuj Jaman said. "The Mukti Fauj area headquarters periodically sends us supplies too." There isn't a lot of ammunition in the camp, and two men with quartermaster experience keep strict account of all supplies. The munitions given to each patrol are carefully noted and have to be turned in on completion of the mission. Dr Mannan commented: "There is not enough ammunition to mount any large attacks, but for guerilla tactics it is sufficient." The patrols are lightly armed with British submachine guns, old Enfield rifles and some light machine-guns. Occasionally a group has two-inch mortars, and there are also some anti-tank bazookas that are used against bunkers.

Three men in handcuffs, alleged to be spies for the Pakistan army, were in the camp. Dr Mannan said local villagers' had reported seeing them leading an army patrol through a guerilla minefield. The men had confessed to being members of the Moslem League and the Jamaat-i-Islam Party but denied they were involved in any of the killing and looting done by League people. They insisted they were farmers and had been forced by the army to show them through the mines. According to Mannan: "The men will probably not be shot but will be given a chance to prove their loyalty in battle with the Mukti Fauj." The captives said they had not been tortured, and they were being fed the same potatoes, curry and rice as the rebels.

During the night one patrol led by Kamuj Jaman made contact with some Pakistani army troops in two bunkers in a small village about half a mile from the camp. The sporadic staccato bursts of machine gun fire could be heard for about an hour. When the patrol returned the following morning, Jaman reported: "The villagers told us the Pakistanis were in some bunkers nearby. We tried to sneak up on them, but they heard something and started firing. They knew they had given away their position, so they withdrew. We fired at their noise but don't know if we hit anyone."

At present the Mukti Fauj policy is to keep up pressure on the smaller outlying army posts. As the guerillas become stronger, they will move from the jungles into the small villages and towns and, eventually, into the cities. They count on Islamabad's financial difficulties and the overextended supply lines to bring closer the victory in which they confidently believe -- if only because they are convinced that the 75 million people of East Pakistan can endure longer than the 100,000 West Pakistan troops stationed on their soil.

But, if recent estimates are correct, 25 million of their compatriots are facing starvation. A major famine is believed by two US doctors to be around the corner -- a famine which, because Islamabad refuses to acknowledge the severity of the situation, little has been done to prevent. Soon, they say, it will be too late to avert the crisis. Hoarding of foodstocks is already commonplace, prices have rocketed -- and the army has taken many of the emergency stores.

People asked as Biafra surrendered whether the Nigerian government genuinely wished to make strenuous efforts to save the stubborn Ibos from famine. And the outside world may wonder how blind Islamabad really is. If these people die, the Mukti Fauj loses a third of its allies. But any such calculation by Islamabad would ignore the probability that every funeral pyre will ignite the hatred of more Bengalis. The Bangla Desh leaders have said: "The time is past for any political solution. . . blood is a river that can never be bridged ."