CHAPTER VI

CIVIL DISTURBANCES AND THE PUNJAB BOUNDARY FORCE

The last units of the old Indian Army that temporarily escaped division were those which comprised the Punjab Boundary Force (PBF). The PBF was the outcome of the decision of the Partition Council taken on 22 July 1947 to create a neutral Military Command to ensure peace in the disturbed area of the Punjab.\(^1\) It was 'probably the largest military force ever collected in any area of a country for the maintenance of law and order in peace-time'.\(^2\) The Force was under the command of Major General T.W. Rees, who was described by Lord Mountbatten as the 'ablest divisional commander in the Burma campaign'.\(^3\)

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\(^1\)The need for such a Force for Bengal was not felt since serious trouble was not anticipated there.


\(^3\)ibid, p.175.
CIVIL DISTURBANCES

Lord Mountbatten in his interview with Maulana Abul Kalam Azad had promised:

...I shall give you complete assurance. I shall see to it that there is no bloodshed and riot. I am a soldier, not a civilian. Once partition is accepted in principle, I shall issue orders to see that there are no communal disturbances anywhere in the country. If there should be the slightest agitation, I shall adopt the sternest measures to nip the trouble in the bud. I shall not use even the armed police. I will order the Army to act and I will use tanks and aeroplanes to suppress anybody who wants to make trouble.4

However, the communal holocaust which followed the transfer of power was the worst that India had ever witnessed. In spite of his promise, Mountbatten failed to check the violence in which millions of people lost their lives.5

As early as 16 August 1946, Jinnah announced his Direct Action Day which was followed by unprecedented communal massacre in Calcutta. It became known as "The Great Calcutta Killing". Jinnah declared, 'What we


5Mountbatten is reported to have said 'only' a hundred thousand people had died. Ismay later wrote 'I was horrified at Dickie's speech.... It seems to me immaterial whether one hundred thousand or a million have actually died: or whether only 3% of the country is in turmoil. The essential facts are that there is human misery on a colossal scale all around one and millions are bereaved, destitute, homeless, hungry, thirsty - and worst of all desperately anxious almost hopeless about their future.' Quoted in Philip Ziegler, Mountbatten: The Official Biography (London, 1985), p.437.
have done today is the most historic act in our history... this day we bid
goodbye to constitutional methods.... Today we have also forged a pistol and
are in a position to use it.' Tucker, who was in charge of the Eastern
Command, wrote, 'I do not know - no one knows - what the casualties were....
All one can say is that the toll of dead ran into thousands.... The Army had
a grim time, the grimmest being the clearing of dead from the battlefield....
At last we were finding out where the rest of the stolen weapons of Burma had
gone, for they were appearing in the hands of the worst elements of the goonda
population of Calcutta and of other Bengal towns.\textsuperscript{6} The violence in Calcutta
had led to large-scale retaliatory killings in Bihar and the United Provinces.

In March 1947, there were riots in Lahore, Multan, Amritsar and
Rawalpindi. Mountbatten had suggested that Jinnah along with the Congress
leadership should appeal to all Indians to avoid provocative acts that might
lead to violence.\textsuperscript{7} Even after the appeal was issued in the names of Jinnah


\textsuperscript{7}This suggestion was made by Mountbatten on 8 April in his interview with
Jinnah. According to Mountbatten, when he asked Jinnah if he would sign a
joint appeal with Congress to renounce the use of force for political ends, he
tried to evade a firm answer by drawing his (Mountbatten's) attention to his
various speeches deploring massacres, etc. He, however, agreed to sign if
Gandhi also signed on it. Later when Jinnah saw Kriplani's (Congress
President) signature on the draft statement, he refused to sign it on the ground
that he would not like to sign on the same sheet of paper with an unknown
nobody like Kriplani. See Record of Interview between Mountbatten and
Jinnah, Viceroy's Interview No.41, 8 April 1947 and Viceroy's Personal Report
and Gandhi the violence continued. On 17 April, Mountbatten in his letter to the Secretary of State wrote:

...The dangerously unsettled state of the whole country continues, and communal riots and troubles are about the same scale as they were last week. In the Punjab the Gurgaon area is quieter, but there have been riots in Amritsar which have necessitated a 24-hour curfew. In the NWFP, rioting, looting and arson have been reported from Dera Ismail Khan....

I wish I could paint a more optimistic picture of the state of the country, but it would be wrong for me to do so....

Mountbatten was convinced that an early transfer of power was necessary 'if we are to avert civil war and risk of a complete breakdown of the administration'.

The announcement of 3rd June Plan and its acceptance by political leaders had temporarily checked the outbreak of violence. Soon, however, there were communal disorders in many parts of India, the worst being in the Punjab. By the end of June, both the Punjab and Sind provinces had voted for partition. On 27 June, Mountbatten in his report to the Secretary of State wrote:


8Viceroy's Personal Report No.3 in ibid, pp.296-7.
The internal situation in the country is much quieter with the unfortunate exception of the Punjab, where trouble has flared up again in Lahore, Amritsar and the Gurgaon district. In the two former the trouble is confined to arson and stabbing on a widespread scale. It is carried out by "cloak and dagger" methods and is therefore very difficult to put down.\(^9\)

With the rapid deterioration of the situation in Lahore and Amritsar, on 23 June Jinnah had urged Mountbatten to be ruthless in suppressing trouble. He said: 'I don't care whether you shoot Muslims or not, it has to be stopped'.\(^{10}\) Nehru also spoke in the same strain and suggested the declaration of martial law in these cities since the police had been accused of communal bias.\(^{11}\) On the advice of Sir Evan Jenkins, Governor of the Punjab, Mountbatten refused to accept this suggestion. Jenkins maintained that neither the Army nor the police could be relied on to suppress violence since both had been infected with communalism and were beginning to abet violence directed against their religious enemies.\(^{12}\)


\(^{10}\) ibid, p.680.

\(^{11}\) ibid.

The situation steadily deteriorated in the Punjab as the date for the transfer of power approached. Sir Evan Jenkins blamed the communal attitudes adopted by the central political leaders and wrote, "there is very little doubt that the disturbances have in some degree been organised and paid for by persons or bodies directly or indirectly under the control of the Muslim League, the Congress, or the Akali party." 13

On the eve of the transfer of power Nehru said, "At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom'. The celebrations, however, were marred by the communal frenzy that swept the country. The announcement of the Radcliffe award on 17 August further aggravated the communal violence. According to the partition plan of 3 June, Boundary Commissions were set up under the Chairmanship of Sir Cyril Radcliffe for redrawing the boundaries of the Punjab and Bengal. The Boundary Commissions were instructed to demarcate the boundaries of the two parts of Bengal and the Punjab on the basis of ascertaining the contiguous majority areas of Muslims and non-Muslims. 14 In doing so, they were also to take into account other factors. The 'others factors' however were not


specified. Since there was no agreement between the Commissioners on the demarcation of the boundaries in the two Provinces, the final decision was the outcome of the casting vote Sir Cyril Radcliffe in his capacity as the Chairman of the Boundary Commissions. The allocation of Gurdaspur to India and Chittagong Hill Tracts to Pakistan were the most controversial decisions. Pakistan alleged that Mountbatten had influenced the allocation of Gurdaspur to India so as to provide her with land connection with Kashmir. However, there is 'no evidence of the influence or pressure which Lord Mountbatten is alleged to have brought on the Chairman of the Commission'. As far as Chittagong Hill Tracts were concerned Patel had warned 'Any award against the weight of local opinion and of the terms of reference, or without any referendum to ascertain the will of the people concerned, must, therefore, be construed as a collusive or partisan award and will therefore have to be repudiated by us.' Thus, both the Congress and the Muslim League were outraged by Radcliffe's award.

Giving an account of the massacres which followed the transfer of power, Philip Ziegler, Mountbatten's biographer wrote:


16 H.V.Hodson, n.13, p.354.
In East Punjab Sikhs were alleged to have raped Muslim women... before murdering them; in West Punjab a Muslim mob surrounded a Sikh temple and burnt it to the ground with all its occupants. Such atrocities may have been grossly exaggerated, may never have taken place at all, but the rumours were enough. Fear fed on hatred, hatred on fear. On both sides of the frontier, thousands, hundreds of thousands, eventually millions of peasants concluded that their lives were in peril, that they could find safety only by abandoning their homes and fleeing to the homelands which had been so arbitrarily called into existence. On both sides of the frontier the new citizens of India and Pakistan looked with hatred at the river of refugees flowing across their land.... Each incident provoked a new wave of refugees, each wave of refugees generated its own crop of bloody incidents.\(^\text{17}\)

Against this background of communal frenzy the PBF was expected to restore peace in the Punjab.

THE PUNJAB BOUNDARY FORCE

The Punjab Boundary Force (PBF) under Major General T.W.Rees came into operation on 1 August 1947. It was responsible to the Supreme Commander, and through him after August 15, to the Joint Defence Council. Brigadier Brar and Brigadier Ayub Khan, of the Indian and Pakistani Armies respectively, were attached to Rees as advisers. Later, Brigadier Nasir Ahmad of the Pakistan Army and Brigadier Thimayya of the Indian Army were also included as advisers.

\(^{17}\)Philip Ziegler, n.5, p.430.
Since the PBF was, for the time being, not included in the division scheme, its units included both Hindus and Muslims. Although it had British officers, it did not include any British units. After the transfer of power, it was decided that the British troops were to be repatriated by the end of February 1948. The British units which were present in India after August 15 till their repatriation were barred from operational use and were, therefore, not available for internal security. The PBF comprised of two brigades of the Fourth Indian Division 11 Brigade covering Jullundur, Hoshiarpur and Ludhiana districts and 5 Brigade covering Amritsar and Gurdaspur districts. It also included 14 Paratroop (Lahori, Sialkot, Sheikhpura, Gujranwala and Lyallpur districts), 43 Lorried Infantry (Ferozepur and Montgomery districts), and 114 Infantry (Lahore) brigades. Although the PBF was supposed to comprise of 55,000 officers and men, the strength of many units was far below their proper establishment.\textsuperscript{18} Its area of operation extended to over twelve districts covering an area of 37,500 square miles. The population included Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs in the proportion of 55:25:20 respectively.

When General Rees took over, the Sikhs in Amritsar were organised into Jathas which raided Muslim majority villages and likewise Muslims were also organised into bands in Lahore. Rees wrote:

\textsuperscript{18}Sir Francis Tucker, n.6, p.447.
Communal bitterness was at a peak, and the masses were egged on and inflamed by shock troops of resolute and well armed men determined to fight... throughout, the killing was pre-medieval in its ferocity. Neither age nor sex was spared; mothers with babies in their arms were cut down, speared or shot, and Sikhs cried 'Rawalpindi' as they struck home. Both side were equally merciless.\textsuperscript{19}

Early in August the Governor of the Punjab had sent an intelligence report to Mountbatten which implicated Master Tara Singh and other Sikh leaders for planning sabotage and murder. They had plotted to assassinate Jinnah. Jinnah and Liaquat immediately demanded the arrest of Tara Singh and other Sikh leaders. Patel argued that any such measure would only precipitate a crisis which was already beyond control.\textsuperscript{20} Eventually no arrests were made since it was felt that it would endanger rather than improve the precarious situation.\textsuperscript{21} Later, Mountbatten was criticised for his failure to arrest the Sikh conspirators. Any such arrest undoubtedly would have been politically explosive. It was left to the PBF to deal with the Sikh and Muslim conspirators who planned murder, arson and loot.

\textsuperscript{19}T.W.Rees, \textit{Report on the Punjab Boundary Force} (New Delhi, 1947). This Report was submitted to the Supreme Commander.

\textsuperscript{20}Alan Campbell-Johnson, n.2, pp.148-49.

\textsuperscript{21}ibid, p.152.
Rees was expected to restore peace in the Punjab without the effective backing of civil authorities. He wrote:

...The civil administration had been steadily deteriorating for some time.... The declaration advancing the date to 15th August 1947, still further accelerated the administrative decline....

The machinery of Government became less and less effective, until, after 15th August in the West Punjab it almost ceased to function and, in the East Punjab, to all intents and purposes, it did cease to function.

...From 70 to 80 per cent of the Punjab Police was Muslim; and having been disarmed by order of non-Muslim officials, even before 15th August, the Muslim police in East Punjab refused to continue to serve there; similarly the non-Muslim police in the West all wished to go East. The intelligence system... rapidly disintegrated. All police became completely partisan, even before partition....

Civil power in the twelve districts. But there was but little effective Civil Government machinery to work with, other than the two new Governors and their new Ministers and a certain number of willing senior officials. These, with the best will in the world, without the necessary subordinates and functioning machinery of Government, could not produce the essential basic elements of the administration and law and order which are naturally pre-requisite to a military force detailed to act in aid of Civil Power....

In view of the prevailing conditions, martial law should have been imposed in the disturbed areas of the Punjab. Martial Law alone would have given the PBF the power of punishment and trial. This certainly would have deterred the rioters.

22 Quoted in H.V.Hodson, n.13, pp.405-7.
The effectiveness of a Force called upon to maintain law and order is largely dependent on the available equipment and infrastructure. Except for a few Jeeps and Lorried Infantry Brigade, the PBF had only one armoured regiment. This affected its mobility and contributed to the failure of communications. Ayub Khan, who was an adviser to Rees, wrote:

...The Boundary Force was doomed to failure from the beginning. There was a great paucity of communications. The Force could only rush to a place that was being attacked, and by the time the troops arrived it was looted, burnt.... In the end all that this Force could do was to try to keep the roads clear for the refugees. This was done by patrolling the main thoroughfares and the railway lines.23

If aircraft and air support had been used extensively, it would have deterred the raiding gangs. It was decided that planes would not be used for an offensive purpose as it would inflict losses on 'one's own people'.24 However, they could have been widely used for the passive role of surveillance of the movement of rioting gangs.

Soon there were criticisms about the alleged partiality of the PBF from both the Indian and Pakistani leaders. This in itself showed that the Force was doing its job well. On 9 August, Rees in his letter to the Brigade


24 T.W.Rees, n.19, p.27.
Commanders, wrote:

Perhaps it will be just as well for me to start this letter with a remark about criticism and pressure from outside.

I am afraid that in a job such as ours is, we will just have to take it. I know that we are all agreed that a lot of this criticism is wild and usually uncalled for. Still, I think we are sufficiently balanced and on an even keel to let it pass over our heads with the minimum of adverse reactions on our parts.

It is certain, also, that we will have a lot of exaggerated and even false stories about our activities.

Still, as I have said this is a part of the particular type of activity that we are engaged in. And I ask you to bear with it.... I shall not cease to endeavour to minimise wild talk, accusation, and unsound advice.25

In spite of the best efforts by Rees and his Force, the violence continued unabated. Moreover, he also failed to check the growing criticism of the Force and its men.

At the Joint Defence Council meeting of 25 August, when Mountbatten proposed to include in the communique a tribute to the soldiers of the Force, he raised a storm of protest.26 Mr.Chundrigar, a Pakistani Minister, refused to pay tribute to the soldiers of the Force and instead wanted to publish a warning to them that any failure to do their duty would be severely punished.

25Rees Papers, Folder F, Box 2 (Sussex University Library, Brighton).

26H.V.Hodson, n.13, p.408.
In his record of the meeting, Alan Campbell-Johnson wrote:

...The two Governments would like to see the Force broken up and reconstituted on national lines with Indian and Pakistani Commander-in-Chief....

...The whole episode makes it abundantly clear that both Governments will have to change their attitudes to military forces doing difficult jobs on their behalf if they are not to have mutinies on their hands....

The Press also launched an attack on the PBF. On August 27, the Hindustan Times carried a direct attack on Rees along with a cartoon implying that the Supreme Commander’s Headquarters were deliberately depriving the Dominion Armies of good officers in order to retain better jobs for themselves. Nehru, however, was against such attacks. Mountbatten wrote:

I had already got hold of the Prime Minister and when I saw him I found him entirely sympathetic; and he authorised me to send for Devdas Gandhi and Sahney, representing the Hindustan Times and Indian News Chronicle, and to put the views of the Government before them, which were briefly (a) that the Government do not wish officers to be attacked in the press and (b) they do not wish to have attacks made on the British officers

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28 ibid, pp.174-5.
who have volunteered to remain.\textsuperscript{29}

When Mountbatten met Devdas and Sahney, constructive suggestions were made for sponsored Press visits and dissemination of neutral news by leaflets, the setting up of strongholds guarded by mixed forces to give immediate succour to refugees and the appointment of custodians for refugee property.\textsuperscript{30}

Meanwhile, heavy communal propaganda was directed against PBF troops. Moreover, as they saw the slaughter of their co-religionists it became increasingly difficult to ensure their neutrality. On 17 August, Rees, in his letter to Auchinleck, wrote:

\begin{quote}
We are having heavy communal propaganda levelled at our officers and men as well as against us as soldiers, but I am controlling it through ICO's, Subedar Majors, and VCO's, and they and men realize and agree that unlimited bloodshed and terror would have been reigning in the Central Punjab today if they were not standing firm and rock like, as the united I.A. always has, when called on.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotenum{29} Mountbatten to Auchinleck, 27 August 1947, Auchinleck Papers (John Rylands University Library, Manchester), File LXXIX, MUL 1249.

\footnotenum{30} Alan Campbell-Johnson, n.2, p.175.

\footnotenum{31} Major General T.W.Rees to Auchinleck, 17 August 1947, Auchinleck Papers (John Rylands University Library, Manchester), File LXXIX, MUL 1247.
\end{footnotes}
The strain on the troops was unprecedented and at the Joint Defence Council Meeting of 25 August, Rees admitted that the situation was explosive. With communal feelings running high, Rees was perhaps convinced that the early break up of the Forces was the best option.

Even when the PBF was created there was not much optimism. This was recorded by Penderal Moon:

On my way back from Delhi to Bhawalpur I happened to hear some views about this force from a Young Sikh major who shared my compartment for part of the journey. He was himself about to join it, but was utterly sceptical of its capacity to maintain order. He thought that a large proportion of the troops would be infected by the communal virus and prove unreliable. He was also doubtful whether mechanized infantry would be able to operate effectively in the rural areas during the monsoon. I fully agreed with him in this.

As violence increased both India and Pakistan wanted the PBF to be disbanded.

On 29 August, the Joint Defence Council Meeting held at Lahore decided to disband the PBF. Mountbatten was convinced that the responsibility for law and order should rest with the two Governments. He was supported by Auchinleck and the Commanders-in-Chief of India and Pakistan. About the

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32 T.W. Rees, n.19, p.16.

Joint Defence Council Meeting, Alan Campbell-Johnson wrote:

...Jinnah, to everyone's surprise, attended as a member. After prolonged discussion the decision was taken to disband the Boundary Force. Pete Rees received very few thanks from either side for his efforts to carry out a task of unparalleled difficulty. Without the wholehearted backing of the Governments and Press on both sides, the position of the Boundary Force and its Commander became rapidly untenable, and otherwise steady and experienced troops began to feel the tug of communal loyalties deeper even than their military discipline.34

The P.B.F. ceased to exist on 1 September 1947 after a brief existence of thirty-two days. With its disbandment ended Auchinleck's last operational responsibility in India.

Later, Mountbatten reported that though initially he was opposed to the idea of disbanding the PBF, the spread of communal passions amongst troops had made such a decision inevitable:

I had been much opposed to this step at first, and indeed remained opposed to it from strictly military viewpoint, because of the risk of lack of liaison and consequent danger of actual clashes between entirely separately controlled armies operating on a recently imposed boundary under conditions approximating to civil war... as the communal virus had started to infect the troops... some such measure became inevitable.35

34Alan Campbell-Johnson, n.2, pp.176-7.

The Commander-in-Chief of India and Pakistan had welcomed the decision to disband the PBF. General Roy Bucher, the C-in-C of the Indian Army later wrote 'Rob Lockhart and I were extremely glad to see its early demise, which enabled us to attempt properly to restore law and order on the Indian side of the new frontier.... Pete Rees had been placed in an impossible position with a role which in the existing circumstances had become a nonsense.\textsuperscript{36}

CONCLUSION

Before the PBF was created, there were serious incidents of rioting in Northern India. However, the Government had failed to anticipate the gravity of the impending disaster. Mountbatten wrote 'It had been obvious to anybody that there were going to be disturbances in the Punjab on the transfer of power. But I freely confess that I did not anticipate the scale and extent of what was going to happen, nor, so far as I am aware, did anyone in authority in India, Pakistan and the United Kingdom anticipate this.'\textsuperscript{37} The failure of Rees and his PBF to stem the tide of violence was more due to the Government's lack of foresight. There was no adequate planning to deal with

\textsuperscript{36}General Sir Roy Bucher to H.V.Hodson, 6 March 1969, Bucher Papers (National Army Museum, London).

\textsuperscript{37}Quoted from the Report of the First Governor General of the Dominion of India in H.V.Hodson, n.13, p.403.
the crisis when it erupted. As early as April 1947, Jenkins had warned Mountbatten that if partition were imposed on the Punjab, it would require four divisions from outside the province to restore order. The Government failed to check the malaise when it appeared.

Some British officers were accused of being indifferent to the fate of the two new countries and of deliberately wanting conditions to worsen 'to show the world that the sub-continent could not exist without British power'. The PBF and its officers could not be blamed since the situation was far beyond their control. However, having failed to check the violence, the Government wanted to escape responsibility for it. According to Alan Campbell-Johnson, Mountbatten was in favour of disbanding the PBF if it did not receive proper support since then 'the responsibility for the resulting bloodshed would rest squarely on those who had caused it to be taken away'. Even after the disbanding of the PBF, the Government could not be absolved for its failure to check the spread of riots.

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40 Alan Campbell-Johnson, n.2, p.172.
In the prevailing conditions of murder, arson and loot, General Rees and the PBF had done their best to restore order. In spite of communal passions being inflamed, there were no incidents of actual shooting between the Muslim and non-Muslim troops of the PBF. There were instances when the PBF men had acted in an exemplary manner. In one case, a Sikh Major, in charge of a Muslim refugee train, suffered grievous wounds while repelling attacks on the train by the people of his own religion. In another instance, a Sikh who had been helped by two Muslim soldiers during evacuation had written to Rees that he was confident that if the whole of the military establishment of the Punjab Boundary Force followed their example the communal trouble was bound to stop. Unfortunately, despite such instances the forces of communalism proved too strong to combat.

As Rees himself was not sure if he could ensure the neutrality of the PBF, the decision to disband it was right. Moreover, after independence,

41 T.W. Rees, n.16.

42 Letter to Rees, 21 August 1947, Rees Papers (Sussex University Library, Brighton).

43 Lord Rees, son of the late General Rees, also said that his father had apprehensions regarding the neutrality of the PBF and was not sure how long the troops could hold on. Despite the PBF having to be finally abolished in the face of the growing trouble he felt the troops had given their best. [Personal Interview, London, 20 April 1994].
the responsibility for maintaining law and order rested with the new Governments. The PBF represented the last effort at co-operation between the two countries. Soon, their Armies were at war with each other. That Rees and his men failed was due to the fact that circumstances were well beyond their control. The Civil authority having failed, the PBF could not substitute it.