

FULL TEXT OF BISHOP BLAIR'S NEWSLETTER

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How wise King David was when he said, 'Let us fall into the hands of God rather than into the hands of men'. I have been looking through the past numbers of the Diocesan News and seen the accounts of the last cyclone, and then the very mild accounts which I gave of the horrors of the last nine months. When I think of what could have happened I cannot but be thankful. And now that we are beginning to discover what the plans seem to have been for the final days with curfews and blackouts, the arming of the Biharis and the fanatic types of Bengali Muslims, the Al Badr, and the use they made of that curfew, one can only heave a sigh of relief and thank Almighty God that 'the days were shortened'. The tale of slaughter is big enough as it is, with the dead set at the intellectuals, and for some reason the doctors as well, together with plenty of ordinary Bengalis – the wonder is that there have not been more reprisals.

Things are not quite over yet. Our area has been quieter than most, as usual, and since the first two days after the surrender when the shooting was mostly into the air in sheer joy, we have hardly heard a shot. We know very little of what has been happening in other areas. Here my impression is that it was the intention of the Bangladesh government that all bloodletting should now cease. Their announcements have been very strong that no-one is to take the law into his own hands. Of course, the first thing that had to be done was to disarm all those who were not in the armed forces. This meant for all practical purposes the Biharis, because the Bengalis had been disarmed already. Much of the trouble since has begun from their resisting being disarmed, while some have deliberately gone out to kill. And of course, there must always be an element of sheer hooliganism, young men pretending to belong to the Mukti Bahini and lifting things off innocent citizens. Actually, I only heard of one such case. Of course, we do not have much of a clue as to what is happening in other districts. But David Sossill has come up from the Baptist Mission at Barisal and reports that things are all well there, although the R.C. Mission at Sagordi had an exciting time when the Razakars were holding out against the Muktis in the camp just next door to them. They were unharmed, but their houses bear a number of scars. Jobarpar has been in Free Bangladesh for a long time.

St. Thomas's Eve (December 20th) was a great day, not because we celebrated St Thomas; he got very scant recognition this year; but because Barnabas Dwijen Mondal turned up with Mark Matab Mondal on his carrier at about ten o'clock that night. Dwijen had come up from Calcutta on his motorbike, spent a few days at Nityanandapur and looked around the area, and then brought Mark on to Dacca. Their only real difficulty was in crossing the Padma, which they had to do by ordinary boat, and the boatman put them down six miles away from the road on this side, so they had to plough through sand and dust till they got to the main road. Things down there seem much as I reported before, only at Bollobhpur the floods have done a lot of damage and there will have to be a lot of house repairs done before people's families will be able to move in. Dwijen said a number of things had been looted from the hospital and the 'Kuti' and the orphanage, but a number of things were now finding their way back to where they belonged. He said he thought the 'Kuti' was habitable. At Meherpur the chowkidar that Mark had engaged (Khoka) had done very well and the garden was flourishing. Nityanandapur had remained undisturbed till the end. I arranged with Dwijen to go down there in the latter part of January and to ordain Mark presbyter on January 23rd at Nityanandapur.

More news from Barisal as Jhutika and her sister have arrived this moment. They say all is peaceful there, and Moher Frances has been out to Jobarpar and reported everything quiet in the district. We have also had news from Mymensingh. First of all, a Christian who is driver to the D.C. of Tangail arrived just as the cease-fire was being signed. He had to drive a Pak army colonel down from Mymensingh in the D.C.'s car and he was one of the few drivers to get through alive. The colonel seems to have been rather like the Duke of Plaza Toro and 'led his regiment from behind'. And so this man got through. He could only report that there had not been any fighting in the town. Since then Ian Hawley of the Australian Baptists has arrived by road, bringing with him this driver's son. He reported that Fr. Sarkar was well and had come down to Mymensingh, and also the young man whom I had sent to keep him company was also safe and well.

Thus, I began this letter just before Christmas. Since then a lot more news has come in. I have been able at last to make a trunk call to Rajshahi, and I have also had a letter from David Morgan. He is well, and he complains that Rajshahi was treated as being so unimportant in the fighting that nothing happened there. His civic pride has been wounded! I found not only David but also Dr. Upen Malakar at the other end of the line, and they proposed to come up to Dacca and I am expecting them any time now. (They did not come).

On the Sunday after Christmas I went up to Mymensingh by the later of the two trains that are running. Slow but sure, it took seven and a half hours to do the 76 miles. I stayed the night with Ian Hawley. And went on next morning to Haluaghat by bus. Meanwhile Simon Delves-Broughton came on up by the next morning's train, taking eight hours over the journey, and went on by bus to the Madhupur area to give Communion to the Garo villages up there. They had remained pretty peaceful right up to the end. On my way to Haluaghat there were several bridges down, and everyone had to get out of the bus while it went down the diversion road and up again – everyone except the ladies and a few old and reverend people like myself, who were allowed to stay where we were. The railway bridge over the Brahmaputra at Mymensingh had three of its piers broken. These were all parting tokens of the Pak army. There were numbers of bunkers on the way and some right in our mission compound at Haluaghat, one only just outside Fr. Sarkar's house. The surprising thing was that they were all completely intact. The total damage that I saw in Haluaghat and on the road was one shell or bomb hole in the building which had been the HQ of the army there, one lot of tin huts near the HQ destroyed, half a dozen holes in the walls of some godowns where the Razakars had been living, a small bomb crater in the middle of the mission grounds and a shell hole near the newly rebuilt boys' hostel, which sent a few splinters through the new tin wall and injured no-one. This was all. On the road nothing had been damaged except the bridges. It was obvious that the Pak soldiers had put up no resistance at all. Since then on my journeys I have talked to Indian soldiers and to Mukties, and they all say the same. When you let an army loose to loot and plunder and murder and rape, and when for nine months their fighting has been against unarmed civilians, and only occasionally against the elusive Mukti Bahini, you cannot preserve their morale. I had felt sure all along that when it came to the test, they would find they had forgotten how to fight. All they wanted to do was to get home and enjoy their ill-gotten gains. There had been an air strike over Haluaghat and some shelling, and old Fr. Sarkar had dug himself a dug-out near his house and sat in it with a few Garo women who had arrived from anywhere, and next morning he found the army gone. How nice it was when I arrived there to find the friendly and happy atmosphere that prevailed. Never have I had so many greetings in the street there as I got that day. On my way back in the bus to Mymensingh I found one of our young Garo Christians travelling with us who was in the Mukti Bahini and who had come in with the Indian army through Haluaghat. He introduced me to an Indian who turned out to be a nephew of the Bishop of Chota Nagpur. There seems to be any number of Christians in the Indian army, many of them from the south and many of them aborigines, Mundas, Oraons or Santals. We had a lot of them in church on Christmas Day and so did the other churches.

My journey back from Mymensingh to Dacca was similar to the journey out except the train was five hours late in starting. But we are thankful that the trains are running at all. Of course, they are not all running. The Pak army destroyed a lot of bridges that the Mukties had left, including the famous Harding Bridge over the Ganges. At present to get to Chittagong, which was my next place to visit, one takes the steamer to Chandpur, and then the train to Feni, then a rickshaw or whatever you can find, for six miles, and then another train on to Chittagong. All this seemed a bit chancy, and my time was limited, and I was assured that it was possible to get through by car. So, I tried that way and I might have succeeded if one of my brakes had not seized up on the way. I got to Comilla on the remaining three brakes, and there I was assured that the Mini with its low clearance would never get over the pontoon bridge, which the Indian army had put over the river halfway to Chittagong. My time was limited as I had to go on down to Barisal. So, I did not risk the railway journey; but I got Chittagong on the phone and had just time to say I was held up in Comilla before the line went out of order for good and all. I came back to Dacca next day, taking eight hours to do the 60 miles; not because I was driving slowly on account of the brakes, but because I was held up at each of four ferries. But the time was not entirely lost. One got a lot of interesting conversations with Indian soldiers of all sorts, and Mukties and others who all had their stories to tell. So, Chittagong have not yet had their Christmas Communion.

David Davey was due to leave on December 19th, and I hear he got away on the 9th on a Japanese ship along with a lot of other expatriates. There are very few Europeans left there now, only about six in all. I have had plenty of news from there. The churches and all the Christians are all safe and well. Simon Delves-Broughton will be going there for the 16th, by which time we hope communications will be a bit better. The Indian army is doing a lot in the way of bridge-building and road repairs. But there is a lot to be done. The ferries across the Padma and the Jamuna, which are the main connections between Dacca and the western side of the country, have nearly all been damaged or sunk. David Morgan and Dr Malakar did not get to Dacca as they proposed. Presumably they could not get across the river. (I heard later that they could not get petrol).

We have now at last had news from Khulna. The fighting in that area seems to have been more serious than in other parts where I have been. But it was mostly west of Daulatpur ie beyond Khalispur. One mortar shell landed just by our mission compound; no-one was hurt, but many windows were broken. Birbal and Tom and the others with them are all safe. The school was full of Bengali refugees at one time; but now I hear it is full of Biharis. I ought to say a word about these people, because what I see in the papers seems a bit exaggerated. As I said earlier, it was the intention of the Bangladesh government to have no reprisals. But among the Biharis there were two types; one which would have accepted the situation and lived in peace with their Bengali neighbours, and the other which in the last days of the military regime were saying openly in the bazaar, 'Let us kill as many Bengalis as we can while we can'. It was men of this type who were responsible for all those ghastly murders during the curfew of the final days, and it was men of this type who, on the night before the surrender, started a riot just near us in Nawabpur by killing three Bengalis. That was one of the few moments when I felt really nervous for the safety of the people in our compound. Fortunately, armed Mukties came on the scene and also saner Biharis got a mike and persuaded the others to stop this kind of thing. It was also this type who brought trouble on themselves and others by refusing to give up their arms. Now, from what one hears, they are in a pitiable condition, fearing to go out of their houses even to buy necessary provisions, and guarded by the Indian army – guarded or surrounded, one is not quite sure which is the proper word. I have not heard what the condition is in the predominantly Bihari towns of Saidpur, Parbatipur, Santahar and Ishurdi.

In thinking about this one has to remember that it is only Christians who are taught the duty of forgiveness; and how difficult they find it. The Biharis are regarded as the jackals who took advantage of the military occupation to help themselves to what they wanted. There is hardly a family in Bengal who is not mourning the loss of some relation and the loss of money or property. A complete amnesty would be psychologically impossible. The government has announced that no-one is to be punished without trial, and therefore no-one is to take the law into his own hands. This is the best that they can hope to do. Unless they promised punishment after trial people would certainly take the law into their own hands. Dacca on the whole is peaceful, and when I left there were people in the streets up till 11 o'clock at night, which had not been so for the last nine months. And Barisal, where I am now writing, seems quite peaceful. But in the suburbs of Dacca there are still two pockets of Biharis guarded by Indian soldiers; and as I said above, I do not know the condition in some of the railway towns. Mymensingh and Comilla were quite normal.

This letter is being written in bits and pieces as I get time. The last bit was written at Barisal. I then went on to Jobarpur, where we ordained Luke Nirmal Dhali to the diaconate on the Sunday (January 9th), with the big church pretty full in spite of the perishing cold and the early hour of the service. At midday we went to Bakal, a couple of miles away, for a feast given by a well-to-do Christian family who had actually managed to avoid being robbed by either the army or Razakars or by ordinary dacoits, all these nine months; and this was their way of expressing their gratitude to God; a prayer meeting and then a sumptuous feast, a little less sumptuous than it might have been in more ordinary times, because some things were just not available. The next day I confirmed some forty candidates from several villages; and on the Tuesday we had our Deanery Standing Committee with a good attendance, including (rather late) Birbal Haldar, who had managed to make his way from Khulna with a little difficulty. They had a bit of an anxious time when the Pak army retired from Jessore on to Khulna. They seem to have put up more of a fight in that area. But the Indians had some amphibious tanks and were able to turn their flank by crossing the river. Barisal's anxious time was between December 1st and the 8th, when the Razakars got loose and did a lot of killing. But on the 8th they all cleared off, and the place was left in peace except for the pocket at Sagordi which I have mentioned above.

Conditions: Not many refugees have yet been able to return to this area. But there are plenty of beggars, genuine ones, whose houses have been destroyed, and some of their menfolk killed. There are still vast stretches of practically uninhabited land where most of the houses have been burnt or destroyed. People say that many more Muslims have been killed than Hindus among the Bengalis. But there have been more Hindu homes burnt. The Hindus mostly got out of the way into India. I talked with some of the local authorities about relief work, asking what they would like us to undertake. Their answer was that they would like us to do as much medical work as we could, and to organise any amount of task relief that was possible. So, I have brought back all sorts of plans, and now must get them approved by the Christian Council Committee. The impression that I get is that the new government is going to do its level best to get relief distributed evenly and honestly, and we must do all we can to co-operate.

Damage: The damage done to St. Thomas's on the first night of the army's crack-down was repaired a government expense last November. At Haluaghat the Sister's compound has been systematically looted by the Pak armed forces, and some of the smaller houses have been dismantled to provide corrugated iron sheets for their bunkers. The damage in the village has yet to be assessed. I do not yet know the full amount of damage in the Kushtia District. Of the other denominations I have heard that the Pak army has been responsible for the destruction or damage of about 11 mission institutions.

Travel: Improving, but there is a lot of leeway to make up. When I went to Jobarpar I did the first eight miles by 'baby taxi' (a three wheeled Vespa scooter) with five passengers plus light luggage. The next two miles by cycle-rickshaw to the first ferry, and another two miles to the second ferry the same way. Then we got a stretch of six miles or so to a broken bridge, again by rickshaw, and another to the next broken bridge. By that time, we were almost at Gournadi and the rest of the journey was fairly normal, ie rickshaw and then boat or walking. But on the way back we only had to get across the broken bridges and then we found a bus, which took us across the ferries right to Barisal. The steamer services are still a bit thin because they are using the biggest of them to ferry the Pak army out into India. That seems to be mostly completed, and now they are ferrying out civilians who want to go to Pakistan. (So long the West Pakistanis have been in the habit of speaking as if West Pakistan was the whole of Pakistan. Now it is so, and no-one from this side is going to argue about it.)

The greatest barrier to communication is the Ganges (which in our parts has become the Padma) and the Jamuna. It seems that most of the ferry steamers which took cars and trucks across have been destroyed; the river has also silted up and Goalando is inaccessible. The Pak army has destroyed several piers of the Harding Bridge over the Ganges by Paksey. As a result of all this the river seems to be the only connection between us and the western part of the country. I was enquiring today how I could get to Khulna or Kushtia. Coaches are going to North Bengal but not westwards. Trains? 'Sorry; We can get you to Jamalpur (just beyond Mymensingh) but no further'. They had no information about trains on the other side. I want to get to Nityanandapur for the 23rd to ordain Mark Mondol to the presbyterate. If I am lucky, I shall get a lift to Jessore on a Norwegian relief plane. If I do not, then exactly what my route will be I do not know. After Nityanandapur I shall stay a bit to see how things are at Bollobhpur and the other parishes there, and also in Kushtia town, and then go on to Khalipur.

Now about Dacca in the last days of the 'occupation' - for that is what it has been since March 25th. My last tour anywhere had finished on November 16th, when I had been to Kaligram and Jobarpar via Faridpur. Apart from a broken bridge and a breakdown of a bus, it was fairly normal. After that I tried to get to Haluaghat for St. Andrew's Day, but the Australian missionaries at Mymensingh warned me that no permits were being given to go there. I was supposed to go to Sylhet; but the internal flights were off and there was no other route. I tried Barisal, but the Mukti attacks on steamers were getting so serious that a steamer company warned me not to go unless it was absolutely necessary, as the service might be closed any day. So, I stayed on at Dacca.

Then came December 3rd. I was out to supper in Dhanmandi; Fr Simon and Marcia were out in Gulshan; the Baptist missionaries from around the corner at Sadarghat were also out at the D.H.C.'s house. When I started for home, I saw everything remarkably dark and still and no-one knew quite what was in the air. So, I

came back and rang them up at home and was told that there was a blackout and a curfew. So, I had to stay where I was. Simon made his way home in ignorance through the curfew. At 2.30am or so the fun began; sirens and then fireworks over the airport about a mile away from where I was. We did not get much more sleep that night. In the morning we had a grand view from upstairs of the Indian planes and the two or three Pak planes that took off to intercept them. They did not have a chance. They were ancient Sabres to the Indian MIGs and Hunters. There were said to be 16 of them in various parts of the country, but most of them did not seem to have got off the ground. Fancy leaving an army of 70,000 or more with an air cover of one squadron of out-of-date jets! After the first day or so the Indian aircraft had it all their own way.

Outside the military target areas no-one was worried. There were jet fighters zooming over the city in broad daylight and everyone going about their normal business or going out on to the roof to watch them, while the rickshaws continued on their ways except when forced by the police to stop. Very few bombs or shots landed outside the immediate target areas. The bomb which was alleged by the BBC to have killed 300 orphans was entirely phoney. (a) There were never 300 orphans there to be killed (our papers gave the number as 50 or 75); (b). 17 bodies were found there, all of grown-ups; (c) a foreign observer was watching and told me he was sure the plane which dropped it was a Pak one. This kind of cynical propaganda stunt was by no means beyond them. No; the Indian airmen were instructed to be very careful not to injure Bengali civilians and they obeyed.

Then came the end so much more quickly than we had ever dared to hope. Yes: we were a bit anxious. If Niazi had carried out his threat and resisted to the last man; if there had been street fighting in Dacca. The areas nearest the airport, and the cantonments are the residential ones, and they were mainly vacated. We hoped they would not try to fight in the old city. As usual we felt we were in the best position here, and several families from near the airport took refuge with us. Then came the raid on the Governor's House, and poor old Malika and his ministers took fright and resigned at once. Then came General Manikshaw's offer to Niazi. We already felt there was something in the wind. Why that curfew? What were the troops doing? There seemed to be very few round our way. During the last 12 hours the D.H.C. kindly kept us informed of things as they proceeded. 'Niazi has asked for another six hours'. Then: 'General Jacob has left for Calcutta for the surrender'. Then: 'The surrender has been signed'. Still the curfew and everything quiet. Then after dark, a tentative 'Joy Bangla' in the back streets. Older men came out and persuaded the lads back into their homes; 'there is still a curfew'. Then a more determined 'Joy Bangla'. The Mukti Bahini had taken over the streets. They tried to keep the shouting to the back streets. But they could not do it for long, and soon all the city was ringing with it. 'Joy Bangla!' Next morning outside our gate an old Muslim gentleman came up to me and wrung my hand and said: 'Sahib, last night was the first night for nine months that I have dared to go out of my house'. The streets were filled with young Mukti lads, educated boys mostly, in torn shorts and lungi, with bare feet and a rifle. Some had ten days training, some a month. They were taught how to use their weapons and the rest was left to their native wit. Desperate lads most of them, who had little to lose and all to gain. 'What are you going to do now?' I have asked several of them. The answer usually is: 'As soon as I am allowed to, I shall go back to college'. In the last stages these were the eyes and ears of the Indian army. They knew every move of the Pak soldiers. They knew exactly where Niazi was lurking; and they got the news through with surprising speed. The Pak army did not stand a chance. I wonder if Yahya has ever read a history book in his life. He behaved as if he hadn't.

Christian casualties in all this: To our knowledge two R.C. Fathers deliberately shot, one of them the saintly Fr. Evans beaten up before he was shot. The R.C. Sister Emmanuel blown up by a mine. Our Brother Nripen of St. Andrew's Brotherhood shot at Panihata. One Christian Mukti killed while fighting. About 40 others killed on various army operations in the villages, mostly Roman Catholics because they are the most numerous community. May they rest in peace. There was also David Rowland, badly beaten by the Razakars, but alive and kicking now.

Now we have peace. The future has terrible problems, and there are all sorts of possibilities. But there always have been in this country. Life is never dull. But now they have won their independence; although they had valuable help in the end, the Bengalis have spent quite enough blood, sweat and tears. They can truly feel that the victory is theirs. It has not been handed to them on a plate. There is a healthy determination to make their country a better one, and one where the poor are less poor and the rich less rich,

and where corruption does not frustrate every effort to improve. Good luck to them, and may God bless them.

As a tail piece may I thank many of you for many letters telling me of your sympathy and prayers. Forgive me for not writing to each of you individually. Life is too short and too full of other things such as relief committees and tours of the diocese. As a Church where are we going to stand? We obviously cannot now be the Church of Pakistan, as this is no longer Pakistan. We shall let the dust settle and then we shall see. Temporarily we call ourselves the Church of Bangladesh, as we have to call ourselves something.

James D Blair.
Bishop of Dacca.

P.S. by David Morgan.

The war ended without any fighting in Rajshahi town. On 17th December the military withdrew from the town, going to Nator where they surrendered a couple of days later. That evening the Mukti Bahini entered the town from the Nawabganj direction, where they had been fighting for some days, and the next week was given over to celebration. In the last few days of the Pakistan army occupation a number of people were killed (though few compared with Dacca) and the operations in the surrounding villages continued right to the end.

The refugees are now streaming back across the border from India. Many of them, including many thousands of Santals, are living out in the open. The lucky ones have a blanket to share among the family, and some have been able to bring a tent; but very many, including the children and the old, have nothing to protect them from the cold nights. 95% of the Santal houses in the district have been destroyed, and in many places the villages have been ploughed over, and the villagers return to find growing where their houses previously stood. The Christian hospital and teaching staff have now returned from India and the school is already functioning, while the hospital will open, in some fashion, from 24th January.