

India and Pakistan

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III. India and Pakistan

The proclamation of their independence by India and Pakistan on July 15, 1947, was accompanied by serious disturbances and bloodshed. A two-way traffic of some millions of fugitives passed from one country to the other. Convoys were attacked and many people killed. Refugee camps in reception centres were quickly overcrowded, and there was increasing danger of epidemics and starvation.

A few months later the situation had become stabilised; out of the six million refugees in Pakistan, less than a million still lived in camps, whilst out of a total of four million refugees in India about 500,000 were still interned. Refugees on either side of the frontier had found makeshift quarters in the villages and dwellings abandoned by their inhabitants.

Very serious problems remained, however. Some districts were still threatened with famine; the return of the hot season and the lack of disinfectants enhanced the danger of epidemics. The exodus and the exchange of populations was not yet ended, nor had passions died down. The general situation called for the presence of a neutral intermediary, in the interests of the parties themselves and on the grounds of both charity and humanity.

In response to urgent appeals, the ICRC sent a special Delegate, Dr. O. Wenger, from Geneva to New Delhi and Karachi, the respective capitals. He left at the end of 1947, and by January was in contact with the authorities and Red Cross Societies of both countries. His arrival was welcomed equally by Indians and Moslems. Fresh exchanges of populations were made with his collaboration, and by agreement between the two countries.

In Kashmir, the presence of an ICRC Delegate proved most opportune, since political developments there threatened to have

extremely grave consequences. A popular vote was to decide to which of the new States the province should be attached. The Maharajah of Kashmir turned to the Indian Union, which he was anxious to join. Part of the population rose against him; in October 1948, fighting broke out, and on both sides Indians and Moslems were massacred. In Kashmir, two Governments were set up : that of Azad Kashmir, supporting Pakistan, and that of Jammu Kashmir, which sought to join India. A number of Moslems continued to reside in the portion of Kashmir which was in favour of India, whilst there were Indians living in the part which declared for Pakistan. Before the arrival of the ICRC Delegate, the two Governments had been unable to agree to an exchange of populations. The Delegate went to Lahore, in response to an appeal, to discuss the question with the representatives of the two Kashmiri parties. These talks led to the dispatch of relief supplies for the Indians interned in Azad Kashmir, particularly those in Ali-Beg Camp, who were living in the most wretched conditions. A doctor and two nurses were sent to give them medical attention; the Pakistan Government promised to supply them with food and declared its readiness to evacuate through Pakistan all Indians living in the Azad Kashmir area who wished to return to India.

The Delegate continued his negotiations and had the satisfaction of receiving from the Indian and Azad Kashmir Governments a declaration that both were ready to respect the principles and the spirit of the Geneva Conventions. The practical effect of the declaration was the establishment of an Information Bureau, the supply of lists of prisoners, and permission for the ICRC to visit the camps.

Under the auspices of the ICRC an agreement was also made between India and Pakistan, dealing with the tracing and repatriating of the women abducted in Kashmir by Azad Kashmir troops. There were fifty to sixty thousand of these women.

In May, 1948, the Delegate had an interview with the Prime Ministers of India and of Jammu Kashmir. After visiting several camps, he left for the Poonch district, which was divided between Indian and Azad Kashmir forces. He visited there some 15,000 refugees, mostly non-Moslems, who were being removed by air at

the rate of 20 to 30 flights daily and 25 passengers per plane. By July, 1948, 20,000 persons had been transported in this way.

In October 1948, the Pakistan Red Cross complained to the ICRC about the bombardment of hospitals it had opened in Kashmir. The Delegate successfully negotiated an amicable settlement between the two parties.

He also visited a prisoner of war camp at Attok (Pakistan) where he found 629 prisoners who had been captured by the Azad Kashmir forces. He superintended an exchange of prisoners at the Rawalpindi airfield, and obtained the Azad Kashmir Government's consent to the repatriation of 1,000 non-Moslem civilians through Pakistan to India.

Finally, he had several talks with the Indian authorities, with a view to having prisoners of war status granted to persons detained after the events in Hyderabad in September 1948.