The Washington Post

The Mothers Who Won't Disappear

In Sri Lanka, a Maternal Cry Against the Death Squads

PHOTOS BY REUTER

From top, Mothers Front founder, Manorani Saravanamuttu; her slain son, Sri Lankan journalist/actor Richard de Zoysa; women weeping for relatives killed by Tamil rebels.

By Steve Coll
Washington Post Foreign Service

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka

The letter arrived by regular post in the afternoon. A mailman carried it up the walkway of a posh bungalow lined with palms and splashed with tropical light. The letter was handwritten in English, addressed to Manorani Saravanamuttu, a medical doctor and a child of the island's wealthy elite, perhaps the best known of the estimated 25,000 Sri Lankan mothers to lose a son to the death squads.

The letter went like this:

We condole with you regarding the death of your son Richard. He was a traitor to the cause of justice and prosperity to our motherland. Therefore he was removed. . . .

You are about to set out on a venture seemingly to avenge your son's death. If you do so, you too become a traitor. . . .

MOURN the death of your son—as a mother you must do so. Any other steps will result in your death at the most unexpected time. . . .

Only silence will protect you.

Since the letter arrived last May, Manorani Saravanamuttu has considered at length the price of silence and the price of speech. When she decided to raise her voice, she says, it was less from heroism than anger, less from courage than desperation. She is alone—divorced, now childless. She felt she had nothing left to lose.

"They expect you to curl up in a corner and die of fear," she whispers on a sultry Sunday morning, smoking, laughing and weeping through hours of conversation on her front porch. She is patrician by Sri Lankan measures—light skin, high cheekbones, gray hair pulled back in a bun—and easily familiar with a Western stranger, confiding and intimate. She answers sometimes carefully, other times with emotion, stopping now and then to ponder aloud what the president of Sri Lanka will think if he reads this or that quoted from her lips.

"I had no one else to put into danger," she says, explaining the origins of the journey that led her into exile and back in the months since the death threat arrived. "I kept going around to my friends saying, 'They would do me a favor by killing me.' They thought I had lost my head, but it was just my reaction. You can get crushed by grief, you can get crushed by fear, or you can just get angry."

From Saravanamuttu's anger the Mothers Front has risen, a mass movement of 25,000 registered mothers of Sri Lanka's "disappeared." Despite threats from the police and allegations of subversion from the government, the mothers held their first rally last month, timed to commemorate the abduction and execution of Richard de Zoysa, Saravanamuttu's son, a journalist, actor and human rights activist.

Where it all will lead is difficult to predict on an island so entangled in violence, ethnic hatred and civil war. Perhaps quixotically, Saravanamuttu hopes the mothers will forge the beginning of a peaceful reconciliation and change their country forever.

"It is my belief that men don't feel sorrow the way that women feel," she says. "I realized that what Sri Lanka needs is a peaceful force. The women are saying, 'We are going mad with grief at home alone.' Now at least we are doing something."

Perhaps you have heard about the death squads in Sri Lanka, or the headless corpses that smolder in the mornings on the roadside, or the eight years of civil war, or the ethnic hatred so fierce it causes educated men to set each other

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SRI LANKA, From F1

on fire. Perhaps you have also heard about the white beaches, or the crystal ocean water running over coral reefs, or the lush tea estates, or the thousands of elephants, or the first-class hotels and casinos, or the Sri Lankan people—impoverished but almost universally literate, gentle and welcoming.

There is no easy way to explain Sri Lanka's death squads. For one thing, this is not a set piece where Evil stands to one side and Good to the other, locked in moral confrontation. But it is helpful to sort it all out, if only better to understand the courage and despair of Manorani Saravanamuttu and the other mothers of the disappeared.

One place to begin is with the departure of the British from Ceylon, as Sri Lanka was once known, following World War II. In Colombo, as in many other capitals of the empire, the British left behind what amounted to an entourage—a tiny, English-speaking elite of Sri Lankan lawyers, doctors, army officers, administrators and clerks who had managed the island's affairs for more than a century.

Many books have been written in an effort to explain what went wrong between 1948 and 1983, when the civil war in independent Sri Lanka began. Some blame the British for sowing the seeds of injustice. Some blame the Colombo elite for jealously guarding its privileges. Some blame a new generation of nationalist politicians who exploited ethnicity and religion to win votes.

The island split in two, with the Hindu Tamil minority in the northeast fighting for a homeland independent from the Buddhist, ethnic Sinhalese majority in the south. Tamil guerrilla groups formed in the north and took to the jungle to battle the government's Sinhalese army.

The war grew bloodier and bloodier until 1987 when India, which sympathized with the Hindu Tamils, dropped in with 100,000 soldiers, ostensibly to restore peace and protect the Tamils from the Sinhalese. The arrival of Indian troops provoked a backlash in the south.

Sinhalese radicals, mainly from the oppressed lower castes, formed the People's Liberation Front, known by its Sinhalese initials JVP, a Maoist, Buddhist, totalitarian revolutionary group whose goals and methods have been compared to those of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Beginning in 1988, the JVP dedicated itself to overthrowing the Sri Lankan government by violence and expelling Indian troops from the island.

The JVP resorted to extreme forms of terrorism. One of its favorite tactics was to enter the home of a government policeman while he was out on duty, slaughter his wife and children with guns and knives, then leave the bodies for him to find when he came home from work.

With the island on the verge of chaos and collapse, the government decided to fight fire with fire. According to Sri Lankan politicians, security force officers and international human rights groups, the government deliberately recruited policemen who had lost their wives and children in bloody JVP attacks, sent them into JVP areas, and told them to do whatever was necessary to defeat the enemy.

In that way, in 1988, the death squads were born.

The Abductions

To travel in Sri Lanka's death squad country in 1989 and 1990 was to tour a strange landscape of slaughter and silence.

During that time, at least 25,000 and perhaps as many as 60,000 Sinhalese boys and men—identified by the government as JVP suspects—disappeared from their homes. They were abducted at night by squads of armed men in civilian dress who drove around in green Mitsubishi Pajero jeeps. By 1990 the squads were so bold that they operated in daylight, and a foreigner could stand by the side of the road and watch the men barge into a village home, pull out a frightened teenager and drive away with him.

In the mornings, piles of corpses appeared on beaches, floating in muddy rivers or burning along roads. Crowds of villagers gathered and stared, mute.

They confided that if you were from certain castes or villages associated with the JVP, it was a virtual certainty that you would be killed by a death squad if one ever found you.

One of the strange things was that the tourists kept coming—Italians, Germans and East Europeans drawn by pristine sands and budget prices. They went jogging when the sun came up, literally hopping over the bodies of the dead. Both the JVP and the government declared foreigners off limits in their war, to encourage the uninterrupted flow of vital foreign exchange.

Many in Sri Lanka and abroad seemed to view the

de [illegible]squads as a tolerable evil necessary to defeat the greater evil of the JVP. Mothers and wives of those who disappeared sobbed with grief and declared to visiting journalists the innocence of their relatives. Human rights groups documented the disappearances and counted the burning corpses. But Western countries put little pressure on Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa, who said he did not control the death squads directly and that, in any event, he was trying to save his country from an apocalyptic revolution.

In November 1989, the government announced the capture and death of the JVP leader, Rohana Wijeweera. A spokesman said Wijeweera was shot while attempting to escape from security forces. The war against the JVP had been won, the spokesman claimed. Many Sri Lankans celebrated.

But that winter, in the south, the death squads roamed unrelentingly. Thousands more disappeared. Corpses kept turning up. Opposition politicians, who had generally supported the anti-JVP campaign, began to question whether Premadasa intended to use the death squads to consolidate his hold on power.

Some asked how it was, exactly, that a government was supposed to instruct a death squad that its work was finished, that the enemy was defeated? Did you send a memo? Award a certificate of meritorious service and a pension? What did you do with these men, so angry and accustomed to brutality?

Neelan Tiruchelvan, a Colombo attorney, said that winter that he feared that Sri Lanka had become a country that had "lost its ability to distinguish between right and wrong."

Then, one year ago last month, Richard de Zoysa was murdered and the mothers of the disappeared began to find their voices.

The Disappearance of Richard de Zoysa

Richard de Zoysa and his mother "both lived extremely busy professional lives—we were two buddies sharing the same house, rather than parent and child," Manorani Saravanamuttu recalls. After the divorce, when Richard was about 13, she devoted herself to a general medical practice at hospitals and clinics. Patients often drove to the gates of their bungalow in a wealthy Colombo neighborhood, seeking attention in the middle of the night.

Richard's was a household face in Sri Lanka. For a while, he anchored an evening news broadcast on state-owned television. An actor, he played a prominent role in a popular TV series called "Neighbors," a light satire on the pretensions of Colombo's upwardly mobile middle class. In journalism, he began to work with the International Press Service, a European agency specializing in the Third World.

Some believe that it was de Zoysa's work for IPS, documenting death squad killings in the south, that led to the events of Feb. 18, 1990. Others say he was killed because he helped write a play that made fun of Premadasa.

The play was called "Who Is This? And What Is He Doing?" which happened to be the campaign slogan on which Premadasa ran in the national elections of 1988. Written by hand in the Sinhala language, the play depicts a lunatic asylum in which many of the doctors and patients are recognizable politicians from Premadasa's United National Party, and the new chief of the asylum is Premadasa himself.

"It's not a very readable play," says Batty Weerakoon, Saravanamuttu's lawyer, who has seen one of the few copies. "It was something on which was hung so many bits of jokes by way of poking fun at government personalities and primarily at the president and his family." Weerakoon, like some others, doubts that de Zoysa was closely involved in writing the script, which does not bear the name of any author. Others say de Zoysa helped organize the theatrical troupe that was to perform the play and contributed to the writing.

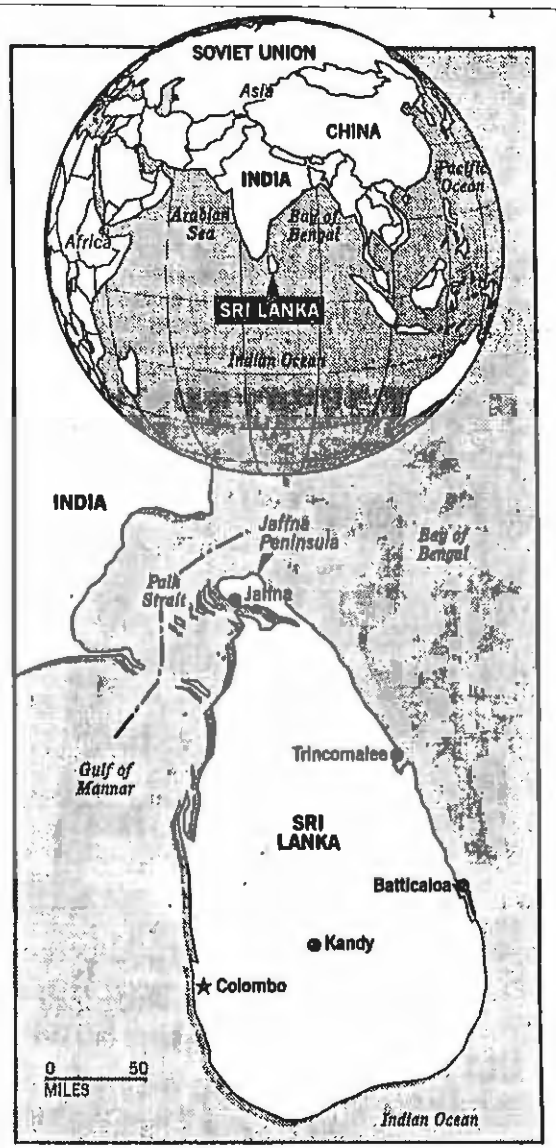
Sri Lankans have been unable to judge the play's merits, since on the night before its debut at a Colombo theater during that winter of 1989-90, its producer, Luxman Perera, disappeared. His body has never been found. The actors, unnerved by this development, declined to go forward.

In any event, it was six weeks after Perera's disappearance that a death squad arrived at the de Zoysa home one morning two hours before dawn.

"People ask, Why did I even come to the door?" Saravanamuttu says, as if a stranger might believe this was all her fault. "But I was on a paging system and sometimes relatives and patients came to the house in the middle of the night [for medicines]. Even the domestic thought it was a patient."

It was over in 15 minutes. Armed men barged through the front door, climbed the stairs, pulled de Zoysa from his bed, walked him outside and put him into a waiting jeep. "I ran down and up to the jeep," Saravanamuttu remembers. "I went to the front seat. 'Where are you taking my son?' There was no answer; they drove off at high speed."

The following morning, de Zoysa's body washed ashore on a beach near Colombo. He had been shot through the head at close range. Fishermen recognized him as a television actor.



BY BRAD WYE—THE WASHINGTON POST

In the swirl of grief and rage that followed, Saravanamuttu says, she had no clear idea what she would do. She says the movement of mothers she has created arose spontaneously from her throat in words she had not planned to speak. She remembers it exactly: She had just come out of the inquest, which established that her son had lived for perhaps 45 minutes after his abduction. She was angry and disoriented. Reporters surrounded her, seeking a comment.

"I am the luckiest mother in Sri Lanka," she told them as she climbed into her car. "I got my son's body back. There are thousands of mothers who never get their children's bodies back."

With those words, the silence of Sri Lanka's mothers ended, and a movement began.

What Can They Hope For?

Premadasa himself came to the funeral at de Zoysa's home. Saravanamuttu was too overcome with grief and anger to speak with him, but the president conveyed his condolences nonetheless. Saravanamuttu steadfastly refuses to speak about her relationship with Sri Lanka's president—it is too sensitive, she says. But others close to the family say Premadasa has been oddly sensitive and solicitous since de Zoysa's body washed up on the beach.

One difference between Richard de Zoysa and the thousands of Sri Lankan youths who died before him cuts to the heart of politics and power on the island: De Zoysa was born to a high caste, spoke English fluently, went to the right schools and lived in a good neighborhood.

These facts may have tempered the Sri Lankan government's response to Manorani Saravanamuttu's campaign on behalf of the mothers of the disappeared, but they have not prevented it from opposing her quest. At virtually every stage, the government has opposed her attempts to get answers about her son's murder.

When Saravanamuttu pressed a court case against police officers she identified as the men who took her son away, the attorney general intervened and said there was no evidence to proceed. After the death threat arrived last May, she went abroad to Canada, New York and England. This winter, she decided it was time to come home because "this is my country. I am not against my country. I was only seeking justice."

The government remains as hostile as before. In February of this year, when opposition members of Parliament sought an independent commission of inquiry into the case, members of Premadasa's cabinet rose on the floor to denounce de Zoysa as a homosexual and a JVP sympathizer.

"You keep referring to abduction and murder. What if it is not murder, but suicide or something else?" asked Ranil Wickeremesinghe, a government minister.

"The more you try to stifle this inquiry, the more people think you are responsible for this murder," answered opposition member C.V. Gooneratne.

The motion for a commission of inquiry was defeated, with all of Premadasa's party members voting against. One opposition parliamentarian, Prince Casinader, lamented that he would now have nothing to tell the hundreds of mothers who had written him recently to ask what happened to their sons. "All those mothers are not Mrs. Saravanamuttus, who can go and file habeas corpus cases. They trek through the night and believe their loved ones are somewhere, six feet underground," he said.

Leaders of the Mothers Front say they are apolitical and seek not a change of government but only a modicum of compensation for what they have suffered. Disappearances mean that mothers and widows cannot obtain death certificates necessary to collect insurance benefits and property. Among other things, the Mothers Front seeks a one-time payment to the relatives of the dead and missing.

Though she has decided to lead thousands of Sri Lankan mothers into the street, Saravanamuttu is skeptical that her campaign will accomplish anything. "There does seem to be no hope for the country," she says. "But one cannot think in those terms. At some stage, there has to be a solution."

In the meantime, she is driven less by a vision of the future than by a need to reconcile the past. "What I hate these people for is their lies," she says slowly and softly as the noon sun rises over her front garden. "They tell their lies, and we never have a chance to tell the truth."

The Washington Post

SUNDAY, MAY 12, 1991

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Banamali Jaladash, 60, stretches out his hands as he describes the aftereffects of the killer cyclone that devastated his village, Kankanabad.

Bangladeshi Islanders Dig Out With Steely Determination

'Fighting With the Ocean' Is a Way of Life

By Steve Coll
Washington Post Foreign Service

MOHESHKHALI ISLAND, Bangladesh—Amid smashed villages and scattered corpses, fishermen and peasant farmers on sea islands struck by Bangladesh's most recent killer cyclone are digging out and rebuilding with almost emotionless determination, steeled by the multiple calamities and risks they have endured for generations.

The island dwellers and their ancestors came here from the Bangladeshi mainland seeking land, opportunity and escape from urban slums. While cyclones and floods wash away their homes and dreams with cyclical regularity, many say they see no option but to stay, despite the high probability that history will repeat itself in a month or a year or a decade.

As lightning flashed in a shadowed sky one recent night, fisherman Nural Islam and his family huddled in a makeshift tin hut beside a tattered red flag erected to attract government helicopters that are dropping food to the hungry and homeless on the islands worst affected by the April 30 cyclone.

The storm, according to the Bangladeshi government, killed more than 138,000 people, the vast majority on sea islands and more than 11,000 on this one.

Like many of his neighbors, Islam lost several family members and much of what he had in the cyclone—livestock, grain supplies, cash savings, his home and much of his furniture. Yet sitting beside a flickering kerosene lamp as a new thunderhead rolled ashore, he said he will rebuild here, would never consider moving to the safer mainland, and will return to fishing in the stormy sea as soon as possible, no matter how grave the risks.

"The ocean always gives back

See BANGLADESH, A24, Col. 1

BANGLADESH, From A1

what it takes from you," he explained, citing an aphorism of Bengali fishermen.

Such stoicism contributed in part to the recent cyclone's high death toll, as islanders accustomed to lashing storms and swollen tides refused to leave their villages for prefabricated shelters even when the government broadcast its highest possible cyclone warning by radio and loudspeaker.

"The police had to beat them to bring them in," said Binoy Krishna Biswas, a Red Crescent volunteer who lives on Moheshkhali. "They never paid heed to the signal. They're too proud of their courage. Fighting with the ocean and the cyclones—they think that's their life."

It is easy to see why they feel in constant battle with the elements. On the night the Islam family sat huddled in its tin hut on Moheshkhali, little more than a week after the devastating cyclone, scattered monsoon showers developed into a torrential storm. Lightning flashed continually, illuminating flat rice paddies in an eerie glow. Thunder rumbled in the distance and crashed nearby. Rain poured as if shot from a fire hose.

But Islam's family and dozens of other villagers slept soundly, hunkered down in temporary shelters of bamboo and tin. Some snored loudly.

In the morning, they explained that the previous night's fireworks had been just a normal storm. The cyclone was a little like that, they said, only the wind was stronger and in the middle of it all, a 20-foot tidal surge crashed through an embankment and washed many from their homes.

The lives of Bangladesh's island dwellers may be stormy, but they are not entirely disastrous, dozens of residents said.

Islanders migrate to the swaths of low-lying delta silt that emerge periodically near the mouth of the Ganges River and along the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal because land, no matter how tenuous, is scarce and valued in Bangladesh.

Many islanders say they earn a better living through fishing, shrimp farming, tobacco cultivation and small-scale salt manufacturing than they would in crowded, polluted cities such as Dhaka and Chittagong, where the ground is dryer but the unemployment rate is above 20 percent.

"We have something of our own we can claim—that's the main thing," said islander Ashok Kumar Dey.

During much of the 20th century, the islands have been particularly profitable for Bangladesh's wealthy class of landlords. As recently as the 1950s, islanders said, it was commonplace for powerful landlords from Chittagong and the southern town of Cox's Bazar to send small private armies onto newly emerged islands to fight for control of the land.

Lately, the government has tried to intervene in the settlement of new islands by encouraging landless peasants from the mainland to move offshore and lay claim to small plots. But the peasants often become indebted to mainland landlords and then must subsist through sharecropping and fishing or by entering into labor contracts at shrimp and salt farms.

These marginal islanders are most vulnerable to the cyclical deliverance of floods and pestilence from the Bay of Bengal. Many said they kept their only stores of rice and grains in sheds near their homes, and that these had been wiped out in the cyclone. Drinking water has become contaminated and carries water-borne diseases, primarily dysentery. Salt water laps through broken embankments into agricultural fields, rendering them useless until the sea walls can be rebuilt.

The poorest trek to government relief centers established on many of the islands. There they find angry crowds gathered at the doors of small, squalid buildings where rice and biscuits are provided to the neediest. Off to the side sit veiled mothers clutching sallow babies and young children suffering from dysentery.

On Ujantia island, three hours by fishing trawler north of Moheshkhali, Red Crescent officials crane their necks at a government plane circling in the cloudy sky and complain that many relief supplies are being dropped into the ocean or else grabbed and carted off by greedy individuals. Inside the mobbed distribution center, Red Crescent supervisor Maynul Islam Chaudhry pointed to several sacks of rice and said, "It's not even sufficient for one meal for all of these families."

Oral rehydration packets and water purification tablets to fight dysentery are in more plentiful supply because they are easier to transport in large quantities to the remote islands, relief officials said.

Although volunteers from private social and religious organizations such as the Red Crescent and Jamaat Islami have made considerable personal sacrifices to deliver supplies and instigate relief efforts on the islands, residents described a dearth of community spirit in response to the cyclone disaster.

Family members lent food and money to one another, but outside of family clans it was by and large every man for himself, residents said. On Moheshkhali, residents from one side of the island looted abandoned belongings on the other side.

When two reporters and an interpreter traveling in a rickety wooden sloop from Ujantia island to the mainland stopped briefly at another island's jetty, a dozen uninvited residents jumped aboard and refused to leave, despite the captain's loud urgings.

Fifteen minutes later, in choppy high seas, the sloop's motor broke down. Adrift and teetering, the passengers waved down two passing trawlers, whose captains each in turn pulled alongside, sized up the situation, waved sheepishly and pulled off at full bore.

Later, when the motor was repaired, the sloop passed one of the two trawlers, now stuck on a sand bar. Passengers on the boats jeered and cursed at one another as they passed.

Beyond such Darwinian survival codes, there are few outward signs of emotion among the cyclone survivors. As islanders recount harrowing tales of clinging to rooftops and watching family members being swept away in the currents, their voices are often flat, and virtually no tears fall. Some islanders attribute this outward coolness to shock; others say it is a product of long experience with collective disaster.

"You see little emotion because the calamity is on everybody and not on any single individual," said Moheshkhali's Fareed ul-Haq.

Asked why they remain in a place so wearing and dangerous, at least a half-dozen islanders offered the same answer: "Where else can I go?"

Relief Officials Question Bangladeshi Death Toll

Some Say Figure of Nearly 139,000 May Be Inflated

By Steve Coll
Washington Post Foreign Service

DHAKA, Bangladesh, May 12—The government's official death toll of 138,868 from last month's devastating cyclone is at best an approximation and may overstate by tens of thousands the number of people who actually perished in the storm, according to several senior Bangladeshi and international relief officials.

Government officials, however, while acknowledging that the announced toll is an estimate and is subject to change, defend the figure as accurate. They say that if anything, it is conservative compared to some unofficial estimates they have received of up to 500,000 deaths.

The uncertainty about the death toll reflects an overlooked aspect of this impoverished country's latest tragedy. In the chaotic aftermath of the storm, many relief officials say there is still virtually no way to know with certainty how many people have been affected. Yet the government continues to publish highly specific numbers about the extent of human loss and economic damage.

"The Bangladeshis are past masters of the aid business," said a senior international relief official. "It's just nonsense the way these numbers were built up. Nobody even knows what the population of Bangladesh is."

There is, however, universal agreement that tens of thousands of people died in the cyclone in Bangladesh, one of the world's most impoverished countries, with an annual per capita income of $113.

The international relief official expressed sympathy for the government's predicament, pointing out that without publishing specific numbers reflecting the broad scale of the devastation, Bangladesh might not have attracted the international media attention and relief money—more than $200 million pledged from more than two dozen countries—that it needed to deal with a genuine calamity.

The United States has pledged $7.2 million in relief aid, and the first contingent of U.S. troops participating in a joint military task force arrived in Dhaka today to help with the international relief effort. Navy Lt. Cmdr. Kenneth Patterson, a spokesman for the U.S. Pacific Command in Honolulu, said the U.S. task force will include 4,600 Marines and 8,000 sailors, the Associated Press reported.

U.S. Marines and Army Rangers are bringing five Blackhawk helicopters to help distribute food and medicine, and the task force includes medical teams as well as construction crews to help rebuild homes and bridges.

The senior relief official here also expressed discomfort about how government officials have used casualty estimates to affect the world's impression of the tragedy. He recalled that several days after the storm struck, he was sitting in a meeting between a senior Bangladeshi military officer and the representative of a major international broadcasting network. The military officer said initial estimates of several thousand deaths had been much too low.

"So the reporter asked, 'Is it more than 20,000?' and he said, 'Oh yes, much greater.' 'More than 50,000?' 'Oh yes, much greater.' He was just bidding up this thing. I just curled up and thought, 'Oh god, here we go.' "

Government officials said the present official toll has been relayed over a Red Crescent radio network and by other means from federal officers stationed in more than 24 administrative sub-districts hit by the cyclone. These officials based their specific estimates on reports from villagers, relief workers and their own inspections, they said. Now that floodwaters have subsided in many places, house-to-house searches are being carried out, and more precise figures of deaths and economic loss may be available in several weeks, they said.

A senior Bangladeshi relief official who visited badly affected coastal areas and outlying islands said he believed the government's estimate of casualties was too high, and that his own estimate of the death toll was 60,000 or 70,000.

He said that on Kutubdja Island, where the government has reported 15,130 dead, early preparation of specific lists of the dead and missing suggested that the toll would be no more than 10,000. Some island residents who initially had been reported missing later returned home after being swept away or after having traveled to check on relatives in other areas, he said.

Reporters who visited Moheshkhali Is-

See BANGLADESH, A20, Col. 1

BANGLADESH, From A19

land, where the government said 11,137 people perished, saw little evidence to support that claim, although they did not visit every affected village on the island. Large areas of the island appeared to have suffered relatively light damage, and in some badly hit sections, villagers reported that the death toll was not very high.

Bangladeshi relief workers said there is no way to count the number of corpses, as many had been washed away or became trapped in mud and marshes. Some said the horror of enduring the storm and seeing so many corpses may have caused local officials to report a high death toll. "If there are a hundred dead bodies, people see them and they become shocked," said a Bangladeshi relief official. "Hundreds become thousands."

The government's information secretary, Manzur Moula, said he had no indication that the announced toll might come down as specific lists of the dead and missing are prepared.

Bangladesh's minister for relief, Luftar Rahman, has pegged economic damage from the cyclone at between $1 billion and $2 billion. A Western diplomat said that his own rough estimate was that the country had sustained about $600 million in losses.

A number of government officials, international relief officials and diplomats approached for comment about the announced death toll and other losses said they did not want to get involved in a discussion of numbers in the midst of such a tragedy.

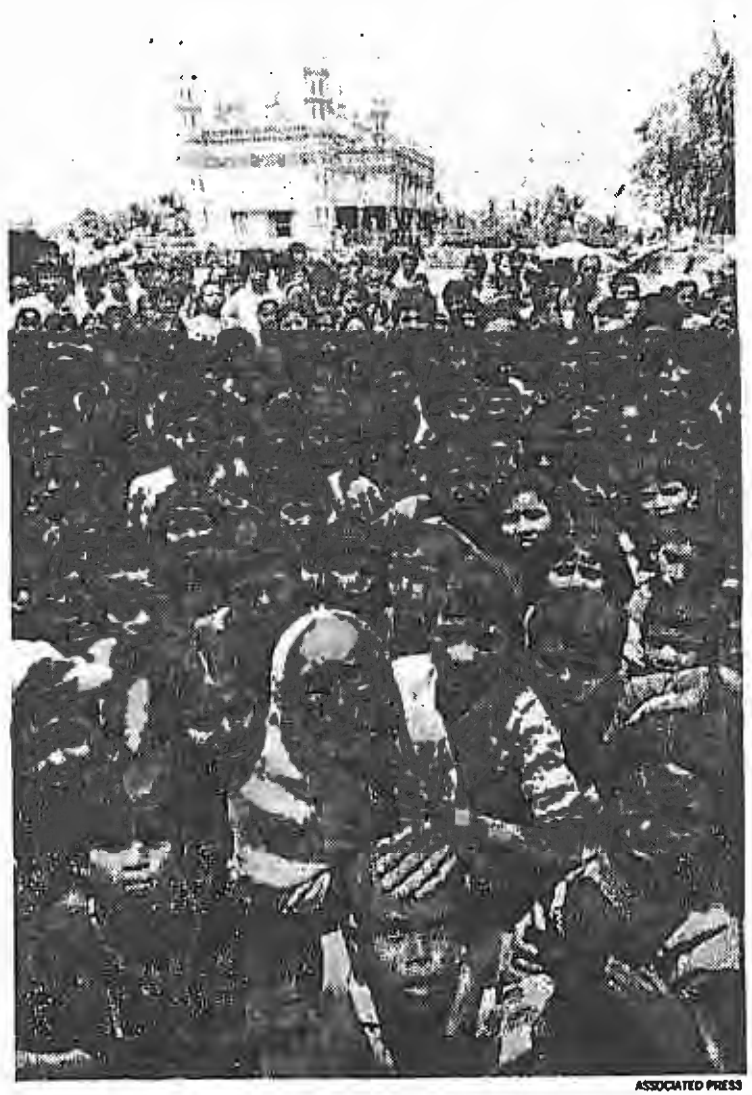
"We are not in a position to assess those figures," said Robin Needham, acting director at CARE, which is conducting the largest independent relief operation in Bangladesh. "We try to soberly reflect what usually responsible local government officials are predicting."

One problem is that even basic population statistics in Bangladesh are uncertain. No formal census has been completed since 1981, when the population was listed as 89.9 million. The government and the United Nations dispute the population growth rate over the past decade, but according to some estimates, the current population is 110 million to 117 million.

Another difficulty is that relief and foreign-aid issues are highly political in Bangladesh. The government's development budget is almost entirely funded by about $2 billion in foreign aid, and rival politicians continually accuse the government of corruption and mismanagement. Since the cyclone, the leaders of the opposition Awami League have accused Prime Minister Khaleda Zia for responding too slowly to the crisis.

An international relief official said his organization has been under intense pressure from the government to direct supplies to Bhola Island, a relatively unaffected area where a parliamentary by-election is scheduled to be held soon.

The political bickering and the uncertainty about the extent of death and damage caused by the cyclone is likely to continue. In 1970, a devastating cyclone swept into Bangladesh, killing tens of thousands and causing widespread damage. Two decades later, published estimates of how many people died in the storm still vary widely, ranging from 100,000 to 1 million.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Survivors of April 30 cyclone wait to receive relief supplies in town of Pekua.

The Washington Post

WEDNESDAY, MAY 22, 1991 G

Violence Threatens a Democracy

With Gandhi's Death, an Already Chaotic India Loses Symbol of Unity

By Steve Coll
Washington Post Foreign Service

NEW DELHI, May 21—The bomb that killed former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi tonight may also have ripped an irreparable hole in the fraying fabric of India's secular, democratic political system.

The sudden, violent death of the country's leading politician—the heir to a family political dynasty that has been a symbol of India's unity and identity since the sun set on the British empire here four decades ago—could hardly have come at a moment of greater volatility and national crisis.

NEWS ANALYSIS

The Indian political culture that has held sway since independence in 1947 has been weakening steadily under economic, religious, and caste pressures for more than a decade. In the past two years, this erosion has set loose unprecedented riots, religious fundamentalism, factionalism and separatist guerrilla movements, causing many ordinary Indians to worry aloud about where their country is headed.

Even before Gandhi's assassination, chaos was visible all across this crowded, jostling nation that has been struggling with only limited success to overcome the deep poverty it has endured for centuries.

The chaos takes many forms: riots between Hindus and Muslims over disputed places of worship; provocative marches staged by an ultranationalist Hindu movement that has found favor with alienated city dwellers in the densely populated north; undeclared wars between private caste armies in the countryside; a violent Sikh separatist movement in the Punjab; a popular rebellion and civil war in the disputed northern state of Kashmir; and countless other insurrections large and small.

For four decades, the most tangible force holding India together has been the omnipresent state—a labyrinthine web of bureaucracy, nationalized industry, close-knit family business monopolies, and political strongmen. The state, in turn, has been dominated by Gandhi's Congress Party, which has governed India for all but five years since independence.

Congress, for its part, has been dominated by a single family, the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, which began with independence leader Jawaharlal Nehru and ended—at least for the forseeable future—tonight near a cam-

See INDIA, A26, Col. 1

INDIA, From A1

paign dais in Tamil Nadu, with the death of Nehru's grandson, Rajiv Gandhi.

Gandhi's children are young, his brother and mother are dead, and now only a handful of squabbling cousins and in-laws are left to scrap for the family mantle.

Before Gandhi's death, a reporter traveling through riot-torn, impoverished villages and towns across India heard two strains of thought about the country's future. Optimists described the present upheaval as a cleansing of old, corrupt institutions and ideas, and said India would endure and move forward confidently. Pessimists, on the other hand, feared the nation was falling apart.

The pessimists had more reason to worry tonight. India's democratic state is still here—the bureaucracy, the sprawling public corporations—but the family that controlled it for so long is gone.

In some ways, Gandhi was felled by a political culture that he, his family and his party helped create during th[illegible]ast decade—a culture of vio[illegible]e and expediency, in which Congress politicians often seemed to believe that the best way to solve a problem was to beat it into submission.

When Indira Gandhi, Rajiv's mother and predecessor as prime minister, sent tanks and commandos to root out separatist militants in the sacred Golden Temple of the Sikhs in Punjab in June, 1984, she set the stage for her own violent assassination four months ater.

When Rajiv Gandhi brought convicted murderers and kidnappers onto his parliamentary campaign ticket in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, when he endorsed violent election-rigging in Kashmir in 1987, and when he tolerated widespread crime and corruption throughout the party and bureaucracy he oversaw, he gave succor to extremists across the spectrum who argued that violence and assassination were justifiable means to their ends.

As this culture of violence flourished under Congress Party rule during the 1980s, India's previously stable state was undermined by its failure to deliver clean government and economic prosperity to a people who, although hindered by illiteracy and feudalism, have come in recent years to expect something better than what they have.

Gandhi and his party promised stability but delivered mainly economic stagnation and persistent poverty, despite the country's abundant national resources and wealth of talent. Wedded to an ideology that has changed only slightly since the 1950s, Congress politicians preached a lofty socialism that exalted poor villagers even while many of them coddled wealthy monopolists and landlords, doled out myriad licenses that are the key to business success here, accepted bribes and lived in relative luxury.

But while a number of Congress politicians enriched themselves by trying to hold onto the socialist status quo, a silent revolution began to brew in India's major cities during the late 1980s. An entrepreneurial, business-minded middle class sprang up, numbering perhaps 100 million and dependent largely on its own wits, not on inherited land or privilege. With growing strength, India's middle class has been demanding a government based on fair play, equal opportunity and a free market.

Still, there is a dark side to India's silent, middle class revolution.

Sensing the disgust and alienation among voters fed up with the decaying Congress rule, the country's previously tiny core of Hindu militants rushed into the void, promising that if Indians, particularly those in the middle and lower-middle classes, would only restore their ancient religion to its place in government—and stop coddling the Muslims and poor so exalted by the Congress—then the country could march forward with confidence.

The Hindu revivalists' appeal, an amalgam of religious hatred, nationalism, and spiritual piety, caught fire with the elections of 1989, when the Bharatiya Janata Party garnered almost 20 percent of the seats in parliament, posing an unprecedented challenge to the country's secular, socialist consensus.

In this month's election, polls predicted Bharatiya Janata might more than double its strength and almost certainly would become the country's second-largest party, after the Congress.

At least in the long run, Bharatiya Janata appears to be the most obvious beneficiary of Gandhi's assassination.

Although Gandhi was frequently derided as an ineffectual politician, without his personal and family charisma, the Congress will be hard pressed to retain its grip on the national polity.

The immediate future is much more difficult to predict. Shocked into action by Gandhi's death, India's potpourri of self-described centrist, secular politicians—including the senior leadership of the Congress and the Janata Dal factions led by former prime minister V.P. Singh and interim prime minister Chandra Shekhar—may rally together.

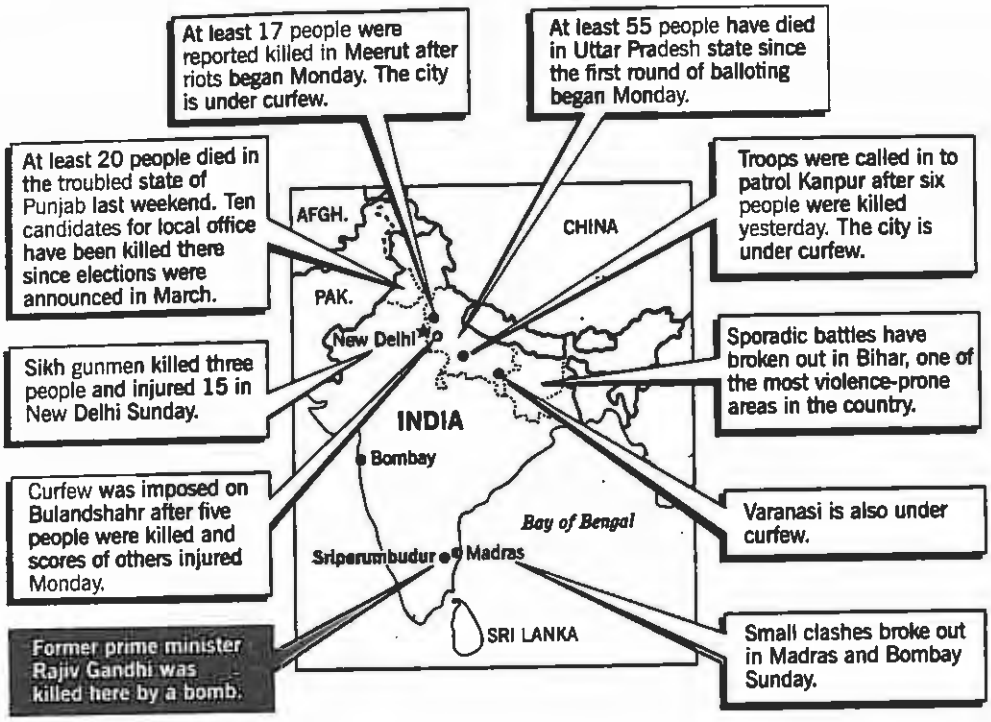
Such a surge of national unity among politicians occurred in 1984, when the inexperienced Rajiv Gandhi swept to office on a wave of nationalist sentiment sparked by his mother's death.

But the squabbling centrist politicians left in Gandhi's wake have neither an ideology nor a leader in common. It is difficult to imagine that they will be able to sustain for long a united, democratic vision of India's future now that Gandhi is dead, since they were unable to do so when he was alive.

With the streets of India already alive tonight with mobs demanding retribution for Gandhi's assassination, that would seem to augur poorly for those optimists who hoped that, despite all its problems, India's secular, pluralistic democracy might muddle through.

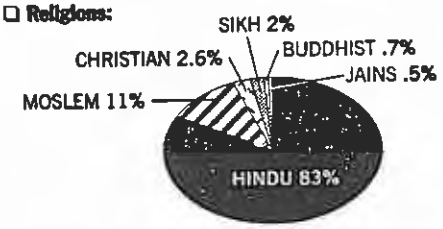
INDIA'S VIOLENT ELECTION

Election-year violence throughout India this year has claimed the lives of more than 200 people since campaigning began, according to local officials. In this week alone, more than 150 people have died, including former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi who was killed in a bomb explosion yesterday evening.



❑ **Population:** 850 million, about 75 percent in rural areas.

❑ **Religions:**



❑ **Official language:** Hindi. Regional languages and English are widely used.

❑ **Area:** 1.3 million square miles, one-third the size of the United States.

❑ **Economy:** Annual per capita income is $327. Nearly half the population lives below the poverty line. Agriculture is the main occupation for more than 60 percent of Indians.

❑ **Main exports:** Gems and jewelry, tea, coffee, garments, cotton, engineering goods, carpets and handicrafts.

❑ **Main imports:** Crude oil, petroleum products, fertilizers, synthetic fibers, chemicals, iron and steel, machinery.

❑ **Modern history:** India won independence from Britain in 1947. Sectarian conflict split the subcontinent into predominantly Hindu India and Moslem Pakistan.

India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, died in 1964. Two years later his daughter, Indira Gandhi, became prime minister. She was assassinated by Sikh bodyguards in 1984 and succeeded by her son Rajiv. In 1989 elections Rajiv Gandhi was defeated by the National Front government of Vishwanath Pratap Singh. The following year, veteran dissident Chandra Shekhar split Singh's party and became prime minister. His resignation last March, following a dispute with the Congress Party, forced this week's general election.

SOURCES: The Washington Post; Associated Press

Compiled by James Schwartz and Ann Brewster–The Washington Post

The Washington Post

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1991

BCCI's Abedi: A Courtier's Ruin

Luxury and Largess Brought Banking Empire's Downfall

By Steve Coll
Washington Post Foreign Service

MAHMUDABAD, India

In the flaking palatial ruins of what once was one of the richest and most dynamic kingdoms on the Indian subcontinent, lizards scurry across the throne room floor. Ten-foot oil portraits of Queen Victoria and the bejeweled rajahs of Mahmudabad stare out on darkened dining and dancing halls swathed in dust.

Fifty years ago the palace was alive with intrigue, wealth and idealistic politics. Now there is only rot. But here in this lost kingdom are the roots of the great financial scandal of 1991—the failure of the Bank of Credit and Commerce International.

Agha Hasan Abedi, the South Asian financier who founded and built BCCI into a $20 billion financial empire with branches in 72 countries, was born and raised in Mahmudabad and lived in the kingdom and its environs until age 25. His ancestors served for generations as courtiers to the once-powerful Mahmudabad rajahs. Besides Abedi, dozens of other senior and mid-level BCCI managers were raised in or trace their roots to this isolated kingdom. In Mahmudabad's centuries-old feudal world, the men who built BCCI first learned about finance, wealth, power, politics and law.

During the last two months, Abedi has been depicted in the West as the mastermind of what New York District Attorney Robert Morgenthau has called "the largest bank fraud in world financial history." Indicted on fraud charges in New York, named in a Federal Reserve Board action seeking his disbarment from U.S. banking and exposed in a report by his own auditors, Abedi has been described as a calculating swindler who stole billions from his depositors, gave away money recklessly to friends and cronies, laundered illegal drug profits, lied repeatedly to regulators and covered up his misdeeds by currying favor with prominent political figures around the world.

Abedi's supporters and critics in South Asia find that description maddeningly incomplete.

See ABEDI, A38, Col. 1

ABEDI, From A1

South Asians disagree about whether Abedi is a villain or a hero, but they agree about one thing: The key to understanding who Abedi is, why he ran BCCI the way he did and why the bank eventually collapsed does not lie primarily in audit reports or secret offshore bank accounts. Instead, they say, it lies here in Mahmudabad.

In Mahmudabad, Muslim rajahs administered great tracts of land from a gold and silver throne. They financed idealistic politicians such as Mohandas Gandhi and Pakistan's founder, Mohammed Ali Jinnah. They doled out gifts to their subjects, paid stipends to renowned poets and intellectuals, plotted against the British empire and finally witnessed the birth of two of the modern world's most impoverished post-colonial nations, India and Pakistan.

Abedi and nearly all of BCCI's senior executives migrated as young adults from what is now India to the newly independent Islamic nation of Pakistan in 1947 and 1948, when the British empire on the subcontinent—and the kingdoms such as Mahmudabad through which the British had ruled South Asia—fell amid bloody religious riots. In Pakistan, Abedi and other refugees confronted the challenge of building 20th-century institutions from scratch in a culture still rooted in 17th-century feudalism. Among other things, Pakistan at its birth had no large banks and very few bankers.

Abedi set out to change that. Driven by high ambitions, he relied on the loyalty of young men from his Mahmudabad clan—a group knit by family, religion, ethnicity and a shared, convulsive history. After an initial false start with a bank that was nationalized in 1972, he erected an international banking empire that sought to carry into the realm of modern finance the romantic idealism of a lost feudal kingdom. Along the way, Abedi and his clan achieved in their new status-driven South Asian world a degree of wealth and fame befitting the decadent Mahmudabad rajahs he and his ancestors had served for generations.

"He was their rajah," said a Pakistani businessman close to Abedi, referring to Abedi's relationship with BCCI's executives. "Privately we used the word *raj-wallah* [man of the kingdom] many times."

Some Pakistanis see Abedi as a man born into a family of minor regal servants who then became obsessed with transforming himself into a king. "It was Abedi compensating himself for his social origins," said Abeda Hussain, a prominent Pakistani politician. "He was not interested in the development of Pakistan. But he was interested in being known as a subcontinental mogul."

To Western prosecutors now sifting through the financial wreckage of BCCI's collapse, this aspect of Abedi's rise and fall may seem irrelevant. Yet to South Asians it has many important meanings. To some the story of Mahmudabad, Abedi and BCCI is a humiliating repetition of colonial history. To others it is a reminder of how far struggling countries such as Pakistan still have to go to build institutions that can succeed in a global marketplace dominated by the West. In any event, it is the story by which Abedi will be judged in the world from which he arose.

Faithful Servants to the Rajahs

In 1922, when Agha Hasan Abedi was born, Mahmudabad was the second- or third-largest princely state in northern India, encompassing 530 villages, thousands of hamlets and generating half a million pounds sterling in annual income. Its line of Shiite Muslim rajahs dated to the 17th century and commanded respect from British colonial officers and from Indians struggling for liberation from the British empire. The Mahmudabad rajahs lived in exorbitant luxury and owned several palaces in the countryside and the city of Lucknow. But they were also deeply involved in anti-colonial politics and Shiite religious movements.

As far back as the mid-19th century, Abedi's family served the rajahs as revenue officers, administrators and private secretaries, according to the present rajah of Mahmudabad, Mohammed Amir Mohammed Khan, a Cambridge University-educated astrophysicist who returned here during the 1970s and now shuttles between his ancestors' decaying palaces. The Abedis' position as courtiers, Khan said, provided them comfort, stability and middle-class status. Abedi's father and grandfather were confidants of the rajahs, although not among their most senior advisers.

Abedi himself grew up hearing stories of royal splendor and fierce anti-British struggle. According to Khan, Abedi's great-great-grandfather participated in the legendary Mutiny of 1857, when Muslim warriors in northern India revolted against the British, only to be slaughtered in short order. Abedi's ancestor was subsequently hung in a cage by the British on the streets of Lucknow to serve as an example to the population, Khan said. Whatever the truth of that story, it secured the Abedi family's stalwart reputation among the Muslims of Mahmudabad.

Abedi had a dependent, emotional relationship with the Mahmudabad rajahs. He began his banking career when Khan's father telephoned the president of Habib Bank and recommended Abedi as a promising candidate for a financial career, Khan said.

Khan said he visited an ailing Abedi in London last year and was overwhelmed by his supplicatory tone of respect. "He looks upon me almost as he would my father and my grandfather," Khan said. "I went to shake his hand, and he took it and pressed it to his chest and began crying. I pulled it away and said he should not be emotional."

The Mahmudabad rajahs viewed the Abedis as faithful servants. "They were loyal, people of integrity, moral probity," Khan said. "Maybe they had their weaknesses—ru-

mor has it, with women, but very discreetly. They were generally not known for any controversial behavior. As far as financial matters, revenue matters, their service to the state, their record was unimpeachable. There were no inappropriate embezzlements."

The kingdom in which Abedi lived was at once extravagant and impoverished, according to former residents and two scholars who have studied and written about Mahmudabad. Landless peasants tilled the fields for subsistence and paid tithes to revenue officers, who in turn filled the rajahs' coffers with treasure. Neighboring minor princes also paid stipends to the Mahmudabad rulers. The rajahs, in turn, prided themselves on their philanthropy and devotion to high culture. They toured the countryside in times of trouble to hand out donations to the poor, provided shelter and finance to independence movement leaders, and paid stipends to Muslim poets, intellectuals and religious scholars.

"They were impractical people, I suppose," said Ahmed Abdul Bari, the son of a neighboring Lucknow rajah whose family is close to the Mahmudabad rajahs. The rulers for whom Abedi's family worked were "impulsive, emotional, romantic," Bari said.

"There were lots of people with power to be looked after," said Humayan Gouhar, a Karachi newspaper publisher who sees Abedi regularly. "That did affect Mr. Abedi's thinking."

Surrounded by Sycophants

Abedi's career in banking began amid one of the great catastrophes of the 20th century, the partition of Britain's empire into Hindu-majority India and Islamic Pakistan. As many as 1 million people died in the religious riots that followed partition in 1947; millions more were forced to abandon their lives and belongings to seek refuge in a new country. The Mahmudabad rajah left his throne. Abedi and thousands of other Shiites from the kingdom fled to Pakistan.

There was hardship but also opportunity in their new country. Abedi rose to a senior position at Habib Bank but felt stymied by the owners' tight control, according to his associates. In 1959 he set out to start the United Bank Ltd. with money provided by the Saigols, a family of industrialists in Lahore who were also refugees from India. When United Bank was nationalized in 1972, Abedi started again by founding BCCI.

"All the people who came from India after partition knew they had burned their boats. They knew they had no chance but to work and build a new country," said Abdul Basir, an early ally of Abedi who is now BCCI's general manager in Pakistan. "Banking was the great vacuum here. . . . People joined [Abedi] and saw the sky was the limit. The promotions were so rapid."

Stoked by businessmen such as Abedi, Pakistan grew, but it adhered to feudal traditions of clan, family, ethnicity and religion. As a Shiite refugee from India, Abedi was a double minority, susceptible to discrimination from Pakistan's dominant group—native ethnic Punjabis who were members of the dominant Sunni Muslim sect. Like many other businessmen in Pakistan, Abedi protected himself from such discrimination by surrounding himself with people from his own clan.

As a Shiite with family roots in Mahmudabad or its environs, you would "just go there [to United Bank or BCCI] and you were given a job. Even if you [didn't] know the ABCs of mathematics, you [could] calculate millions," said Lucknow journalist Ahmed Hussain, who had seven relatives working at BCCI. "These BCCI employees were being given such facilities as you could never imagine."

The Shiites who came to BCCI "were not professional bankers," said Khalil Zubairi, who managed BCCI's branches in Pakistan, Oman, Bahrain and Zambia during the 1970s and 1980s.

Several senior BCCI executives who have been named in recent U.S. Federal Reserve Board actions against the bank grew up in the kingdom of Mahmudabad and came to Pakistan when Abedi did.

Hasan Mahmood Kazmi, accused by the Fed of authorizing the secret loans that allowed BCCI to illegally acquire First American Bank in Washington, is from a family of servants who worked for the Mahmudabad rajahs, according to several people who knew Kazmi and his family in Lucknow. Kemal Shoaib, involved in BCCI's allegedly improper acquisition of Independence Bank in Encino, Calif., is also a Shiite from Mahmudabad, these people said. Swaleh Naqvi, who became BCCI's chief executive after Abedi had a series of heart attacks early in 1988, is a Shiite refugee from Agra, about 100 miles from Mahmudabad.

Many of Abedi's trusted aides at BCCI were not only from his clan but also from lower middle-class or landless families with few resources and no reputation. They often treated Abedi sycophantically, a practice Abedi did little to discourage.

One Pakistani businessman recalled meeting with Abedi at a European hotel in a suite where Naqvi and other senior BCCI executives were present. The businessman sat with Abedi apart from the others, and when coffee was served, Abedi asked his senior executives to bring him a tiny end table to put the cups on. All four senior executives stood up, the businessman recalled, grasped a corner of the table and slowly walked it over to Abedi.

"These people [around Abedi] had to display this loyalty because they knew, deep down, they did not have the merit to hold these positions," said the businessman. "This sycophancy was confused with loyalty," he added, and given the "court culture" surrounding Abedi, the bank could never function as a normal financial institution.

Abedi also sought to acquire status in emerging Pakistan by surrounding himself with relatives of the country's most important people, no matter what their background. "He wanted the sons of somebodies," said politician Abeda Hussain. "If you were a civil servant, you got your son hired at BCCI. If you were a general, you got your son hired. They were paid more than they were worth, and they swanked all over the world. It was inevitable that it would go broke."

In the 1980s, Abedi hired a descendant of one of the greatest "somebodies" he had ever known—the rajah of Mahmudabad. Imran Imam, a grandson of the Mahmudabad ruler whom Abedi's father had served, became a senior employee of BCCI's corporate office in London. His position: Abedi's personal assistant.

Devotion to Philanthropy

Many financial details describing how Abedi ran BCCI and why the bank collapsed so suddenly this year were uncovered and publicly released this summer by auditors, regulators, prosecutors, Western politicians and the media. Much more about BCCI's banking activities, particularly its alleged involvement in organized crime activity such as drug trafficking and gun running, remains to be discovered in continuing investigations. But several clear patterns have emerged.

The patterns suggest that, in some ways, Abedi saw BCCI less as a 20th-century, multinational bank than as a 17th-century feudal kingdom with international horizons.

From BCCI's beginning, Abedi declared publicly and repeatedly that his would be a different kind of bank, one devoted among other things to philanthropy and the amelioration of Third World poverty.

In Pakistan, he poured about $60 million of bank profits into a charity foundation ostensibly devoted to funding anti-poverty projects. He doled out stipends to Pakistani politicians, journalists and poets, according to present and former bank managers. He gave low-cost or free housing loans to all his employees and many of his friends, some of them important Pakistani politicians. If an employee or a relative of an employee fell ill, he sometimes paid for expensive operations or treatment abroad. He routinely paid for scholarships for the children of employees to attend universities in the West.

"The concept was to extend help. That was why the loyalty of the staff was with him," said BCCI manager Basir. "Mr. Abedi is such a tremendous, charismatic personality, it is not something very easily explained. One must experience it."

Many of the beneficiaries of Abedi's largesse were members of his Mahmudabad clan. But as BCCI expanded, apparently so did Abedi's idea that the way to success was by spending his depositors' money generously on employees and friends of the bank. "These ideas were linked to the courts [of Mahmudabad], but he had gone beyond that," said Abedi's friend Gouhar. "He came into Pakistan and he became Westernized, international."

Thus Abedi gave $10 million to former president Jimmy Carter's Global 2000 organization, and millions more to philanthropic foundations Abedi established in England and other countries. But the money did not belong to Abedi personally. It came from BCCI's revenues and from the bank's depositors.

Abedi's impulsive generosity extended to the bank's basic lending business. He apparently lent hundreds of millions of dollars to people who had no intention of paying it back. Nor, apparently, did Abedi demand that the loans be repaid. When Price Waterhouse, BCCI's auditor, uncovered these giant black holes in the bank's lending portfolio this year, the firm's officials were stunned to find that Abedi had apparently doled out massive, unsecured, nonperforming loans totaling as much as $5 billion to friends and business associates.

For example, the Saigols, the Lahore business family who first staked Abedi in the banking business, received at least $30 million in loans from BCCI without putting up any collateral or signing a loan agreement, according to Price Waterhouse. The Gokals, a Pakistani business family that brought Abedi business in his early days, may have received as much as $700 million on generous terms, the auditors said.

So too did several Arab businessmen who worked closely with Abedi during BCCI's early days. In all of these cases, however, record-keeping was so sloppy and secretive that it is not clear how many of the loans were real and how many were fictitious—or even whether the listed recipients were aware of them.

Pakistanis close to Abedi find this pattern of lending huge sums of money to friends and associates without collateral or tight repayment agreements perfectly comprehensible. "If they had done something for him, he would make sure that he did favors for them," said Karachi businessman Bari. "That is something the West finds very difficult to understand. But he [Abedi] has seen how princely things are done."

Abedi's feudal business practices extended to Westerners who came in contact with him. All employees enjoyed exceptional salaries and access to loans that they were not expected to repay. In some cases bank employees made little effort to hide the practice. Records from BCCI's Paris branch show a loan for 1.67 million francs ($280,000) to Lemarche C. Yves, a French national and a BCCI director. Under the heading "Expected Date of Settlement," the loan entry states simply, "Never."

Abedi's relationship with BCCI's most important shareholder, Sheikh Zayed Sultain Nahayan of Abu Dhabi, was similar. After flying to Zayed's then-underdeveloped desert kingdom in the early 1970s to persuade the ruler to fund BCCI, Abedi and his bank devoted the ensuing 15 years to catering to Zayed's every need, according to several former BCCI employees.

The "protocol department" of BCCI's Karachi branch spent 100,000 Pakistani rupees ($5,000) a day to maintain Zayed's palaces in Pakistan and to serve the Abu Dhabi ruler's visiting relatives, according to Zubairi, the former Karachi branch manager. Basir, the present Karachi manager, said the sum spent was much less but concedes that several dozen employees were permanently assigned to look after Zayed's houses and personal interests in Pakistan and elsewhere.

As BCCI expanded internationally, Abedi sought out businessmen with close family or social connections to the government of each country where it was opening branches. He rewarded these intermediaries generously, then sought to expand his bank's deposit base. In Washington, he turned to former defense secretary Clark M. Clifford, whose reputation as an accomplished adviser—and some would say, courtier—to several American presidents was established long before he met Abedi.

Ultimately, this pattern of growth became untenable—the size of the unrecoverable loans, gifts, stipends and charity donations outstripped the amount of deposits and other obligations BCCI owed to its customers. New York District Attorney Morgenthau has characterized this type of fraud as a "giant Ponzi scheme," meaning that Abedi kept racing to raise new deposits from customers in order to cover his fraudulent dealings with friends, employees and cronies. Pakistanis close to Abedi see the pattern differently. They see Abedi as having tried foolishly to extend to the West a style of business commonplace in his own world but unacceptable abroad.

They also see the West's crackdown on BCCI and Abedi as a repetition of colonial attempts to repress great Muslim rulers such as the rajahs of Mahmudabad. When the Bank of England shut down BCCI on July 5 and U.S. prosecutors then indicted the bank's senior executives on fraud charges, it seemed to Pakistanis that another Abedi was being hung out in a cage by the colonials as an example to the local population. To Westerners, that attitude may seem naive and dishonest. To South Asians, it is an article of faith.

Loyal to the Throne, Not the Man

After two heart attacks, a heart transplant and a stroke, Agha Hasan Abedi today spends his time in a walled Karachi compound, protected by lawyers, family, friends and the abiding loyalty of Pakistani politicians he helped so generously in the time of his ascendance. Jam Sadiq Ali, the chief minister of Sind province, where Karachi is located, has said Abedi will never be extradited to face charges in the West. Asked why he has adopted that stance, the chief minister told reporters it was because Abedi gave him a monthly stipend of 5,000 pounds sterling when he was forced to live in political exile in London.

Some of Abedi's friends feel that in his time of crisis, he has been abandoned by the Mahmudabad clan for whom he did so much. Naqvi, Shaoib, Kazmi and others who served him earlier are now either with Zayed of Abu Dhabi, who owns what is left of BCCI, or else have gone underground to evade Western prosecutors. These friends of Abedi see him as the victim not of the West, nor of his own malfeasance, but of the shallowness of his royal court.

"Why Abedi tolerated these people has something to do with his upbringing in Mahmudabad and its culture and its decadence. But it also has something to do with Pakistan's so-called 'great men,' " said a businessman who sees Abedi regularly. "The one fatal flaw I've seen in these great men is that they surround themselves with pygmies.

"Today where are these people from Mahmudabad? None of them is here," the businessman concluded. "Their loyalty was to the throne, not to the man."

The Washington Post

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 1991

Revolt by Untouchables Augurs Changes in India

By Steve Coll
Washington Post Foreign Service

CHITROBIPURA, India—The railway police found Ramesh Parmar's battered corpse on the train tracks outside this shaded rural village in western India. His head and neck had been cut to shreds with a scythe.

Three months later, much about Parmar's death remains mysterious, but one thing is clear: The death of the 22-year-old tractor driver from a lowly "untouchable" caste has triggered a remarkable local revolt that could have implications for all of India.

For at least four centuries prior to Parmar's death in August, the residents of Chitrobipura knew their places. Several hundred families from a dominant land-owning caste profited from farmi[illegible] dozen shunned untouchable families [illegible]rty work—sweeping floors, laboring in [illegible]lds, washing clothes and disposing of animal corpses. Sanctioned by Hinduism's caste theology, in which every person is assigned a rigid role at birth, the system was oppressive and unshakable.

Then came Parmar, who managed with a demand for back wages to change his timeless village forever. The upheaval allegedly cost Parmar his life. It also launched his untouchable kinsmen on a 100-mile, bittersweet, as-yet unfinished journey in search of justice.

The story of Chitrobipura's caste revolt reflects broad social and economic changes taking place in India as the subcontinent turns toward the 21st century. Many of the changes have accumulated gradually. But this year, New Delhi's government is implementing an unprecedented, rapid shift from centralized socialism to free-market capitalism, a move that has the potential to alter India's basic social order if it succeeds. What happened in Chitrobipura can be seen as a preview of where India may be headed.

"The story is the same in all the 560,000 villages all over India—the same hardships, the same struggle," said Kanshi Ram, the most prominent national leader of India's untouchables.

One way to consider the future of India's estimated 150 million untouchables is to ask a question: Can free-market capitalism, which promotes rapid social mobility through the ac-

See UNTOUCHABLES, A18, Col. 1

UNTOUCHABLES, From A1

cumulation of wealth, break down India's centuries-old caste system, which is designed to prevent upward or downward mobility by locking every man and woman into a socioeconomic role for life?

Tractor driver Ramesh Parmar's life and death, and the events that followed his demise, offer an ambiguous answer to this question. As a microcosm of the ongoing, volatile struggle for equity, social mobility and prosperity involving the poorest of India's poor, the revolt in Chitrobipura village this fall offers many reasons for pessimism. But it can also be seen as a parable of hope.

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For generation after generation, Chitrobipura's society and economy were defined by the dominance of the *chaudhry* caste of farmers over the *chamar* caste of untouchable laborers.

"Since the very inception of that village, we have gone along with the chaudhrys," said Ishwar Parmar, father of Ramesh Parmar. Concurred V. N. Chaudhry, a high-school principal in Chitrobipura who agreed to speak for the village's dominant farmer caste: "No question like this had been raised in 400 years. . . . We have been living in this village very peacefully, very happily."

The untouchables' essential role was to work for and clean up after the farmers. Landless and illiterate, their livelihood came from the carcasses of cows, buffaloes, goats and sheep donated by the farmers. Touching dead animals was considered religiously impure for the farmer caste, so the untouchables hauled the animal carcasses away, skinned them, burned them, and then manufactured leather goods from their hides.

In some of India's densely clustered rural villages, many castes are intertwined in a complex feudal order. In others, such as Chitrobipura, there are only two castes—one on top, the other locked at the bottom. Chitrobipura's untouchables could not drink at the same well as the chaudhry farmers, could not relieve themselves in the same fields, could not share the same food and could not touch a member of a farmer family.

Yet by August 1991, in ways the farmers could not see, the village's feudal social fabric was unraveling. The changes were the fruits of a long, frustrating struggle by Indian untouchables for emancipation.

Today, 40 years after independence leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi promised to build a casteless society through socialism, only about 5 percent of India's untouchables can boast of a secondary education. Many of these have jobs as government clerks and typists through affirmative-action programs, and a few have risen to high-status positions in the vast, upper caste-dominated Indian bureaucracy.

But most untouchables seeking a better life have had to sweat it on their own, migrating from villages to city slums in search of factory jobs in India's belching, state-owned industries.

Within a hundred-mile radius of Chitrobipura, millions of untouchables work today in factories or on construction crews. They live in shantytowns and generally die young and receive meager wages, but their earnings are far higher than anything available in the villages. For economic inspiration they look to the state's seven untouchable millionaires—out of a total untouchable population of about 8 million. Nearly every untouchable in the area knows the millionaires' names.

It was against this background that on Aug. 31, amid the shade trees and sandy lanes of Chitrobipura village, tractor driver Ramesh Parmar summoned his courage, walked to the home of his employer, and allegedly asked to be paid $60 in cash—five months' back wages that had been withheld, according to the village untouchables, for no reason other than the routine whimsy of their upper-caste landlords.

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There are two versions of what happened in Chitrobipura. One is told by the village's upper-caste farmers, the other by its untouchable laborers.

According to the untouchables, Parmar came home from his employer's home shaken. He had quarreled about his wages and his debts with two upper-caste brothers, and the brothers had threatened to teach him a lesson. An hour later, the brothers and 50 other farmers brandishing sticks tromped into the untouchable quarter and demanded that Parmar come outside.

"They said, 'We will kill Ramesh,' " said Ishwar Parmar, Ramesh's father. "So we shut Ramesh inside the house for his protection."

The farmers dispersed but the two brothers returned, Ishwar Parmar said. They took Ramesh away by force, Ishwar Parmar and other untouchables said. The railway police arrived the next morning to say that Ramesh had been slashed to death and dumped on the train tracks.

The untouchables claim this was not the first time one of their kin had been killed by an angry farmer. But this time, they did something they had never done before: They went to the police and registered a charge of murder. Then they retrieved Parmar's body, cremated him and marched back to the village.

The farmers were so infuriated

by the murder charge that they gathered near the village square and pelted the untouchables with stones as they returned from the funeral, according to the untouchables.

The farmers deny this version of events. There was no quarrel with Parmar, they said. No mob visited his home. The brothers did not take him away or threaten anyone. "The village is innocent," said high-school teacher Chaudhry. Parmar's death is "a very suspenseful case" and it is not clear to the farmers "whether it was suicide or he was killed."

Besides, Chaudhry went on, Parmar was a drunkard, and like many of his untouchable kinsman in the village, an unreliable debtor. In fact, because of their collective laziness, the Chitrobipura untouchables managed to accumulate over the years massive financial debts—a total of $17,000—which they generally refused to repay to the farmers who made the loans. Despite this, he said, the farmers indulged the untouchables and treated them like members of their own family.

"We promised them that we are all brothers," Chaudhry said. "Yet they were very firm that they suffered from prejudice."

That certainly was how the untouchables interpreted what happened after Parmar's funeral—they say the farmers announced a "social boycott" of the untouchables. From that day forward, no member of the farmer caste in Chitrobipura or the surrounding villages would have any interaction whatsoever with the untouchables, the farmers said, according to the untouchables. There would be no jobs, no loans, no water, no grass for cattle, no toilet facilities, no conversation.

Stunned, the untouchables gathered to discuss what to do. "We became orphans," said Ishwar Parmar. "How could we live?"

Days yielded to weeks, and still there was no work, no grass, no water except from faraway wells. Starved for fodder, the untouchables' animals began to die—a cow, several buffalo, another cow.

Some older untouchables considered compromising with the farmers and dropping the murder case. But the news of Parmar's death had galvanized the younger generation. Two dozen young village untouchables worked in the metropolis of Ahmedabad, 50 miles away, as factory laborers and government clerks. These younger, urbanized, salaried untouchables returned to the village after Parmar's death and dominated the talk about what to do next.

"The younger generation would not let us compromise," recalled the elder Parmar. "They insisted that we should not live in slavery conditions. They insisted that we migrate from this village."

So on the afternoon of Oct. 18, Chitrobipura's untouchable families packed their belongings, loaded them onto carts, and left the village where they and their ancestors had lived for centuries. Led by the younger among them, they trekked 50 miles to the state capital of Gandhinagar, sat down in a field and said they would not leave until somebody came to their aid.

Three weeks later, an embarrassed state government promised the untouchables that if they would go back to the area near their village, they would be settled on vacant, government-owned wastelands, which the untouchables could try to farm themselves. Today they live in a cluster of burlap tents in a stark, eroded field five miles from their village. They are protected by a squadron of police.

Back in Chitrobipura, the farmers have been left alone to consider why the world they knew is no more. "Nowadays, all over India, some events have occurred" in which untouchables have clashed with upper castes, Chaudhry reflected. "Their leaders misguided them. They are very aggressive, very angry. They are not in a position to hear our talk, even. . . . We want to pressure them to live here peacefully."

The farmers still own the fertile land around the village, still live in the same spacious homes. If they need laborers, there are plenty of other landless, untouchable workers in the area eager for jobs. But Chaudhry said the farmers have no desire to bring new untouchables to the village.

"We ourselves are doing the work. It is not difficult at all," he said. "We are disposing of our own dead animal bodies. We do it very naturally."

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Whether the emancipation of Chitrobipura's untouchables this autumn should be seen primarily as a story of social progress, or as evidence of how far the poorest of India's poor have yet to go, is one part of a larger debate raging in India about how the country should reform itself to promote greater prosperity and social equity.

The New Delhi government, dominated by upper castes, is pressing for radical capitalist reforms to convert India's ancient, caste-based feudal order into a prosperous society where old barriers to social and economic mobility—such as those faced by the Chitrobipura untouchables—will gradually break down. In time, as capitalism blooms and the economy grows, there will be more and more young, educated, urbanized, fully employed untouchables of the kind who inspired the caste revolt in Chitrobipura.

Untouchable political leaders agree that economic growth can play a part in the caste's emancipation. But they believe that New Delhi's free-market reforms are primarily designed to make the upper castes richer at the expense of the untouchables. They want protection: more affirmative action, more government set-asides, more access to power.

"Only when we become partners in the governance of the land will good laws and reforms be implemented," said Kanshi Ram, the national untouchable leader.

Ram argued that in Chitrobipura, the young untouchables who led the march out of the village "spent energy and resources in one isolated case, and they [will] get exhausted." Though they changed their village, they wound up on a craggy expanse of barren government wasteland, living in burlap tents. They were free, but what had they gained?

Local untouchable leader Punamchand Leuwa, who helped resettle the Chitrobipura villagers, said he agrees that progress for untouchables has been too slow, that the victories his people achieve sometimes seem Pyrrhic, and that New Delhi's shift toward capitalism has the potential to make things worse by enriching upper castes. But he also said he knows that India's government is bankrupt and he sees no choice for untouchables but to carry on with the struggle.

As happened in Chitrobipura, he said, "People will have to find their own way. . . . We'll have to try."

The Washington Post

MONDAY, MARCH 11, 1991 G M

U.S. Scrambled to Shape View of 'Highway of Death'

By Steve Coll and William Branigin
Washington Post Foreign Service

MUTLAA, Kuwait—The U.S. Navy's Silverfox bombing squadron swooped beneath low clouds north of Kuwait City in the early hours of Feb. 26 and suddenly found itself overlooking an attack pilot's dreamscape—more than 1,500 Iraqi tanks, armored vehicles, jeeps, water and fuel tankers, ambulances, tractor-trailers and passenger cars clogged in a traffic jam on a six-lane highway headed north.

Fire and shrapnel exploded on the highway as bombs fell from the Silverfox squadron's A-6E and other attack planes. Navy, Air Force and Marine pilots trapped the long convoy by disabling vehicles at its front and rear, then pummelled the traffic jam for hours. Scores of Iraqis were blown apart or incinerated in their vehicles. The victims were "basically just sitting ducks," said Cmdr. Frank Sweigart, the squadron leader, when interviewed later that day by reporters.

The highway north of Kuwait City became the most vivid scene of destruction in the six-week Persian Gulf War, its images of wreckage and death contrasting sharply with emotionally remote "smart bomb" videotapes and television pool reports filmed from the rear of the desert battlefield.

Yet the way the highway bombing unfolded—its ferocity, timing and public presentation by senior U.S. military officers—also constitutes one of the war's most complex and ambiguous episodes.

The bombing demonstrated one grim irony of the brief ground phase of the conflict: that a war undertaken to drive Iraqi forces from Kuwait ended with some Iraqi troops desperately trying to leave the emirate while U.S. forces held them in place and destroyed them.

U.S. military officers said their main purpose in pounding fleeing Iraqi troops was to protect allied forces elsewhere on the battlefield by cutting off potential reinforcements for Iraqi Republican Guard divisions north and west of Kuwait. In retrospect, some officers say, the doomed Iraqis

■ *Destruction and carnage mark the site of U.S. raid on second Iraqi convoy. Page A14*

See HIGHWAY, A14, Col. 1

HIGHWAY, From A1

crowded on the highway—many of whom had loaded their vehicles with loot stolen from Kuwait—probably wanted to go home to Baghdad, not reinforce the Republican Guard. But there was no way to know this in the heat of battle, they added.

While the bombing was an act of war ordered by allied field commanders seeking to protect their troops on a dangerous battlefield, it also was the focus of a public relations campaign managed by the U.S. Central Command in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia—a campaign designed to shape perceptions of the war's last and most violent phase, which culminated in the near-total destruction of Iraq's army in Kuwait and southern Iraq.

To the northeast of here, more than 400 charred vehicles and dozens of bodies mark the 50-mile stretch where another fleeing Iraqi convoy was destroyed along a second road that connects the Kuwaiti town of Jahra to Iraq.

But the "highway of death," as the road near Mutlaa has come to be known, may be something of a misnomer. It is now apparent that more Iraqis fled their vehicles and were taken prisoner than were killed by U.S. bombing of the highway. There still are no reliable figures on precisely how many people were killed in the convoy, but reporters who visited the scene as bodies were being collected say the most they saw at any one place was 40, and they estimated that a total of 200 to 300 Iraqis may have died at the scene.

The following reconstruction is drawn from interviews with Kuwaiti witnesses, U.S. field commanders and soldiers in Kuwait, officers with the U.S. Central Command in Saudi Arabia and pool reports of interviews with U.S. pilots conducted at the time of the bombing.

Feverish, Fatal Flight

Huddled in their homes beside the highway leading from Kuwait City to Iraq, Kuwaitis who had suffered through more than six months of brutal occupation listened with amazement to the chaotic sounds of a panicked Iraqi army on the move. In the black of night, tanks and armored vehicles rumbled, car and truck horns blew, voices cursed in Arabic, and every so often there was the crunch of a traffic collision, then more curses and blowing horns.

It was Monday night, Feb. 25, less than 48 hours into a ground offensive the Kuwaitis hoped would liberate their beseiged country. Ever since the ground war began, there had been signs that Iraqi troops were preparing to leave Kuwait. Sunday, for example, they had been seen loading television sets and other booty into stolen cars and trucks. Now the flight was feverish, "as if they were racing to get to Iraq," recalled Manawar Said, a Kuwaiti Education Ministry employee who lived by the highway.

Near midnight came the first thunder of bombs. Iraqis on the highway redoubled their panicked flight, only to exacerbate the traffic jam. Vehicles poured into the southbound lanes to head north and collided with one another. Hundreds of Iraqis jumped from their cars and trucks and ran off into the night, desperate for a place to hide. Some crouched in a nearby cemetery. Many sought refuge in empty houses.

By morning, the highway was a mangled scene of destruction and death. Planes from the aircraft carrier USS Ranger buzzed the convoy again and again, dropping cluster bombs and whatever other munitions they could hurriedly load onto their attack planes. Marine F/A-18 jets unleashed 500-pound bombs on the stranded vehicles. Air Force F-16A fighter-bombers raced north from bases in Saudi Arabia. There were so many planes striking the convoy, pilots said, that the "killing box" had to be divided in half by air traffic controllers to avoid mid-air collisions.

U.S. pilots, and Kuwaiti civilians who witnessed the attack, were struck by the scale of its destruction. A few felt pity for the Iraqi victims or expressed mixed feelings about the one-sidedness of the bombing. But most said they thought the Iraqis were getting only what they deserved.

"I think we're past the point of just letting him get in his tanks and drive them back into Iraq and say, 'I'm sorry,' " U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. George Patrick told a media pool reporter that Tuesday as he rested between missions against the convoy. "I feel fairly punitive about it."

Navy pilot Sweigart, speaking to a reporter on the Ranger as he reloaded between attacks on the highway, said, "One side of me says, 'That's right, it's like shooting ducks in a pond.' Does that make me uncomfortable? Not necessarily. Except there is a side of me that says, 'What are they dying for? For a madman's cause? And is that fair?' Well, we're at war; it's the tragedy of war, but we do our jobs."

Kuwaiti civilians living near the highway where Sweigart's bombs exploded felt none of the pilot's ambivalence. "These people who left Kuwait at the last moment were the security forces of Iraq, the people who really controlled the city," said Kamel Awadi, a Kuwaiti marketing executive who listened to the bombing from a two-story house near the tail end of the trapped convoy. "They were the most brutal, most vicious people in Kuwait. . . . We have no pity on them, because they had no pity on anybody."

Shaping World Perceptions

That Tuesday morning, while bombs exploded on the highway, senior U.S. military officers stationed far away at command headquarters in Riyadh wrestled with an unexpected problem: how to counter Iraq's surprise claim that the troops attempting to flee north from Kuwait were part of an orderly withdrawal from the emirate designed to comply with United Nations resolutions.

As the Iraqi vehicles rumbled and collided in the darkness that Monday night and early Tuesday morning, Baghdad radio announced that Iraq's government had ordered all of its troops to withdraw from Kuwait, ending months of defiant occupation.

Baghdad's pullout order posed several problems for the U.S.-led military coalition. Continued allied attacks raised the specter of a one-sided slaughter of retreating Iraqi troops, possibly complicating U.S. political problems in the Arab world. Perhaps more importantly, a successful Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait would deprive the allies of the chance to humiliate Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, destroy the remnants of his army and prevent him from posing a continued military threat in the region.

By Tuesday morning, with allied ground forces rolling into Kuwait and across southern Iraq, the total defeat of Iraq's military had become a clear but generally unstated U.S. war aim. The aim was politically sensitive because the United Nations' resolutions under which the war was organized did not go beyond the liberation of Kuwait.

As the bombing proceeded Tuesday, the U.S. responded to the Baghdad radio announcement by playing down evidence that Iraqi troops were actually leaving Kuwait, emphasizing that Iraqi forces had to abandon their weapons and armor to avoid allied firepower, and later arguing that Iraqi troop movements out of Kuwait were not a voluntary pullout but a retreat under fire.

At the same time, U.S. forces rapidly pressed a planned flanking maneuver into southern Iraq and northern Kuwait to block enemy troop movements to the north and west. The bombing of the highway was seen by commanders in the field as a part of this tactical maneuver. "We moved on them so fast they didn't have time to reinforce over there [to the north and west] or exercise their own counterattack," said Col. Bill Steed, chief of operations for the Marine Corps in Saudi Arabia, in an interview last week.

While Steed and other field commanders were calling in massive air strikes on Iraqi convoys moving out of Kuwait City on Tuesday morning, U.S. military briefers in Riyadh offered a carefully drawn, and in some respects inaccurate, picture of the fast-changing battlefield.

At 7 a.m. Tuesday, five hours after Baghdad's withdrawal announcement, a U.S. military officer emerged from the war room of U.S. Central Command headquarters to brief dozens of reporters on overnight developments. The officer, who cannot be identified under Pentagon rules, was peppered with questions about whether Iraqi troops were leaving Kuwait.

The officer said the U.S. command did not "have any real evidence of any withdrawal at this time. There are vehicles on the road, just as we've implied throughout the campaign. . . . There are still not any indications of a significant amount of movement in any direction, north or south."

Asked about reports that U.S. pilots were hammering retreating troops near Kuwait City, the officer acknowledged that the air campaign was being pressed with full force, but he repeated, "There's no significant Iraqi movements to the north."

In fact, most Iraqi troops in and around Kuwait City began to flee toward the Euphrates River on Monday night, according to Kuwaiti witnesses. U.S. military sources in Riyadh said the officer who gave the briefing believed his characterization was accurate because it was not clear as he spoke whether the Iraqis being bombed on the highway were going home to the north or heading west to reinforce the Republican Guard.

By noon Tuesday, interviews with U.S. attack pilots conducted by media pool reporters that morning and circulated on news wire services had undermined the briefer's portrait of Iraqi movements. Pilots flying bombing missions over the highway indicated that a large-scale Iraqi retreat from Kuwait was underway, and one pilot told a pool reporter that bombing the retreating Iraqis was like "shooting fish in a barrel."

As the day wore on, senior officers with the U.S. Central Command in Riyadh became worried about what they saw as a growing public perception that Iraq's forces were leaving Kuwait voluntarily and that U.S. pilots were bombing them mercilessly, according to U.S. military sources. Relaying these worries to the Pentagon as they prepared for Tuesday's scheduled televised news briefing, senior officers agreed that U.S. spokesmen needed to use forceful language to portray Iraq's claimed "withdrawal" as a fighting retreat made necessary by heavy allied military pressure.

That strategy became evident in Saudia Arabia at 4:45 p.m. Tuesday (8:45 a.m. in Washington) when President Bush stepped into the White House Rose Garden to make a brief and hastily arranged televised statement saying the war would continue despite Baghdad's withdrawal announcement, that Iraq could not be trusted, that Iraqi troops were retreating under pressure, not voluntarily withdrawing, and that Saddam Hussein was attempting to achieve a political victory from a military rout. Bush vowed that the Iraqi president would not be permitted such a propaganda victory.

The president's statement was followed quickly by a televised military briefing from Saudi Arabia, which had been postponed earlier, apparently to accomodate the White House announcement. At the Saudi briefing, Brig. Gen. Richard Neal emphasized that Iraqi forces were not withdrawing, but were being pushed from the battlefield.

"Saddam Hussein has described what is occurring as a withdrawal," Neal said. "By definition, a withdrawal is when you pull your forces back, not under pressure by the attacking forces. Retreat is when you're required to pull your forces back as required by the action of the attacking forces. The Iraqi army is in full retreat."

In fact, however, tens of thousands of Iraqi soldiers in and around Kuwait City had begun to pull away more than 36 hours before allied forces reached the capital.

While the Iraqi troops may have pulled out because they were battered by allied bombing and fearful of a ground attack, they did not move out under any immediate pressure from allied tanks and infantry, which still were miles from Kuwait City.

The U.S. Army's Tiger Brigade did attack the paralyzed Iraqi convoy on the road from Kuwait City on Tuesday afternoon, but only after hours of relentless air strikes had pinned down the fleeing Iraqi vehicles. Units of the 2nd Marine Division also reached the road from Kuwait on Tuesday and began striking it with artillery and tanks. Capturing the highway intersection controlling entrance to Kuwait City was a primary objective "from day one," said Lt. Gen. Walter Boomer, the Marine commander in Operation Desert Storm.

Souvenirs of Destruction

These days, the "highway of death" is Kuwait's main tourist attraction. Kuwaitis in traditional robes and headdresses tote video cameras up and down the highway to record the devastation. U.S., British and Arab coalition soldiers tour the mayhem and take snapshots of each other alongside junked tanks, armored personnel carriers and other vehicles.

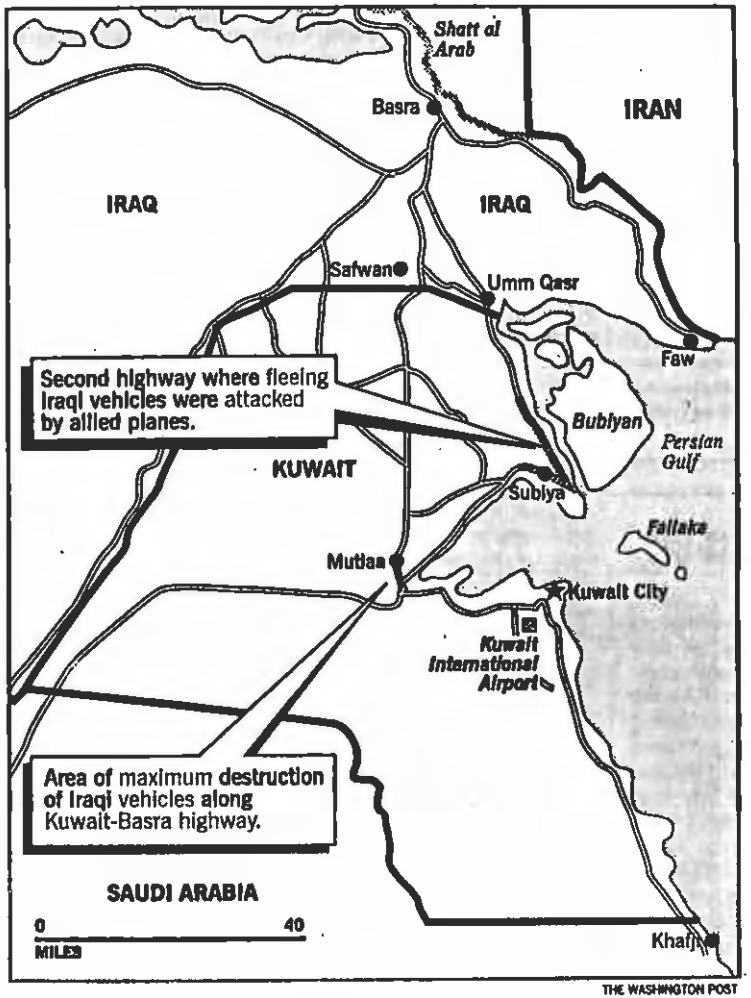
Hand grenades still in plastic wrappers lie strewn on the ground alongside a school bus packed with ammunition boxes and pencils and other school supplies. Other loot included children's story books, bags of flour and rice, suitcases stuffed with clothes, new athletic shoes, women's high heels and a dirty white wedding dress that someone had tied to the doors of a military ambulance.

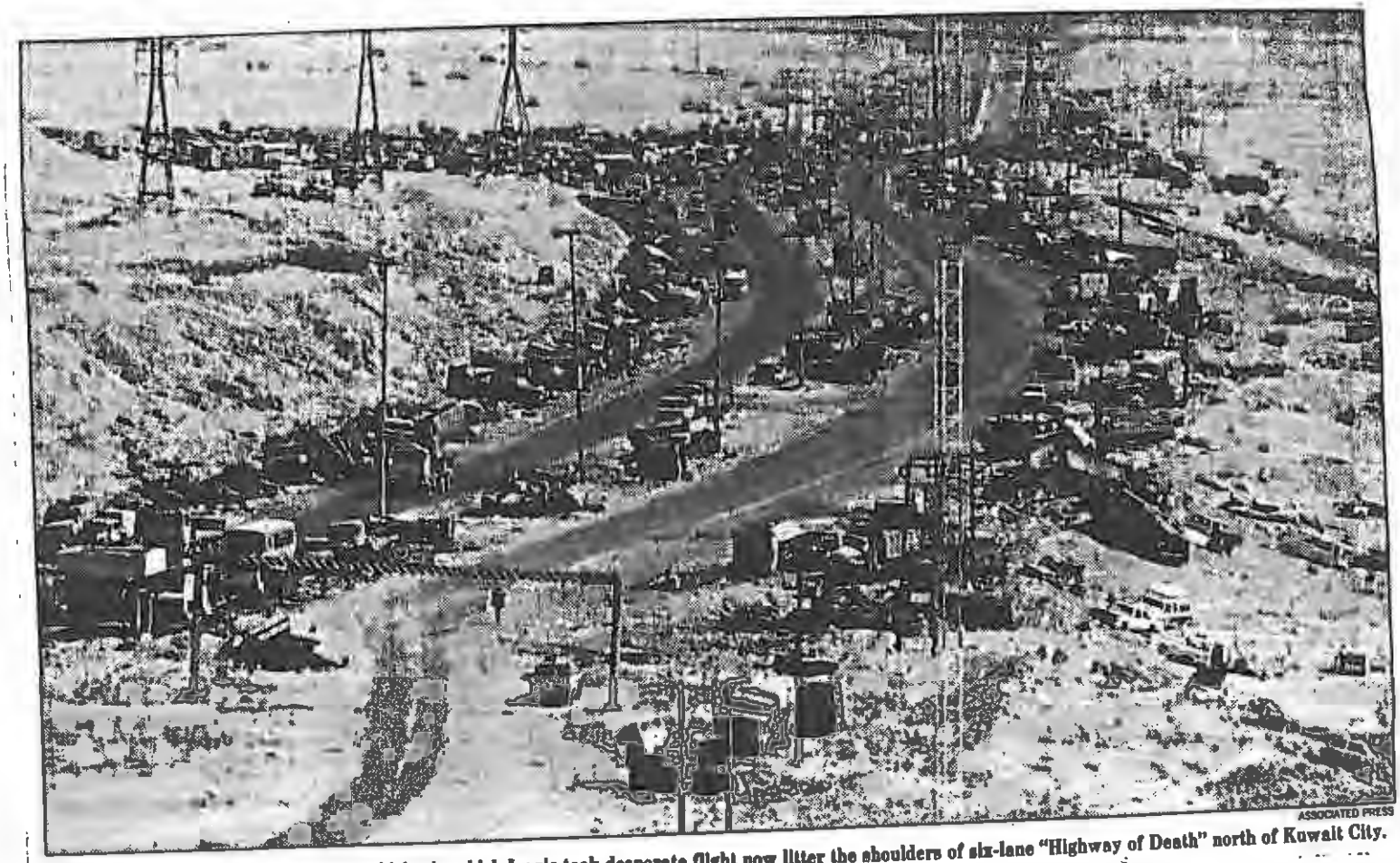
Several groups of U.S. and British soldiers on a recent day were trying to remove Iraqi tanks and armored personnel carriers for their units' museums, and some Kuwaitis were trying to recover civilian cars and vans that they claimed had been stolen from them by the Iraqis.

U.S. soldiers cleaning up the damage said they were satisfied justice had been done on the highway. "It was like a robbery," said Staff Sgt. Casey Carson of the Tiger Brigade. "It was like we were the police force, and these guys got caught trying to burglarize a house."

Asked what he thought about the destruction all about him, Marine Lt. Roy Blizzard replied: "The thing that really bothered me was that in every track, you could see a bag of loot. . . . They made us come here and do it. They should have listened to the president and left."

Coll reported from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and Branigin from Kuwait. Staff writer Molly Moore with U.S. Marines contributed to this report.





ASSOCIATED PRESS

Hundreds of wrecked and burned-out vehicles in which Iraqis took desperate flight now litter the shoulders of six-lane "Highway of Death" north of Kuwait City.