

# INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS

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## ASIAN SUB-CONTINENT

### REPATRIATION OF 250,000 PERSONS

From September 1973 to March 1974, more than 250,000 persons have been moved from one side of the Asian sub-continent to the other in a vast operation involving the extensive co-operation of the ICRC. It was possible for this repatriation operation to be carried out only through the positive stand adopted by the three countries concerned and the co-operation shown by Switzerland,<sup>1</sup> the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the ICRC. Since the end of the Second World War, this is the most extensive repatriation operation undertaken by the ICRC, and its sheer size compels us to give in the pages that follow a summarized account of what has been accomplished<sup>2</sup>. The relief efforts, though of considerable magnitude, undertaken by the ICRC since 1971 in support of prisoners, internees and civilians in the Asian sub-continent, will not be touched upon here, as they have been mentioned on several occasions in past issues of the *International Review*.

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Under the New Delhi Agreement signed on 28 August 1973, the Governments of India and Pakistan gave expression to their determination to seek a solution to the humanitarian problems resulting from the conflict of 1971. This Agreement, which had the concurrence of the Government of Bangladesh, provided for the

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<sup>1</sup> In charge of diplomatic negotiations relating to the operation between those three countries.

<sup>2</sup> *Plate*.

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repatriation of: (1) all Pakistani prisoners of war and civilian internees in India (except for 195 POWs alleged to be guilty of war crimes); (2) the Bengali minority in Pakistan; and (3) "a substantial number" of non-locals<sup>1</sup> in Bangladesh. The three States concerned requested the ICRC's assistance to implement the provisions of the Agreement and repatriation operations were begun in September. At the same time, Bangladesh and Pakistan requested the United Nations assistance to facilitate the movement of the persons concerned between those two countries.

At the end of 1973, there were 57 ICRC delegates working in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, assisted by more than 400 local staff, as the widely varied tasks, which the ICRC in Geneva and its delegates in the field were called upon to exercise, had expanded very rapidly. The ICRC was given the responsibility for carrying out the registration of persons wishing to go to Pakistan or Bangladesh, and it dealt with the transmission of lists of those persons to the Governments concerned. As for the actual transfer of people to those two countries, that was effected by an airlift on board aircraft chartered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The latter wrote in the bulletin of March 1974:

*In addition to the repatriation of Bengalis and non-Bengalis, the Agreement covered the return of prisoners of war to Pakistan. From the start, the three movements were concerned as being inter-linked and interdependent. If one of them failed, the other two would be automatically affected. UNHCR has no operational responsibility, however, in the prisoner-of-war leg of the triangle which is the concern of the Indian Government and the International Committee of the Red Cross. UNHCR is co-operating closely in this operation with the International Committee of the Red Cross, which is responsible for the registration and processing of the returnees prior to departure. The registration lists must be checked and approved by the receiving country in each case...*

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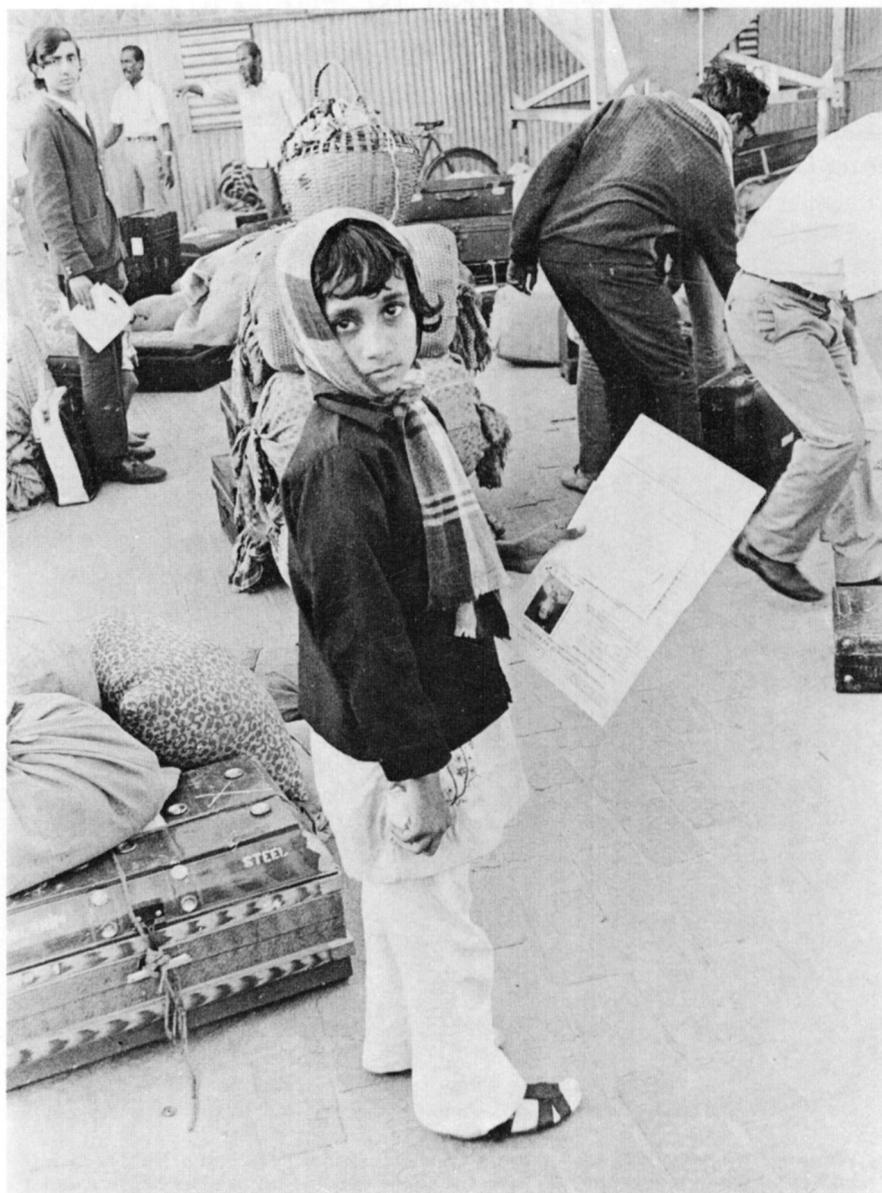
<sup>1</sup> "Non-locals" is the term used for those mostly Urdu-speaking Muslims who, at the time of the partition of British India in 1947, had opted to leave that part of the country that was to become the Republic of India in order to go to Pakistan. A second migration, to both East and West Pakistan took place following the first outbreak of hostilities between India and Pakistan in 1956.

## REPATRIATION IN THE ASIAN SUB-CONTINENT



**Wagah, November 1973.** After being released, former Pakistani prisoners of war and civilian internees entering Pakistan across the India-Pakistan border, under the supervision of ICRC delegates.

Photo M. Martin/ICRC



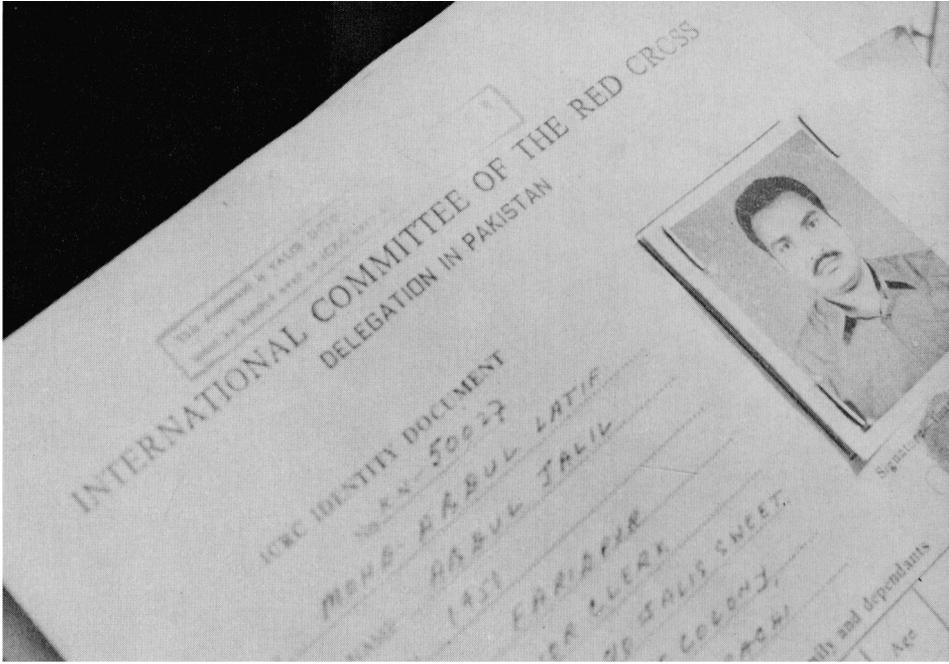
**Dacca** (Bangladesh). Persons cleared for repatriation to Pakistan receive from the ICRC their identity documents...

Photo Pulver/ICRC



... and board the plane chartered by the UNHCR.

Photo Pulver/ICRC



Identity document issued  
the ICRC.



Members of a Bengali family  
from Pakistan greeted in Dacca  
by local staff of the ICRC Cen-  
tral Tracing Agency.

Photos Bloomer/British  
Red Cross Society

## India

The transfer from the camps to the India-Pakistan border is being carried out by rail. Trains carry prisoners of war and civilian internees, accompanied by ICRC delegates, at the rate of 800 persons every two days; the ICRC delegates supervise the smooth running of the repatriation operations and send a report on each to the Detaining Power and to the Power on which the detainees depend. From 28 September 1973 to the end of March 1974, the delegates accompanied 92 repatriation trains and supervised at the border check-post the repatriation of 62642 prisoners of war and 16975 civilian internees. Before leaving the camps where they were detained, each one of the prisoners of war and civilian internees had to complete a personal repatriation card. The cards, filled in according to the delegates' instructions, were to be sent to the Central Tracing Agency at Geneva, where they were filed in the Pakistan card index.

By the end of March, there remained in India several thousand prisoners and internees who will be repatriated under the same conditions as described above.

## Pakistan

ICRC delegates assisted local authorities in Pakistan in charge of the preparatory work for the repatriation of the Bengali minority. Those persons cleared for repatriation had to be collected and taken to transit and departure camps. A sub-delegation of the ICRC had to be opened in Lahore and the number of delegates in Karachi was increased. Airlift terminals were set up in each of these places and, daily, delegates issued ad hoc identity documents to returnees, taken to departure points at the airports, prior to their leaving for Bangladesh.

All Bengali civilians wishing to return to Bangladesh were requested to apply for registration at the Central Tracing Agency bureaux, set up by the ICRC in various parts of the country. Applications by Bengali military personnel were registered by the Pakistan Government. All applications were then submitted by the ICRC to the Government of Bangladesh for clearance.

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By the end of March 1974, 62544 Bengali civilians and 53,879 Bengali military personnel, including members of their families, had returned, after receiving the documents issued by the ICRC, to Bangladesh by the UNHCR airlift<sup>1</sup>. The repatriation operation of the remaining Bengalis wishing to return to Bangladesh, numbering a few thousand persons, is still proceeding and is expected to be wound up within the next few weeks.

### **Bangladesh**

Since 1972, several hundred thousand persons, referred to in Bangladesh as "non-locals", expressed their wish to go to Pakistan. After the New Delhi Agreement, the ICRC has been as active here, as it was in Pakistan for those going in the opposite direction, for facilitating their repatriation. The procedure at both ends is the same, as regards the issuing of ad hoc identity documents prepared by the ICRC and the preparation of repatriation cards. In Dacca, and in other parts of the country where ICRC delegations were set up (Chittagong, Khulna, Ishurdi, Saidpur), the task of the ICRC has been, and continues to be, to aid the local authorities by co-operating extensively with them for the repatriation of non-locals. The ICRC carries out the registration and notification of those persons cleared for repatriation by the competent Pakistan and Bangladesh authorities. Under the New Dehli Agreement, the Government assumes responsibility for the transfer of those persons to the exit camps set up at Dacca and Chittagong in which it is assisted by the ICRC. There each applicant is issued an identity document before boarding one of the aircraft chartered by UNHCR.

The ad hoc identity document is issued by the ICRC to persons requesting to be repatriated only after their files have been carefully examined and, in particular, after the granting of an entry visa into Pakistan has been checked. When the returnees arrive at their destination, their identity documents must be handed back to the ICRC delegates, who send them on to the Central Tracing Agency at

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<sup>1</sup> In addition, one ship completed 5 return voyages between Karachi and Chittagong.

Geneva. The exit cards prepared for each particular case are also transmitted to the Central Tracing Agency and are entered in the appropriate card-index.

Shortly after the start of the repatriation operations, an ICRC delegate described in a report the excitement surrounding travellers about to set off to start a new life in a distant land:

“ Kilo Camp, a few kilometres outside Dacca, offers shelter to about one thousand persons and differs from all other camps sheltering non-Bengalis and Pakistanis in that, being very close to Dacca Airport, it has been recently turned into a transit camp. For the tens of thousands of non-Bengalis who have been living since the end of the war in temporary accommodation, it constitutes the final stage in the lengthy process leading to their departure. ”

This vast operation necessitated at the time it was in full action last December, the assistance of a large number of delegates and considerable local staff. The telecommunication network, too, between the various ICRC delegations had to be expanded. In Geneva, the Central Tracing Agency had to cope from September 1973 with a tremendous task: every month several tens of thousands of cards were received, examined, classified and entered by nationalities in card-indexes. In addition, replies had to be sent to numerous enquiries from various countries to persons reported missing or who had since been repatriated. At the end of 1973, the normal complement of the Agency had been reinforced by 15 additional staff.

To a large extent, the operation was accomplished under the auspices of the International Committee, with the aid of its delegates in the field as well as in Geneva and of the Central Tracing Agency personnel. It has been conducted successfully and the end is almost in sight. The *International Review* considers this a timely moment to give a broad outline of what has been achieved. But it could never have taken place without the co-operation of the authorities and National Red Cross Societies of the three countries of the sub-continent, without that of the High Commissioner for Refugees, and without the material and financial support provided by the

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Governments and National Societies of all the different countries that responded generously to the appeals launched by the ICRC and made available to it the means to carry out its mandates.

In conclusion, in order to give an idea of the extent of this operation, we give the following figures, made out until the end of March 1974:

62,642 prisoners of war and 16,975 civilian internees moved from India to Pakistan;

116,423 persons moved from Pakistan to Bangladesh;

68,045 persons moved from Bangladesh to Pakistan.

There are still 11 ICRC delegates in India, 8 in Pakistan, and 16 in Bangladesh.