

THE MIDNAPORE DISASTER

On October 15-16 a disastrous Cyclone struck the Midnapore District of Bengal, resulting in 11,000 persons being killed and great devastation and destitution. The Midnapore District is a stronghold of the Congress Party responsible for the recent disorder in India. A Press Note issued by the Governor of Bengal reports that on October 17 the organisation of relief work by Officers in the Contai and Tamruk sub-Divisions principally affected had already been undertaken, and incidentally that even before any Official relief could reach the area British troops stationed there shared their rations with, and provided milk for the children of the afflicted people. The Note proceeds:-

The Government consider it desirable that the public should realise how great were the difficulties which were placed, and are still being placed, in the way of the effective organisation of relief by those disaffected elements which, when the cyclone and tidal wave struck the District, had for weeks been organising a reign of terror in the areas most affected by nature's fury. They had set up, and they are still unfortunately maintaining in areas where authority has not yet been completely restored, a regime of intimidation, persecution, and extortion, directed against representatives of, and those among the inhabitants who are or are suspected to be in favour of the maintenance of law and order.

When the cyclone hit Midnapore they had already succeeded in interrupting the road and telegraph communications, destroying a number of police stations, post-offices and other government buildings, and water-borne craft and ferries. Officers administering departments of the Government within the locality had been detained or evicted, and in some cases cruelly beaten. Participation in these activities, it is now learnt, had been secured by a policy of intimidation, accompanied by threats that the homes and property of any person not taking part would be destroyed.

A young man was stabbed for no better reason than that he was a nephew of a man who had seconded the efforts of the local authorities to restore law and order. The subversive elements had contrived to establish as the machinery of their ascendancy centres of administration, with a parody of all the paraphernalia of ordered government - parallel District organisations, so-called Courts, jails, centres for the training of 'volunteers', and a number of so-called Thanas (Military or Police Stations).

The disaster, while it left local people stunned, evoked from those who were organising and directing those activities against ordered government no genuine humanitarian sentiments. They had already attempted to apply an economic boycott against Government officers and those who were opposed to their rebellious activities. From information now received from some parts, they were determined to employ solely for the relief of their own adherents the stocks of rice in their possession which had escaped destruction. Paddy was also looted from persons who were not sympathetic to their unlawful activities.

Those responsible for the disturbances also destroyed houses, looted the household possessions and the stocks of persons whose loyalty to the established government marked them out as victims, and in one case assassinated the Mohurrir (Clerk) of a Zemindar (Landowner) who had received from his employers stocks of foodstuffs and was not prepared to comply with a demand for their surrender.

The people in some areas were induced or intimidated to refuse to accept Government assistance, and incited in at least one instance to attack the vessels conveying foodstuffs intended by the Government for the relief of distress. Simultaneously a campaign of molestation, persecution, assault and intimidation continued.

Officers of the Education Department, who had been deputed to ascertain the extent of the damage were molested. Chowkidars (village watchmen) and Daffedars (village foremen) were subjected to persecution and assault: in some cases their houses were burnt. In one case a Daffedar and his son were kidnapped, and up to the present have not been traced. A clerk in a sub-divisional office who was sent out in connection with relief was seized and detained.

/ A clerk

A clerk of the Collectorate (Government district office) returning from home was similarly detained and held for ransom until rescued by the forces of law and order. A constable who had been permitted to visit his home was seized and beaten. The union of Panchayats (village Councils) were threatened, their houses burnt and their property destroyed or looted. Funds were extorted for the organisation directing and controlling the disturbances.

Housholders who were known or suspected to be loyal were warned to remove from their holdings under the threat that their houses and belongings would be destroyed. An instance was reported in which representatives of a well-known humanitarian organisation were prevented from purchasing rice for relief, and another charitable society administering relief reported that apprehension and interference from hooligans prevented them from establishing as many relief centres as was desired.

It is abundantly clear that those responsible for the disturbances at Midnapore are determined that humanitarian considerations shall not deter them from exploiting conditions in that district for their own political ends. The above summarises only in general terms the great mass of details referring to the lawless activities inspired by those who are responsible for the disturbances in Midnapore, and it is given in order that the public may understand the difficulties under which both official and non-official organisations are working there. The Government are determined to take whatever measures are necessary to ameliorate conditions for the victims of the cyclone and tidal wave, and to rehabilitate them.

+++++

INDIA OFFICE