

A Hopeful Move in South Asia

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A major advance in relations on the South Asian subcontinent is promised by the proposal of India and Bangladesh to return the 90,000 Pakistani POWs held for the last 16 months, if Pakistan will 1) release some 200,000 Bengali civilians stranded since the 1971 war and 2), in a kind of exchange, accept back some 200,000 Biharis who have been interned in Bangladesh but do not wish to stay there. By this one stroke, three important groups, each posing a political knot as well as a humanitarian issue, could start their lives anew. What makes the deal considerably more palatable for Pakistan is that Bangladesh no longer demands Pakistani recognition as a condition of POW return. Bangladesh still threatens to retain up to 200 POWs to try as war criminals, but since trials would ensure Bangladesh—a major supplicant for international handouts—major political damage, one hopes that Sheikh Mujib will find a way around them. Besides, Pakistan could hold counter-trials of Bengalis.

To outsiders, it may seem odd, not to say distasteful, that problems can be solved by official decisions to move large communities of people from one country to another, rather than to treat their condition in place. But large scale transfers of people have been a feature of

political life in the subcontinent at least since India and Pakistan were born as modern states a quarter-century ago. Moreover, many Americans tend to forget how immense was the movement of people from one country to another in Europe after World War II. The Soviet Union alone, for instance, physically expelled some 10 million people from areas conquered by the Red Army; no one now challenges that astonishing act. The one conspicuous postwar exception to the notion of resolving political issues by moving people around the map is the Mideast, where the claim of some Palestinians to return to their former homes in what now is Israel is still part of the politics of the region.

In the current case of the subcontinent, the three groups of people who would be moved (one composed of military prisoners, two of civilian internees) wish to move. This is what makes the new Indian proposal seemingly such a natural. It was only last July that India and Pakistan agreed, at Simla, to work for "an end to the conflict and confrontation that have hitherto marred relations." Not without strain, they have since moved a significant distance toward their goal—not by American prodding, it might be noted, but in response to their own sense of what is necessary and right.