

Lord Mountbatten's Protestations that Armed Force would be available to contain the breakdown of order at the Time of Partition: an Exercise in Self-Delusion rather than Deception?

Professor Richard Bonney

Notes from *Selected Documents on Partition of Punjab 1947. India and Pakistan...* ed. Kirpal Singh (Delhi: National Bookshop, 1991; revised edn. 2006).

p. 67. Lord Mountbatten's Interview with the Maharaja of Patialia. 3 May 1947.

I made it quite clear ... that I would ruthlessly suppress any fighting which might break out on the announcement of the plan or subsequently **up to the date of transfer of power**. I said that I would use utmost force against either side or both sides, guilty of indulging in violence; and that if the Cabinet did not support me, the consequences would be entirely their responsibility...

p. 84 Lord Mountbatten to Sir Evan Jenkins, 17/18 May 1947

I have got the Cabinet's approval to the use of maximum force at the earliest possible moment (including air bombing if necessary) if there should be any outbreaks of violence; and I shall support you up to the hilt in whatever measures you consider to take in this direction, as it is vital that the very first attempt at communal war should be utterly and ruthlessly crushed...

p. 88. Viceroy's Report No. 8, 23 May 1947

... The next day in Cabinet, I raised the question of further aggression by Muslims, Sikhs or Hindus in any part of India. I asked if the Cabinet would support me to the hilt in putting down the first signs of communal war with overwhelming force, and if they agreed that we should also bomb and machine gun them from the air, and thus prove conclusively that communal war was not going to pay. The proposed policy was acclaimed with real enthusiasm by the Congress and Muslim League leaders alike, and when I looked across to the Defence Member, Baldev Singh, and said, 'Are you with me in this policy', he replied 'Most emphatically Yes'...

p. 93 Viscount Mountbatten's Broadcast on the All-India Radio, 3 June 1947

... If the transfer of power is to be effected in a peaceful and orderly manner, every single one of us must bend all his efforts to the task.

This is no time for bickering, much less for the continuation in any shape or form of the disorders and lawlessness of the past few months. Do not forget what a narrow margin of food we are all working on. We cannot afford any toleration of violence. All of us agreed on that...

May your decisions be wisely guided and may they be carried out in the peaceful and friendly spirit of the Gandhi-Jinnah appeal.

p. 101. Press Conference by Lord Mountbatten, 4 June 1947

... I am in a position to tell you that there has been a unanimous decision in the Cabinet that we shall not allow any more violence or strife. Sardar Baldev Singh broadcast as Defence Member on that point yesterday. There have been many times when there have been more troops. Now we know the bad spots and there the troops are being sent. The Centre has therefore already intervened in the most effective way possible by passing a unanimous decision in the Interim Government not to tolerate any more violence.

pp. 162-3. Governor's Appreciation. Sir Evan Jenkins, 11 July 1947.

The communal feeling is now unbelievably bad ...

The Sikhs are the most uneasy of the three communities. They believe that they will be expropriated and possibly massacred in Western Punjab and smothered by the Congress and the Hindus generally in the Eastern Punjab. They threaten a violent rising immediately after the transfer of power unless by then there has been a satisfactory award by the Boundary Commission...

pp. 472-3 Punjab Boundary Force. Governor of Punjab's Report to Viceroy, 12 Aug. 1947

The Commander, Punjab Boundary Force, has a most difficult task. The population of the twelve districts in which he is operating is close on 14.5 million, and this population is distributed over 17,932 inhabited towns and villages. When the possibility of the enforcement of the Boundary award was first discussed, I estimated that we should need at least two Divisions of full strength and on a war footing, i.e. a minimum of about 20,000 fighting men. The effective strength of the PBF is at present about 7,500, or including static troops and training centres about 9,000. Now that the Police are definitely unreliable in Lahore and Amritsar, the troops have a rapidly increasing

responsibility. Neither the railways nor the main roads are safe, and the village raiding is quite impossible to control without a very great display of force. Firepower is really less important than numbers. Until 1946 I do not think that we had ever experienced in India any large communal upheaval outside the cities – the Mopla rebellion is perhaps an exception to this general statement. The lesson of the 1947 disturbances in the Punjab is that once the interlocked communities begin to fight all over the countryside, the only remedy is to employ a very large number of troops. I should say that the Amritsar district could at the moment do with two full-strength Brigades in addition to the old Police force. It has in fact one weak brigade and a Police force which has largely disintegrated.

pp. 489–94 **Informal Minutes of the Joint Defence Council Meeting, 16 Aug. 1947**

1. The Supreme Commander [Sir Claude Auchinleck] said that he had visited Lahore on 14 August and there met Sir Evan Jenkins and Major-General Rees. He had reached certain conclusions on the situation in the Punjab from the conversations which he had held and from intelligence reports which had been received. It appeared that there was no doubt that the strife in Amritsar and the surrounding country had been started by the Sikhs. They were operating in armed bands of considerable strength and carrying out raids against Muslim villages, or mainly Muslim villages, or the Muslim parts of larger villages – three or four raids nightly. These bands were well organized and often included mounted men for reconnaissance purposes. One band was reported to have killed 200 Muslims in one village. There was reason to suspect, although full evidence was not forthcoming, that the subjects of certain Sikh States were assisting these bands. On a recent case of train wrecking which had been carried out by skilled wreckers using electric detonators, motor tracks led to the territory of a certain [Sikh] state. Although there were Muslim bands in the same area doing the same sort of thing, these were generally smaller and not so well organized. The Army had successful encounters with all these bands. However, the Army could not act unless a detachment met a band actually in the process of carrying out an outrage; and was therefore severely handicapped. In certain cases the bands had fought back using such weapons as mortars and light machine guns. In one case the Army had killed 60 members of a band who were in the act of murdering the inhabitants of a village.

2. The Supreme Commander went on to say that the troops were carrying out continuous active patrolling but their number was small for the area involved. There was no proper remedy unless the troops were permanently posted in every village and hamlet. In Amritsar city itself, there have been high casualties, mostly among the Muslims. This had largely been the result of the emasculation of the police force

in the city. A new Hindu Superintendent had been posted there and had disarmed the Muslim element of the police force. This man had since been replaced and the situation was somewhat better, but it was true to say that both in Amritsar and Lahore, the police as a whole were completely unreliable.

3. The Supreme Commander said that he had flown over Amritsar en route. There were house burning in the city at the time. There many villages in the vicinity which were completely burnt out. Others were still being attacked. The Army was in considerable strength in Amritsar itself. In Lahore the aggressors had been almost entirely Muslim. The action that had been taken was said to be in retaliation for the killing in Amritsar. Most of the victims were, of course, Hindus. A very disturbing feature in Lahore was practical defection of the police, most of whom were Muslim. There was evidence that the police had joined mobs carrying out arson and murder. All the European officers of the Lahore police had left on the 14th in accordance with the policy. The general morale and discipline of the police was extremely low. Therefore, the task of maintain law and order devolved practically entirely on the army but for the presence of which there would be a complete massacre and arson all over the city.

4. The Supreme Commander stated that certain local Muslim Leaders were said to be attempting to suborn the Muslim soldiers in the same way as the police had been suborned. So far, these efforts had no effect and the soldiers were generally behaving with complete and exemplary impartiality. The Muslim League National Guards had not been helpful in Lahore and were said to have encouraged Muslim mobs. It was difficult accurately to assess the damage in Lahore, but this might be as much as 10% of the houses and 15% of the area burnt down. The Supreme Commander said that he had personally flown over Lahore two or three times; 20 or 30 houses had been burning and there was a thick pall of smoke. There was practically nobody on the roads or the streets. There were houses burning in most of the villages round Lahore.

5. The Supreme Commander said that the civil casualties in the area covered by the Punjab Boundary Force were estimated at 1,500 killed and wounded. The troops themselves were believed to have killed and wounded over 200 people who had been engaged when in the act of murder. It was said that certain ex-members of the INA were involved in the leadership of the gang in East Punjab. It was also said that ex-members of the INA had been recruited in the police.

6. So far as communications were concerned, the usual police arrangements for the protection of the railways had completely broken down. The only safeguard now in East Punjab and as far as Jhelum, was patrolling by troops. This was carried out so far as the number of troops available would allow. The sabotage was mainly done at night...

7. The Supreme Commander said that the delay in announcing the Boundary Commission's award had a distinct effect, as many rumours, mostly wild and many malicious, were being started and were leading to fresh trouble. The general position was extremely bad and was getting worse. Trouble had spread the previous day to Sialkot and Gujranwala. The previous day a train had been held up and 100 persons killed and 200 wounded. Trains had been attacked at many different places. A large scale uncontrolled evacuation of Muslims from Amritsar district was in progress, and was beyond the control of any local authority.

8. With the agreement of the two Governments, it had been arranged for two more Infantry Brigades and one Mixed Squadron of Armoured Troops to go as soon as possible to reinforce the Punjab Boundary Force. These should be on the move that day but were coming from a long way and might take several days to arrive. There was no prospect of any further reinforcements. Major-General Rees and his Brigade Commanders were doing all that was humanly possible.

9. The Supreme Commander reiterated that the troops had so far been impartial and well disciplined, despite stories spread to the contrary by persons in responsible positions who should know better. Such stories did the greatest possible harm and could only have the result of affecting the troops. If this occurred, the situation could become terrible indeed. He was not prepared to contemplate it.

10. [Possibility of talks between Muslim League and Sikh Leaders. Major-General Rees did not desire martial law to be imposed at the present time]. The imposition of martial law would require planning and the provision of extra officers. If it was imposed over the whole area, at least 200 more officers would be required; if in districts of Lahore, Amritsar and Gurdaspur only, 50-60 more. Major-General Rees was flying to Ambala the following day to attend a meeting at which both Governors would be present...

11. So far as the air was concerned, Major-General Rees had asked that an extra Flight should be provided to be stationed at Lahore for Reconnaissance Duties and if necessary for psychological purposes. There was no question of using these aircraft for bombing and machine-gunning...¹

14. Pandit Nehru asked whether there was a military escort on every train, and if so, why such massacres took place. The Supreme Commander explained that the gangs either got on to a train at a station with their arms concealed and then attacked suddenly; or put one man on the train to pull the communication cord at the spot where the rest of the gang was ready. It was impossible to provide more than six to ten soldiers as escort on each train. There had been cases when

¹ Contrary to the earlier suggestions made by Mountbatten.

these had driven off the attackers but they had not always succeeded in so doing...

17. Mr. Liaquat Ali Khan gave his view that the Sikhs were responsible for the present situation – not Congress or the Muslim League. It was this one part – the Sikhs – over which no one seemed to have any control. Matters had been settling down before the recent conflagration. Unless the Sikh Leaders came forward honestly and sincerely, he did not see how the disturbances could be stopped except by brute force...

20. The Governor-General said that some of the ... arms had indeed been stolen and sold – but not by the army. He pointed out that many arms had been left behind after the war, especially by United States Forces.

21. Sardar Patel asked whether it was true to say that the police in the Punjab as a whole were mainly Muslim. The Governor-General confirmed that this was true. Efforts had always been made to keep the communal proportion equal, but the police was a volunteer force and Muslims had been much readier to volunteer. The Supreme Commander said that this was mainly for economic reasons and comparable to recruitment for the Army...

23. Sardar Baldev Singh claimed that the trouble in the Punjab had started in Rawalpindi in early March, and had been started by the Muslims. The Muslim League Leaders had been asked to condemn these outrages, but they had refused to do so. Mr. Liaquat Ali Khan said that he could remember no such request.

Sardar Patel gave his view that there was no doubt that if the origin of the trouble was traced, it would be found that they started at Rawalpindi, Multan, Dera Ismail Khan and those areas, but it was equally definite that Master Tara Singh had recently made some highly indiscreet speeches. Agitation had also been stirred up by the comments of the Muslim League newspapers on the banning by the Punjab Government of the Nakana Sahib meeting. As a result of this, the Sikhs had started trouble in Amritsar and this had spread to Lahore. In Lahore all the police were Muslims. He had received a report that some of the Lahore police had gone to Amritsar, having been sent there fully armed by the Superintendent of Police of Lahore. They had been sent officially. Sardar Baldev Singh said that he had phoned up the East Punjab Inspector General of Police who had confirmed that 43 of these men had been arrested in Amritsar. The Governor-General gave his view that it would be far more likely that they had gone without orders rather than officially sent.

The Supreme Commander said that he considered that incursions from one side to the other were likely to increase. The Governor-General suggested that there was only one way to control this, namely the imposition of martial law...

Sardar Patel gave his view that no amount of martial law could bring the situation under control. If the two communities were so violently apart, they could not be brought together by force. The causes must be removed.

Sardar Baldev Singh declared that the Sikhs were prepared to co-operate...

Mr. Liaquat Ali Khan said that it was absolutely necessary for the two States to maintain law and order. So far as the Pakistan Government was concerned, it would do everything possible. Pakistan was a new state and could not build itself up unless all communities cooperated....

pp. 500-2 Note for the Joint Defence Council by the Supreme Commander [Sir Claude Auchinleck] on the Future of the Punjab Boundary Force, 27 Aug. 1947

Whereas the situation in certain towns may be improving the general situation in rural areas of the Boundary Force continues to deteriorate. The disturbances have also spread to areas outside the Punjab Boundary Force area which the Commander of the Boundary Force has no means of controlling. For example, 70% of the major attacks on railway trains have occurred outside the Punjab Boundary Force area.

The refugee problem has increased to such proportions that the Civil Governments can no longer control it; in fact Civil Government itself appears to have ceased to exist in Eastern Punjab.

Road and railway communications between India and Pakistan have been interrupted to such an extent that reconstitution has practically come to a standstill and Pakistan nationals and property can no longer be moved from India to Pakistan and there is no prospect of being able to do so.

The Commander of the Punjab Boundary Force has become so involved with political questions and administrative problems on a high level that he is no longer able to devote his time to his proper tasks...

In fact the position of the Commander of the Punjab Boundary Force has become impossible. Moreover he reported a few days ago that owing to the extraordinary circumstances in which they find themselves situated and the very great strain imposed upon them by the circumstances in which they were being called upon to aid the civil power the Indian Officers and men had become inevitably affected with the communal virus. He anticipated that this deterioration would increase rapidly and stated his considered opinion that he would be unable to guarantee the reliability and general impartiality of the troops under his command beyond the middle of September. This is

an extremely serious statement for a commander to make and full weight must be given to it. [Proposals for disbanding of Punjab Boundary Force follow.]

pp. 503–8 **Minutes of the Joint Defence Council held at Government House, Lahore, 29 August 1947**

[Disbandment of Punjab Boundary Force accepted.]

Item 2: The Guardian and Welfare of Refugees

The Governor-General of India [Mountbatten] raised the question whether troops of one Dominion should be lent to the other Dominion for the protection of refugees in camps and convoys. He pointed out the disadvantages to this course of action were that clashes between the two armies might take place. As an example, Pakistan troops might be employed guarding a convoy of Muslim refugees in India; and attack might be made on this convoy; Indian troops might appear on the scene; and fighting between the two lots of troops might result. On the other hand, it was certain that, if no arrangements were made to guard refugees by troops of their own community, terror would strike the minorities.

During discussion on the risks involved by such a loan of troops, the opinion was generally expressed that, whereas these risks definitely did exist owing to the increase of communal feeling in the Army, they should be accepted as the lesser evil. The Prime Minister of India stressed the psychological aspect of providing protection which ensured confidence in the minds of the refugees themselves. He instanced an occasion when there had been panic among the refugees in the camp at Wah when a purely Muslim guard was put on the protect them.

The Governor of West Punjab expressed the hope that the number of Sikh soldiers employed on the guarding of refugees in his Province would be reduced to the minimum and that the Baluch Regiment should if possible not be so employed...

The Prime Minister of India pointed out that these proposals did not include arrangements for the protection of refugees on their way to refugee camps. The Commander, Punjab Boundary Force, agreed and said that he regarded this period of movement to the camps as the most dangerous for the refugees, but that with the existing forces guards could not cover the co-ordinated movement of refugees...

The Prime Minister of Pakistan expressed the hope that, as the general situation improved, those gathered in refugee camps would return to their homes. For this reason, and because the numbers who had already crossed the borders were so large, he trusted that the

scale of evacuation would reduce. He suggested the refugees in the smaller camps should be gathered together into larger ones...

pp. 508–9 Joint Statement of the two Prime Ministers, Pandit Jawarharlal Nehru and Liaquat Ali Khan, end of August 1947.

The Punjab was peaceful and prosperous only a short while ago. It is now witnessing scenes of horror and destruction and men have become worse than beasts. They have murdered their fellow beings with savage brutality and have spared neither women nor children. They have burnt houses and looted property. Even people fleeing in terror have been butchered.

2. This is resulting in incalculable injury to West and East Punjab and all who live there. No possible good can come from it to any community. Indeed Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims in the Punjab have all suffered terribly.

3. The Ministers and leaders of the two Dominions as well as those of West and East Punjab have recently met and declared their firm intention of putting down this lawlessness and crimes. Further they have declared that it is the sacred duty of the majority community in each area to safeguard and protect the minorities there. This duty is not only a moral duty and enjoined by all religions, but is also essential in the interests of the States.

Hindu, Sikh and Muslim leaders have all in pursuance of this appealed to their co-religionists to refrain from violence and disorders and to end immediately the insecurity that is ruing the Punjab. They have declared that they are determined to leave no stone unturned to ensure that law and order are restored quickly and all people can live in security.

4. From 1 September, the Pakistan and India Governments have taken over in West and East Punjab respectively the full military responsibility for law and order which previously was vested in the Punjab Boundary Force.

5. The two Governments have decided to take the most drastic action against those who are disrupting law and order. All the powers of the Government will be used in full force against the law breakers. In particular, armed bands will be captured and put into concentration camps. Bands caught in the act of committing crime will be shot at sight. The two Governments will see that its orders in this respect are fully carried out by their officials.

6. Both Governments have also decided to take the most urgent steps to look after the unfortunate refugees. Refugee camps will be protected by military guards in whom they have confidence; Muslim refugee camps by Muslim troops and non-Muslim refugee camps by

non-Muslim troops. The same policy will be followed in the matters of escorts. No obstruction of any kind in the movement of refugees will be tolerated.

Both Governments have taken it upon themselves to feed the refugees and to provide the necessities of life. Refugee Commissioners have been appointed and a complete organization is being rapidly set up for the purpose by each Government.

7. Illegal seizures of property will not be recognized and both Governments will take steps to look after the property of refugees and to restore it to its rightful owners. Each government is appointing a Custodian of Refugee Property.

8. Both Governments are thus devoting all their energies to the task of restoring peaceful conditions and protecting the life, honour and property of the people. They are determined to rid the Punjab of the present nightmare and make it once again the peaceful and happy land it was.

[Note on a Press Conference 3 Sept. 1947:

<http://pakistanspace.tripod.com/47_09.htm> In a conference held at Lahore by the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and his Pakistani counterpart Liaquat Ali Khan, the two premiers have reiterated 'the determination of the two Central and the two Provincial Governments that law and order should be immediately established and all lawlessness suppressed and punished'. It is also stated that 'illegal seizure of property will not be recognized and both Governments will take steps to look after the property of refugees and restore it to its rightful owners'.

Over the last few days they have carried out a joint tour of the affected areas in the now divided province of Punjab: Amritsar, Batala, Hoshiarpur, Lahore, and Shiekhupura. Most touching scenes were witnessed in the refugee camps where thousands of people from both sides are awaiting either exodus or rehabilitation. In a caravan along the road through Sheikhupura in Pakistan, an old peasant said: 'This country has seen many changes of rulers. They have come and gone. But this is the first time that with a change of rulers the *riyaya* (subjects) is also being forced to change.' An elderly Hindu woman said to Mr. Nehru, 'Partitions take place in all families. Property changes hands, but it is all arranged peacefully. Why this butchery, loot and abductions? Could you not do it the sensible way families divide?']