

UNEASY TRUCE OVER BANGLADESH

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Uneasy truce over Bangladesh

by Khursid Ahmad

After two months of protracted confrontation between the students and the government, the educational scene is becoming relatively calm.

It all began in the first week of December, when President Bhutto launched his "mass contact" movement to win over the people to the recognition of Bangladesh. He started his tour in the mountainous region of the North Western Frontier Province in the hope of getting the support of the National Awami Party as well as of his own People's Party. He was disappointed. The most firm and consistent opposition came from the students. It turned out to be a bad start.

Broadly speaking the forces of the student left are supporting Bhutto in his campaign to recognize Bangladesh. The rightists are arrayed against him, not merely on the Bangladesh issue, but on most of his policies, political, economic and educational. The right is clamouring for democracy while the left is basking under what has been described as "elective dictatorship".

NWFP had an added disadvantage. Only a few weeks before Bhutto began his tour there was a clash between the students and the local police in Swat, resulting in the death of one student and injury to many more. Students felt estranged from the ruling party and the Bangladesh issue provided them with an opportunity to voice their disaffection. There were student disorders against Bangladesh's recognition everywhere in the NWFP.

The trouble soon spread to the key province of Punjab and the international city of Karachi. Student demonstrations, however, remained peaceful, despite repeated police force.

A convention of 250 representatives of different universities and colleges of the Punjab was held in Lahore. It took issue with the government on the University Ordinance and curtailment of educational autonomy. It also opposed the move to recognize Bangladesh. This proved too much for the government. Over 300 arrests were made. Clashes increased in number and began to spread to smaller cities.

Students in Karachi and other cities of Sind demonstrated in sympathy with the students of Punjab. This was followed by arrests of many student leaders. Tension was high but then the government announced that it was in no hurry to recognize Bangladesh. Some of the arrested students were released as a gesture of goodwill, others were freed on bail.

The last batch, consisting of the more influential student leaders, included the president of the Punjab University Students' Union and his "shadow cabinet". They stayed in prison for about five weeks.

Ever since Mr Bhutto's assumption of the Presidency there has been an uneasy truce between his party and the students. He came to power on progressive slogans but very few of them are being taken seriously now. Students were never his stronghold. His real dilemma is that the main body of students continues to support the pro-Islamic forces which are opposed to the PPP.