

Military report on the riots in Calcutta (Calcutta, 24 August 1946)

Caption: In a military report dated 24 August 1946, the headquarters of the Eastern Command outlines the situation concerning the riots in Calcutta. After the 'Direct Action Day' launched on 16 August 1946 by the Muslim League to call for the partition of India and the creation of the independent Muslim state of Pakistan, violent clashes erupted between Hindus and Muslims, resulting in thousands of deaths in Calcutta.

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SECRET & PERSONAL
D.O. No.5705/3/GSI(b)
K. Eastern Command
Calcutta 12 A.P.O.
Dated 24 Aug 46.

My dear Brigadier,

I refer you to my D.O. No.5705/3/GSI(b) dated 8 Aug para 4 regarding the police morale and my D.O. No.5705/3/GSI(b) dated 15 Aug regarding the possibilities of a first class communal clash.

2. We are making out a full and detailed report but it takes time to collate the enormous amount of information which we have collected. The trouble started early on the morning of the 16th and both sides were equally responsible. The Hindus started putting up barricades at Tala Bridge and Belgachia Bridge and other places to prevent Muslims processions coming into the town and Muslims goondas went round forcing Hindus to close their shops. As previously mentioned in my D.O. of the 15th the air was electric and this caused crowds to gather, lathis were produced and in no time North Calcutta was a scene of mob riot. By 1100 hours there were brick bat fights all over North Calcutta. During the first few hours the students were taking a fairly prominent part, but by the afternoon they had realised that it was very much more than an ordinary rowdy such as they had been indulging in for the past 9 months. The student element then cleared out and went to their houses and homes and did little more than defend themselves and their families, if attacked.

By late in the afternoon the situation changed and the persons involved on both sides were gwallahs, rickshaw pullers, teashop wallahs, pan berri wallahs, cart pullers, cart men, goondas of the worst type. Soon after midnight on the 16/17th these gangs fought out the most desperate battles, murder and butchery of a worst type were carried on in the side lanes and byways of North Calcutta. Round Vivekananda Road/ Central Ave., crossing, about 50 Hindu Behari rickshaw pullers were caught in a cul-de-sac and butchered. Further up Central Ave., round the temple which stands in the middle, a party of some 30 Mohamedans were killed. It was during the period midnight 16/17th and 0700 hours on the 17th that most of the casualties occurred. All the roads in the affected areas were red with bricks.

Our patrols were out but due to the tremendous fights that were going on it was impossible for us to force our way into the areas in which the main killings were taking place.

The police opened fire in Harrison Road at about 1100 hours on 16 Aug '46. 2 rounds of buck shot and Barnes and Smith emptied their pistols into the crowd. The crowd dispersed formed up in Bow Bazaar St and a fight started there between the Hindus in Bow Bazaar St. and the Muslims coming up from Lower Circular Rd. I was there at the time and the police finally dispersed the crowd with tear gas. By 1200 hours there were fights in every street and alley from Sealdah to Shambazar. Eastern Command Intelligence Centre jeeps dispersed some of these crowds and stopped the fights without firing, but as soon as we had gone the fights started again. By 1400 hours on the 16th Government were considering calling out troops but the police had only fired the above mentioned number of rounds.

3. Apart from a few senior officers, the police themselves were unwilling to open fire and I don't blame them. If they had done so and succeeded in quelling the outbreak, but mind you they would only have succeeded if they had fired quickly and a very large number of rounds, they would have been blamed for unnecessary firing. During the whole of these riots until the army was called out and authorised to shoot, I met various police patrols and pointed out rioters and looters, but there was always some good excuse as to why they should not fire. The above is known to the Army Commander and I have given him a note which he has sent to the Governor. It is not only myself who realises that the police were hesitant, but everyone who witnessed this riot. Public confidence in the police has been rudely shaken. H.E. the Governor told the Commissioner of Police on the 16th when the riots started, that he would back him in any strong action taken, but I think this assurance was given too late for the information to be really absorbed by the subordinate ranks. If he could have given this assurance a fortnight ago, which of course was of the question, the Calcutta Police who have been a fine body of loyal constabulary, would have done their job very much more successfully. I don't say that the whole riot could have been quelled by the Calcutta Police without the aid of military support, but I am confident that if all ranks had known that they would be supported to the hilt, nothing like the state of affairs which occurred would have taken place. There is no doubt that this situation will be put right in the very near future and I trust it will be an example to other provinces.

4. Three Battalions of troops were called out in aid of Civil power moved in and arrived into the worst affected area at 15.15 hours on Saturday afternoon, 17th August. As soon as the troops came in and started to shoot, the effect was immediately apparent, but other areas still carried on fighting, particularly Chitpore in North Calcutta and these fights lasted till Sunday night when troops moved into this area.

5. One of the most interesting points was that Europeans were not attacked. No bricks were thrown at army lorries except in stray cases, or when they took an active part in dispersing mobs. In fact, both sides were only too pleased to offer advice as to how to act and beat up the other side.

6. From the time the riots started every little blacksmith was working like mad in his house manufacturing spears, rods and knives. The iron rods used in reinforced concrete building works were all stolen and shapened at both ends, and the butchery that these crude weapons did has got to be seen to be believed. Men, women and children were slaughtered by both sides indiscriminately and when Mullick Bazar was burnt three Hindu children were thrown into the flames.

7. The result of this riot has been complete mistrust between the two communities. Most of the Babus dare not go to their offices because they have to pass through Muslim areas, and they are afraid of being stabbed. Though the city is quiet there are still stabbing cases and both sides are very very frightened. The trams are running today (22nd). There are buses and taxis and the city is fast returning to normal. We have cleaned up practically all the corpses, D.D.T. has been sprayed and everything possible has been done.

8. There is a lot of talk in the town that the army should have been called in in aid of civil power earlier during the riot. Personally, I think that it would have been a mistake if this had been done. It is the duty of the police to first try and quell a disturbance and only when they had expended all the power they have, then should the troops be called in.

The police had hardly fired a round until the 17th, and one could see that they were uneasy as to the consequences of firing and would be only too pleased to get the army in to take the responsibility.

9. As I said in my previous DO's there is bound to be a show down, and we've had it. I think that both sides are terribly frightened and I feel that this will clear the atmosphere for some time to come. Politicians will realise that violent speeches are liable to cause what they appear to be clamouring for "a blood-bath", but when a blood bath comes it is not so pleasant. /always

10. It now remains to be seen as to whether the Muslims will start any trouble on the Id which takes place on the 28th or 29th August, or if they will start any trouble when Nehru's Govt is proclaimed. Personally, I don't think they will. There may be a few minor clashes but I don't expect anything in a big way, though we are ready for it.

11. There is hardly a person in Calcutta who has a good word for Suhrawardy, respectable Muslims included. For years he has been known as "The king of the goondas" and my own private opinion is, that he fully anticipated what was going to happen, and allowed it to work itself up, and probably organised the disturbance with his goonda gangs as this type of individual has to receive compensation every now and again. It is difficult to estimate the number of casualties but I should say it is somewhere in the region of 2 to 3 thousand at least. There were corpses all over North Calcutta, they were in the river, canals, side lanes, in fact, everywhere. The number of shops looted and burnt must be somewhere in the region of 2 to 3 thousand. I personally think that the killings of both sides were fifty, fifty, or if anything, more Muslims than Hindus, but damage financially has been much greater to the Hindus than to the Muslims.

12. The Assembly meets on the 2nd of September and I feel certain that there will be a non confidence vote against Suhrawardy and his goonda Raj, and it might quite easily lead to the fall of the Ministry. I hope it does. The figures in the Assembly are Muslim 114, Congress 86, Europeans 23, Independents 10, and I should say that the Congress, European and Independents will all vote against the Ministry which should make it 114 Muslim to 119 opposition. Apart from this I would not be surprised if some of the Muslim League even voted against Suhrawardy. The Muslim Press have got nothing much to say but the European and Hindu Press is violently anti-Suhrawardy and some of the leaders in the Statesman have been excellent.

13. From secret information I have obtained, I believe that the Hindu side of this fracas was organised by the Hindu Mahasabha who misguided the upcountry Hindus, such as gwallahs, rickshaw pullers, parn berri wallahs, tea shop wallahs and other rif raf, by telling them that they had to fight for their existence or be exterminated.

14. With reference to the police action mentioned above, this has already been taken up by the Army Commander with the Governor, so I suggest that you keep this part of the DO for the information of the army only as I have to work in very closely with the police and do not wish to be entangled in such a matter. It was not until the troops came out and started firing, that the police confidence returned, and where they were with troops they were prepared to fire and did so. Their mobile patrols sailed round and round the town, and they came into a street as looters ran out of shops and dispersed and the police patrol just sailed on, in fact, their mobile patrols did little more than disturb the looters.

15. In the various riots that have taken place up to date, no firearms have been used, but on this occasion firearms were used by both sides in several places and one Sikh was caught by Paul Barnes, D.C. Special Branch Police, using a revolver on a Muslim crowd from a red cross car.

16. Since the disturbance started red cross cars of both sides appeared to take the injured away and rescue families. These cars were spreaders of rumours both false and true and it was the talks and rumours spread by these cars which greatly assisted in inflaming the already difficult situation and causing outbreaks in areas which were up to that time quiet.

Yours sincerely

sd/-

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