

## **Partition of India 1947 : Military Evacuation Organisation for Refugees**

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### **Introduction**

**C**onsequent to the decision of partition of the country in 1947

into India and Pakistan, the two bordering provinces of Punjab and Bengal were also divided according to majority areas of Muslim and non-Muslim population. The Radcliffe Award demarcated the boundaries where East Punjab with a non-Muslim majority and West Punjab with Muslim majority population went to India and Pakistan, respectively. Likewise the boundary of Bengal into East and West Bengal was demarcated.<sup>1</sup> The partition, however, gave Muslims the option to stay in India or move out to Pakistan. Likewise Non- Muslims also could stay in the newly formed Islamic Pakistan or migrate to India. However, the violence following the partition led to the mass migration of minorities on either side of the border. Consequently, within a period of four months, over four million non-Muslims migrated from West to East, while a similar number of Muslims moved in opposite direction.<sup>2</sup> Never before, in the history of the world had such a vast migration taken place. The law and order had broken down with collapse of civil administration on both sides of the border. The large scale killings and pillage necessitated army intervention. This Paper analyses the role of the Army in evacuation of refugees from West to East Punjab.

### **Raising of Punjab Boundary Force**

In order to maintain law and order, the Partition Committee set up a Special Military Command in July 1947 called the Punjab Boundary Force (PBF). It was a joint military force consisting of both Indian and Pakistani troops commanded by Maj Gen TW Rees. The PBF was responsible to the Supreme Commander through the Joint Defence Council. Indeed, the PBF was not

designed to control such a massive explosion of communal frenzy. Consequently, it failed in its mission and both countries decided to disband it on 31 August 1947.<sup>3</sup>

Subsequently, the responsibility of internal security was entrusted to the troops of the respective dominions. East Punjab Area Headquarters (HQ) Jalandhar and Lahore Area were made responsible for maintenance of law and order in East and West Punjab respectively. The Area Commanders occasionally conducted limited operations against armed gangs in order to protect the refugee camps and their moving convoys. In fact, the responsibilities were twofold:

- (a) To maintain law and order.
- (b) Safe evacuation of refugees.

#### **‘Military Evacuation Organisation’ Constituted**

Law and Order was looked after by Headquarters East Punjab Area but for the evacuation of refugees from West Punjab to East Punjab, a new department called Military Evacuation Organisation (MEO), India, with its Headquarters at Amritsar was constituted on 01 Sep 1947.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, evacuation of Muslim refugees from East Punjab to West Punjab was looked after by MEO (Pakistan) raised for the purpose. The evacuation programme involved setting up of Transit Camps for collecting refugees, transporting them either on foot or by rail/motor transport, and finally settling them in relief camps established in the country of their destination.<sup>5</sup> The MEO thus was to evacuate as many refugees as possible in shortest possible time by safest means. To carry out the task, some Indian units were placed under command of Commander Lahore Area (Pakistan Army) to protect non-Muslim convoys and refugee camps in Pakistan side of Punjab. Some Pakistani troops also worked under Commander East Punjab Area for a similar task. By the time MEO was raised over 12 lakh non-Muslim refugees had left West Pakistan for India with an average of 30,000 people every day. But millions of refugees had yet to be evacuated. The MEO was tasked to protect refugees in the concentration camps, arrange for their evacuation across the border and also protect them enroute.<sup>6</sup>

There were big concentration camps of refugees in Lyallpur, Sialkot, Montgomery, Lahore and Sheikhupura. In addition, many refugees were held in smaller camps all over West Punjab. In fact, there were some 20 big camps each with over 20,000 refugees and 40 small camps each with 5,000 or so refugees in Pakistan. Many refugees were still making their way to these camps from the hinterland. Still many were waylaid and subjected to brutalities of the worst kind. Police almost remained silent spectators and at times joined the looting and kidnapping of refugees. Refugees were neither safe in their homes nor in refugee camps. Young girls became easy prey.<sup>7</sup> There was neither food to eat nor water to drink. People were dying of starvation and fatigue. At times, refugees paid hundred rupees to purchase one kilogram Atta (flour) and rupees fifty for a single glass of water in Pakistan.<sup>8</sup>

### **Organising the Refugees**

Assessing the situation, which was indeed distressing, Commander MEO made his appreciation. For evacuation, he divided the Punjab into two sectors - the Near West and Far West. Near West sector included Lahore, Gujranwala, Sheikhupura, Gujarat, Shahpur, Jhang, Lyallpur and Montgomery districts, while the Far West sector included remaining districts of West Punjab. The evacuation from Near West within a radius of 150 miles, was planned on foot or mechanical vehicles while evacuation beyond this limit was envisaged by rail, road or air.

To facilitate evacuation, MEO also set up its Tactical HQs at Lahore. The officers there made efforts to identify the non-Muslims scattered in villages and move them to Subsidiary bases. MEO was, however, constrained by the shortage of manpower. It, therefore, sought the help of local civilian officers acquainted with the area. To facilitate the task, a chain of such local Liaison Officers generally amongst evacuees was created. Wherever possible, local ex-soldiers amongst the evacuees were identified and given uniforms to wear. These Liaison Officers went around from village to village to find out non-Muslims and brought them to nearby Subsidiary bases under military escort. The task of Liaison Officers was indeed difficult as it involved threat to their lives. It was also difficult to identify the non-Muslims in villages as many had converted to Islam or had left the villages to save their lives and modesty of their women folk.<sup>9</sup>

Sometimes transfer of refugee groups from hinterland to nearest refugee camp also turned risky. During their movements, they were mauled, looted and their women abducted. When the refugee groups of two communities crossed each other on the way, the situation turned precarious. It was, therefore, decided that different communities should follow separate routes to reach their destinations.

From subsidiary bases, the evacuees were moved to nearby concentration camps. The staff of MEO stood guard at these camps. From Concentration Camps in Pakistan, refugees were brought to India under protective cover of MEO personnel. The movements of the refugees were generally organized in large groups of Foot Columns or Motor Transport or Train.

### **Refugees in Foot Columns**

The length of Foot Columns organized in blocks of 20,000 to 30,000 or more evacuees often stretched for miles. A 25 mile long column, moving along the road in packed formation, with bullock carts loaded with household items and children, and members of the family walking alongside on foot was common. Both sides of the road were crowded with men, driving cattle, sheep, donkeys and camels, their backs bent with heavy loads, raising a cloud of dust. Whenever the Columns passed alongside a pond or a well, there was rush for water. If fodder was seen, there was a scramble to get it. Leaves and branches of all trees along the road were cut to feed animals and for cooking food, leaving behind naked stems portraying the tragedy of the millions of unfortunate human beings.<sup>10</sup>

Each column was generally escorted by military personnel of MEO moving on foot and jeeps, into camps arranged at convenient places. The camps too were protected by military piquets. It is notable that some people in the columns carried food but others who left in haste had nothing to eat. Earlier, the Joint Conference had decided that the Dominion from which the evacuees were moving out would be responsible for providing food, water, fodder and protection until they crossed the boundary. Subsequently, they were to be taken care of by the Dominion receiving them. But the rule was hardly observed. MEO personnel had, therefore, to arrange food for them and made efforts that no

one in the columns was left to starve. They also supplied water in military trucks to the moving columns. Efforts were also made to provide transport to the physically infirm, pregnant women, small children and old people who were unable to walk. The movement of the Columns was organised properly. It halted at four O' Clock in the evening at a suitable place and the time of departure for the next day was announced. This process was repeated day after day.

Indeed, communal frenzy was so deep that even amidst such security measures, there were many attempts of attack on the moving Columns. After an attack on a Foot Column (from Sargodha) at Lyallpur where large number of casualties were suffered, special security arrangements became paramount. The villages located on the route of the Foot Columns were placed under curfew. Armoured cars, wheeled carriers and tanks were deployed when Columns passed through towns. Watch from roof tops were also arranged by military personnel. Similarly curfew was also imposed in Amritsar along the route when the Muslim refugee columns passed through the city.

The groups or convoys of refugees initially moved under command of JCOs. But when Pak security forces started taking them lightly, commissioned officers were engaged on the job. It yielded desired result. The MEO personnel thus saved many lives and saved many girls from the clutches of goondas.

After crossing the boundary line, the refugees were first received in Transit Camps near the border. From these Camps, they were sent to bigger camps in India. The work of the MEO stopped at the Transit Camp. Thereafter, the responsibility of refugees lay with the East Punjab Government and Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation. However, one of the large refugee camps with over three lakhs refugees (at Kurukshetra) was manned by the Army.<sup>11</sup>

The task of MEO in evacuation of refugees was very difficult. The vagaries of nature further tormented the people making conditions more difficult. In late September and early October 1947 floods in Central Punjab badly affected refugees on the move. MEO with the help of Engineering branch of the Army erected Bailey Bridges and repaired the roads and bridges to

facilitate evacuation.<sup>12</sup> The Royal Indian Air Force (RIAF), too came to the rescue. Its pilots took grave risk in flying the aeroplanes every inch of which, including the cockpit, were fully packed by refugees. The RIAF also did a good job in dropping cooked food and food grains for marooned refugees when floods in October 1947 rendered the routes unserviceable.

MEO worked for about a year and was closed down on 23 August 1948 by which time most of the refugees had been evacuated.

Indeed the officers and jawans of the Indian Army deputed with the MEO were working in extremely difficult conditions. Many of them had just returned from their overseas assignment after the Second World War. Some had not gone on leave for a long time while others were looking forward to demobilisation. Still some soldiers themselves were displaced persons and had no information of their families.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, they stood for saving the lives of their people. In this venture some soldiers also died.<sup>14</sup> The Army too was facing the crunch of resources. Its manpower was divided between India and newly created Pakistan. The Army mostly comprised of British officers who had left India after Independence. Also the attack on Jammu and Kashmir by Pakistan in October 1947, further needed mobilisation of troops to the war front.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion it may be stated that though the MEO had limitations, the evacuation of refugees on both sides of the border became smoother after its inception. It maintained the law and order situation to safeguard the refugees once they joined the Columns. They countered hostile people on the way. MEO, however, took the help of Engineering branch of the Army and erected Bailey Bridges to facilitate evacuation. The soldiers of MEO themselves had numerous problems and some even did not know of the well-being of their own displaced families. But, it in no way affected their zeal for work. In its one year tenure, MEO evacuated over four million refugees from West to East Pakistan. The Organisation also helped the Pakistan authorities in evacuation of even greater number of Muslim refugees from

Indian side of the border. Thus, despite numerous constraints, the soldiers of MEO did their best to achieve desired results.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In June 1947, Britain commissioned Sir Cyril Radcliffe to head the two Boundary Commissions (one for Punjab and the other for Bengal), to determine which territories will be assigned to which nation. The Boundary Commission had representatives, both from the Congress and the Muslim League. The Commission's report was published on 17 August 1947, two days after Independence.

<sup>2</sup> Ian Talbot, *Punjabi Refugees' Rehabilitation and the Indian State: Discourses, Denials and Dissonances*, Modern Asian Studies, Vol 45, No. 1, Jan 2011, pp. 109-130. The number of migration of the people differs in various sources. According to an estimate a total of about 14.5 million people migrated between India and Pakistan due to partition. See Prashant Bhardwaj & Others, *The Big March: Migratory Flows after the Partition of India*, Economic and Political Weekly, 30 August 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Pallavi Chakravarty, *Post-partition Rehabilitation of Refugees in India*, (History and Society- NMML Occasional Paper New Series 46, 2014), p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> MEO was headed by Brig (later Maj Gen) SBS Chimni.

<sup>5</sup> Pallavi Chakravarty, op. cit., p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Rajendra Singh, Brig, *The Military Evacuation Organisation, 1947-48*, (Manager Press, 1961), pp. 14-15.

<sup>7</sup> In a refugee camp at Arya School in Layallpur, about 500 non-Muslims were killed and more than 200 girls were abducted in first week of October 1947.

<sup>8</sup> BH Mehta, *Refugees Plight at Kurukshetra*, in Times of India, 21 Dec 1947, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Rajendra Singh, op. cit., pp. 24-25.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 41-42.

<sup>11</sup> BH Mehta, op. cit., p. 7. There were 10,000 tents of the Army for refugees. Each tent was meant to accommodate 16 persons but because of huge rush there lived 30 persons in each tent.

<sup>12</sup> *India's Debt to Armed Forces*, in TOI, 15 Aug 1947, p. 27.

<sup>13</sup> War Diary, 2 Dogra Regiment, INF/33/H, 1947, HD, MoD.

<sup>14</sup> War Diary 2 Bihar Regiment, INF/18/H, 1947, HD, MoD. The unit suffered 74 casualties included many dead while escorting the refugees train from Mari Indus (Pakistan) to Ambala (India).

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*Journal of the United Service Institution of India*, Vol. CXLVIII, No. 611, January-March 2018.