INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WDF-20
Trip on the River

c/o American Consulate
Dacca, East Pakistan
October 5, 1957

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers,

Zain-ul Abedin, the energetic young man who is Director of Public Relations and press officer for the Government of East Pakistan, is five feet tall, weighs 91 pounds, has long wavy black hair, three fountain pens, several pockets full of notebooks, a way of being furiously efficient then delightfully relaxed, and the notion that his job consists not only of praising what is right but also raising Cain with what is wrong.

His "minority report" minutes to the Chief Minister on a wide range of public issues have ruffled the feathers of other ministers, but Zain has a short answer for that: "I am not here as a cheer leader."

One morning last week I was sitting in his office in the former girls'-college hostel that serves as the Secretariat. He was relaxed and recounting nothing more serious than his year-old battle with the Finance Ministry for permission to buy the big Oxford dictionary. "They remind me that I already <u>have</u> the Concise Oxford, and I tell them I know some words that aren't <u>in</u> the Concise Oxford. Their logical answer is, of course, 'If you know those words, then you don't need the big dictionary.' But they don't answer, they merely stall.

"By the way," he interrupted himself, "on Saturday I am going down to Barisal and Khulna to frighten the daylights out of my District Publicity Officers down that way. Would you like to come?" Five days, a trip on the river, a visit to the new port-industrial town of Khulna, yes, I'll come. Zain pushed buzzers and rang bells and set people busy booking telephone calls and telegrams.

The following night Zain, with his orderly and driver, dropped around to the hotel in a pick-up truck. The porters chucked my suitcase and sleeping bag aboard and said their "<u>Salaams</u>": "Peace," or in this case, "Where's our tip?"

We drove the 12 miles along the dike-long road to the port of Narayanganj. The quay was jammed with passengers and coolies struggling underneath the baggage they carried on their heads. The coolies pounced on us and divided the baggage among five of them. No, three will be enough.

Our caravan made its way along the broad gangplank, being careful not to step on the sleeping beggars on the sides. We passed through the hot lower deck of the steamer where deck-passengers huddled tightly, and mounted the stairs to the cabins. Zain's "P.A.," his "personal assistant, dashed up with the information that he hadn't been able to buy the

tickets. No wonder, that had already been done. We all became settled, the whistle hooted, there was a great deal of shouting, and the steamer slid out into the river.

We sat on the forward deck, in the breeze, watching as the giant headlight made a broad path through the darkness. Then Zain spotted two "celebrities": Nirul Amin, who had been Chief Minister of East Pakistan for five years, and Maulvi Tazimuddin Khan, who had been President of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly. They were on their way to Barisal to address a Muslim League meeting. The maulvi talked on Bengali anthropology: "...and so Dravidians, Aryans, Mongoloids, Arabs, all have left their impact..." The former Chief Minister perferred matters of greater urgency: he didn't see why the States should give aid to India, the friend of Russia and China; or why, if the States defended justice so boldly in the case of Korea, they should be so timid in the case of Kashmir; or why the States, the first nation to stand up for self-determination and anti-colonialism, should side with the French against the Algerians, unquote. We were all becoming slightly testy by one o'clock in the morning. They went to bed, and I remained on the deck and watched the riverbank go by. In the saloon three Anglo-Indian women, with their arch-British accents, played a giggling game of gin rummy with a sombre young Indian chap. I went to bed myself.

In the morning Bengal was beautiful. The broad river was lined with water-level rice fields, and palm trees, and thatch-hut villages with silent watching men and women, and children who smile and wave after you smile and wave first. On the river fishermen sat singly in their shallow boats, holding trap-nets into the water, waiting for the hilsa, the big fish that would bring, all at once, a day's pay. Occasionally there came along another paddle-wheeler like ours, stuffed with passengers, and we could see what we ourselves looked like. After every three miles, or seven or ten, our boat stopped in midstream while dingis and barges carrying new passengers and their belongings---bedding, boxes, live chickens, buckets and kerosene lamps newly bought at the bazar---came out from the shore. Then off again down the river.

"The river" is many rivers and creeks and canals and inlets, a vast watery area a couple hundred miles east to west and a hundred miles north to south, that is called "the Mouths of the Ganges." The rivers are the avenues and the barriers, and will remain so: there are roads only in few places, and there are few more places to build roads.

"See how tremendous our problems are!" Zain was saying. "In those parts of East Pakistan where you can build roads, there must be draining or bunding or filling in, and culverts every few feet and bridges---you decide where to put the bridge and then the river changes course! Impossible, you know!" He continued: "Take education. Let's say there is a modest program for improving education in the villages. ₨1000 (One rupee is $.21, officially) will pay for a small shed, just the building, with no thought to improving teachers' wages or books and things. How many villages in East Pakistan? Sixty thousand! How many rupees is that? Six million---no, sixty million, you see...Suppose we want to raise the pay of our constables to ₨100 a month, from the present ₨60 or so. God knows the poor chaps deserve it. Five hundred police stations, with how many constables? You figure it out. And the same thing is true of digging wells, controlling floods and what have you. Where is the money?

You know, you spend more for snow-removal in New York State---I found this out in Albany---more money than our total budget..."

After noon, we came into view of the tin-roofed shacks piled together on the waterfront: Barisal, headquarters of one of 17 districts in the province. The Muslim Leaguers put on a shouting demonstration of welcome for their distinguished visitors, and then the District Publicity Officer, a bearded, bespeckled man of 50, Mr. Hamid, smiled his way forward to greet his own distinguished visitor. He pressed Zain's hands and then mine and said he felt "deeply honored." We boarded a jeep for the Circuit House, a bungalow reserved for visiting government officials. There, we did what almost everybody else in town was already doing, namely taking a nap.

Mr. Hamid had invited us to tea at his office-home. A large red banner was stretched out over the door: "Backerganj District Directorate of Publicity." Zain was curt: "All right, what language is this? How many people, of those who can read, read English in this district?" Mr. Hamid look struck. "Yes, yes, Bengali," he muttered.

Zain took Mr. Hamid and his three or four assistants inside for a half-hour conference. They emerged and we sat down to the tea table. It was loaded with apples, bananas, cakes and sweetmeats, all of them together worth a half-week of Mr. Hamid's pay.

"You know," Zain began, "this is a very generous display of hospitality, especially for a foreign friend who is with us. But I cannot welcome it. The idea is to give us refreshment, not to hold a feast... A big sign and fine apples---how much do these cost?---do not take my mind off what I came here to see. The old days when an officer came and we could feed him well and then sit back in our chair for another year are finished. This is our country now. We are no longer running it for the British and standing on the heads of our own people. We are running it for ourselves. The task of the District Publicity Office is not to distribute pamphlets that we send out from Dacca---we can get newsboys to do that. Your job is public relations, relating the public to the government, encouraging public participation in its programs, letting the public know how they can take up what little the government is offering for them. The public is your business. The road is full of holes---that's your business. The landing ghat is filthy---that's your business. You tell the proper authorities what should be done, not wait for a circular letter from me."

Zain's audience looked rather sober. He continued without relenting: "When there's a 'Grow-More-Food' campaign, you grow more food yourself, and go out preaching---" Mr. Hamid was suddenly relieved. "I have grown a papaya tree and vegetables," he announced happily.

We went riding around town in the jeep and dropped in on the Catholic mission. The debonair Canadian priest in charge showed us the nicely done model boats which boys carved as a cottage industry, and then we sat and talked. He had "100,000 parishioners and 700 members." He was "dying" for more cement to build an addition to the girls' school. "Suddenly everybody wants education," he said. "Imagine. A woman who works as a street-sweeper squeezes out every anna she can to send her daughter to the school."

The priest said he gets around his parish by boat and bicycle. Somebody mentioned the nawab in the old days who imported a Rolls-Royce to drive him from the steamer ghat to his nearby palace. Now the palace was crumbling. "If there is one thing that Independence has brought," the priest said, "it was to destroy the big zamindars," the landlords, the squirarchs. He spoke feelingly of the extortions and rent-racking, the right of first night, the indignities, and the poverty and despair that these practices brought. "Thank God that is gone," he said. "The poverty is still there, but the people are raising themselves up."

Mr. Hamid had insisted that we share his "poor fare," and we went to his house and sat and ate by lantern light: mutton curry and stewed chicken and mounds of rice, and then a nibble of cinnamon bark and a betel leaf. Our host only sat and watched. Finally, deliberately, he called in his son and daughter, both college students, who were quiet and shy. I wondered what others were inside. It became time to go. Mr. Hamid was sorry this was all he could offer. No, no, this was too good, we protested. Next time we come to Barisal it will be only for eating.

On the way home Zain said, "You know, Hamid isn't a bad fellow. But they all have these outmoded ideas. You ask them, How is your work going? and they show you a 19-year-old letter of recommendation given to them by the same relative who hired them in the first place."

Back at the Circuit House, Zain's P.A. had an urgent request. Could his sister-in-law, who lived in town, provide tomorrow's breakfast? Very nice, but please, no special fuss. Delighted, the P.A. dashed off, at 11 P.M., to give the word. The next morning, "no special fuss" turned out to be 11 dishes, most of them sweets, and for later refreshment the sister-in-law sent along 14 coconuts. The P.A. was immensely pleased, regretting, with a great smile, that other dishes which he would have liked to furnish were "not available in a town like this."

After breakfast we went out to the college, with its well worn brick buildings and shaggy lawns. Although it was vacation time, for the Hindu Durga festival, some of the boys remained on campus and a dozen or so took us to their hostel, a bare barracks. They had little---a handful of books, a few clothes---and little to spend---their meals and an occasional movie. This hostel was for Muslims; there was another for Hindus. Well, was this sort of separation a good idea? "The college policy..." and "That is the custom..." Yes, but what do you think? "That is difficult to say..." As it turned out, the real separation was between the boys and the girl students. "Oh no, we do not talk to them." Their quarters were inside a walled compound.

They wanted to know about America. How were the colleges there? Were there jobs for graduates? How much salary does a graduate make? Why is there racial discrimination in an experienced democracy? Is our country on the right path? Why do the States give aid to India, the "homeland of communism"?

We dropped into the Hindu hostel and persuaded one student to play his harmonium. He played what I took to be a hymn. "What was that?" I asked. "Popular film hit," he replied.

When we boarded the steamer for Khulna there was a mix-up on reservations, and our two cabins became one cabin and then none, and we wound up with a couple of cots placed on the deck. At night, the jute moths

which resided in my cot came out and began munching on me. I spent the rest of the night inside my sleeping bag, stretched out as best I could in a deck chair. "First class" is a relative term.

In the morning, the skyline of Khulna showed the smokestacks of a couple of new jute mills and the lofty cranes at the shipyard. The town would soon be a city. We were greeted by the effacing young man who is the District Publicity Officer, but Zain was bent on storming into the steamer company office to complain about our overnight discomforts. At the Circuit House I was given "the room that Mr. Suhrawardy had" when he visited Khulna---by sea-plane---a couple of weeks earlier.

The District Superintendent of Police, who had gone to college with Zain in Calcutta, came over to hold a small reunion. But he could not stay long: there had been a dacoity, an armed-gang raid, in a village, and he had to investigate. But he furnished us with a Police Intelligence officer whom he said knew a great deal about "my biggest problem, labor unrest."

On the way to the newsprint plant project we left the old part of town quickly and drove along streets where construction workers live, new-built slums of thatch huts and tea shops, an area without sanitary facilities or drinking water. The police officer recounted the trouble there had been a few months ago at the plant site. One of the Pathan watchmen, from West Pakistan's Northwest Frontier, had stabbed a Bengali workman, and a riot, with bloodshed, ensued. Town life, he added, was "ruining" the villagers who came for work.

We talked to one of the three Canadian engineers who direct the project. The plant, he said, would fulfill all of Pakistan's newsprint requirements, but there was another 18 months of work to go. The paper will be produced by a new chemical-impregnation process, and the supply of pulp would be "endless": "We can work our way through the gewa forests of the Sunderbans, and by that time the re-plants will let us work our way through again."

Some 5000 laborers are engaged in the work, and most of them get the standard ₨2 ($.42) for a 9½-hour day, six days a week. Accommodations for the workers? That is the general contractor's business. The chief of the general contractor's party, a Briton, said it is the labor contractor's business, and the labor contractor, a Pakistani, made it clear that his business was to provide workers, not workers' accommodations. The cold economy includes a system of bosses, sardars, each having a gang of 22 men. The sardars are in charge of maintaining discipline, paying wages and selling workers rationed rice, and some of them, it is commonly accepted, make something extra for themselves through kick-backs, hiring fees and simple extortion.

Lying on the river bank on the south side of town is the half-completed shipyard, which, in a couple of years, will provide a vast outdoor factory to build or repair six ships at once---three pairs of 300-foot-long side-tracks, facing an I-shaped slip. In charge of the project is a German shipbuilder whom we had read about in the newspapers: he had been nicked on the scalp by a stone thrown during a workers' demonstration several weeks earlier. "These workers, from the villages, didn't know what they were doing. It's the union leaders, coming from politics, who put them up to these things." He was more concerned about red tape and shortages and the difficulty of "asking engineers from Germany to come out to this forsaken place, when Pakistani engineers, who we trained in

Germany, refuse to come here but go to West Pakistan, where it's more pleasant." Frankly, he said, he is "ready to go home, anytime."

Out in the yard, a Pakistani machinist brought us a complaint. He had taken a test in order to fill a better job, but he had been turned down. "One judge," he said, "said the piece I made was too short. The other said it was too long. It must have been exactly right!"

In the evening, two government labor officers, a labor union leader and an executive of a new match factory all came on invitation to the Circuit House, but instead of there being a conference there was a medley of individual performances.

The Provincial Labor Officer was voluble on the theory of labor welfare, which he had "studied during my stay in the U.K." He slipped around to me later and asked if there was anything I could do to get him a scholarship to the States. The Central Labor Officer, a recent college graduate, revealed that at this stage, at least, he understood his job as that of transmitting the complaints of unions up to the next higher level. The labor leader, a lawyer, defended the non-working labor leadership: "They cannot do it themselves, so they come to us. Why should we fail to help them?" The match factory man complained that the Japanese experts who came to help them get started were going remarkably slow in teaching Pakistanis how to do the job. He was certain the Japanese, highly paid as they were, wanted to stay around for a long time.

At six the next morning we took a government launch down the river some 40 miles to Chalna anchorage, which along with Chittagong gives East Pakistan its two big ports. We passed Chalna Bazar, where the anchorage had been located until swift currents forced the port people to move ten miles downstream to Mangla, where the name "Chalna anchorage" prevails because it would have been "too confusing" to change it.

At any event, after passing down the river past farms and jungle, and meeting nothing in the river but small fishing and cargo boats, all of a sudden ocean-going steamers loomed gigantically in the stream ahead. Flat barges clung alongside on both sides of the ships, and cranes were creakily on-loading bales of jute and hides.

There is no shore installation to speak of, only a police station and the huts of the 2000 coolies. We checked in briefly at the barge-borne office of a shipping company, then headed farther south for a cruise into the edge of the Sunderbans.

The Sunderbans is a belt of swampy forest running 75 miles along the Bay of Bengal in India and Pakistan, and extending 35 miles deep up toward the plain. Scarsely settled, the Sunderbans is reknown for its Royal Bengal Tigers and snakes and deer, and from what you hear has the aura of dark, jungle danger and mystery about it. We chugged slowly along the watery path that led through the dense forest on either side. Inside there was the occasional sound of the rustling of brush and, farther inside, the echo-like calling of a bird.

"Well at least let's land somewhere and see what it looks like inside," I said. There were spontaneous murmurs of dissent, and a laugh or two. "When you enter the Sunderbans," said the police officer, "you go with two guns, one to cover the other." There followed many stories about Tigers vs. Men. Apparently the Tigers are ahead. I silently

wished the Khulna newsprint people good luck in getting their trees out of the Sunderbans.

Returning to the anchorage we had lunch and afterwards were visited by a handful of leaders of a port coolies' union. For six months, they said, they had been asking in vain for an interview with the labor contractor to discuss their demands: union recognition, living accommodations "for the deserving," and no overtime, or at least not under the present arrangement of regular-rate pay. Now they were going on strike. They had just given the two-week notice. How would the workers live during the strike? They had a strike fund. It came to about ₹7 per man.

As we were about to leave, one of the leaders began petitioning me fervently in Bengali. Later Zain remarked sadly, "He didn't have any idea who you were, but he knew you were somebody 'big' from the outside."

In the waning afternoon we headed upstream. Zain was plainly gloomy, "really disturbed, you know, about this whole labor business." It grew darker and the blood-red setting sun colored the sky and the water. Abruptly Zain announced, "You know, I've never taken my wife on a honeymoon. Always too busy. This is where I should take her, and the kids, you see. This is where you should come for your honeymoon..." He talked on: "...American women, you see, exhaust you emotionally..." We had a long talk about love and marriage on two continents. We agreed, by the time we reached Khulna, that a woman who combined the self-assertion of the American Woman with the complaisance of the Oriental Woman would be quite a woman indeed.

There was another feast ready for us at the Circuit House: lobster cooked in coconut milk and mutton and chicken and fish, enough food for ten. Those who were with us apparently felt it was their place only to watch. "Sit! Sit! Eat!" Zain ordered, "we are not the kings!" The District Publicity Officer sat down and his assistants followed suit, but they sat removed from us at the far end of the table.

We took the night boat for Barisal and arrived late the next afternoon. We had only a few hours on shore. It was the evening when Hindus would parade with images of the Goddess Durga and immerse her in ponds and rivers, and we visited one temporary pavilion where a crowd gathered around and women brought offerings of food and fruit and incense. We were invited to come to the immersion but our boat would be gone by then.

After several days of nightly feasting, if there was one thing that I did not need it was a square meal. But the little boatman who hired a launch to the Publicity Office had pleaded to entertain us all and we crowded around a table in his huddle-roofed boat for a grand meal.

The boatman had furnished knive and spoon for me, but like the others I ate with my fingers. "Don't they use those things in the States?" he asked in Bengali. Yes, he was told, but the American has become a Pakistani by now.

It had begun to rain, and we washed our fingers by sticking them outside the windows. As we left, the boatman pressed our hands, touched his forehead and heart and kissed the air softly. He felt he had been honored.

The next morning I could not possibly eat any breakfast. Zain had gotten up early and was busy all morning scribbling notes for a minute to the Chief Minister on "some of these labor conditions," and drafting a pungent letter to the steamer company about their service, and planning some changes in his own department.

I sat on deck and began to read from the Koran:

> "For the wrongdoers We have prepared a fire which will encompass them like the walls of a pavilion. When they cry out for drink they shall be showered with water as hot as melted brass, which will scald their faces. Evil shall be their drink, dismal their resting-place."

I switched to John Donne:

> "I am two fooles, I know,
> For loving, and for saying so
> In whining Poetry..."

That was more like it.

We came into Narayanganj landing, after some 500 miles of travel. As soon as the gangplank was down, the coolies raced aboard. Six coolies shared our luggage. No, no, three---well, four: there were still some left-over coconuts. We drove back to Dacca.

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