

Free World asked to help Bengali prisoners

Malik Raj is a Bengali studying in Vienna.

By Malik Raj

Contemporary history writes itself in nouns: Facism, Naziism, Hitler, Pearl Harbor, Dachau, Hiroshima, Suez, Viet Nam, Bangla Desh . . . names of violence and disaster, of guilt, betrayal, physical and spiritual exhaustion. Time and again the world has closed its

eyes to the sufferings of the Third World.

But it is time for the people and the press of the Free World to rise and put an end to the misery of the people of Bangla Desh stranded in Pakistan. These 400,000 Bengali civilians and military personnel (36,000) happened to be in Pakistan at the time of the liberation of Bangla Desh. They want desperately to

return to Bangla Desh, and Bengalis want them home.

Recently Pakistani police rounded up the Bengalis and put them in concentration camps. More than 2,000 civilians are held in jails under the so-called Defense of Pakistan Acts, without any charges being filed against them, and having none of the usual rights of prisoners.

Bail has been virtually impossible for these people. Many have been victims of constant harassment and naked discrimination. All Bengali language schools have been closed. But the greatest suffering is caused by the uncertainty of their future.

The Bengalis in Pakistan are clearly being held as political hostages. In April 1973, India and Bangla Desh offered to exchange the 400,000 Bengalis in Pakistan for the 260,000 Urdu-speaking Pakistanis now in Bangla Desh, who have opted for Pakistan. They also have offered 93,000 Pakistani prisoners of war, holding back only 195 wanted in Bangla Desh for trial.

These men are responsible for some of the most heinous acts of genocide the world has ever known: mass murder, rape and crimes against humanity. This exchange offer was made to Pakistan without any pre-conditions, on purely humanitarian grounds, and to hasten peace in the sub-continent. But Pakistan has totally ignored this appeal. To the contrary, Pakistani

guest opinion

President Bhutto has said that if Bangla Desh tries these 195, who are most responsible for the inhuman actions taken by Pakistan in 1971, Pakistan, as a retaliatory measure, will try the Bengali hostages.

The Free World must condemn this use of hundreds of thousands of helpless persons as political hostages. It is the moral obligation of the Free World to take all possible measures to stop this blackmail, and to bring this outrageous state of affairs to an end.

These Bengalis, both civilians and military, are absolutely innocent. They have committed no crime save that of indicating their wishes,

often on the prompting of the Pakistani government, to return to Bangla Desh, their mother country. The army personnel, who have been

removed from sensitive and responsible positions since before the December 1971 War of Liberation, did not and could not, directly or indirectly, take part in the freedom struggle of Bangla Desh. They and the other Bengalis just happened to be in Pakistan at the moment of liberation, serving the Pakistani government.

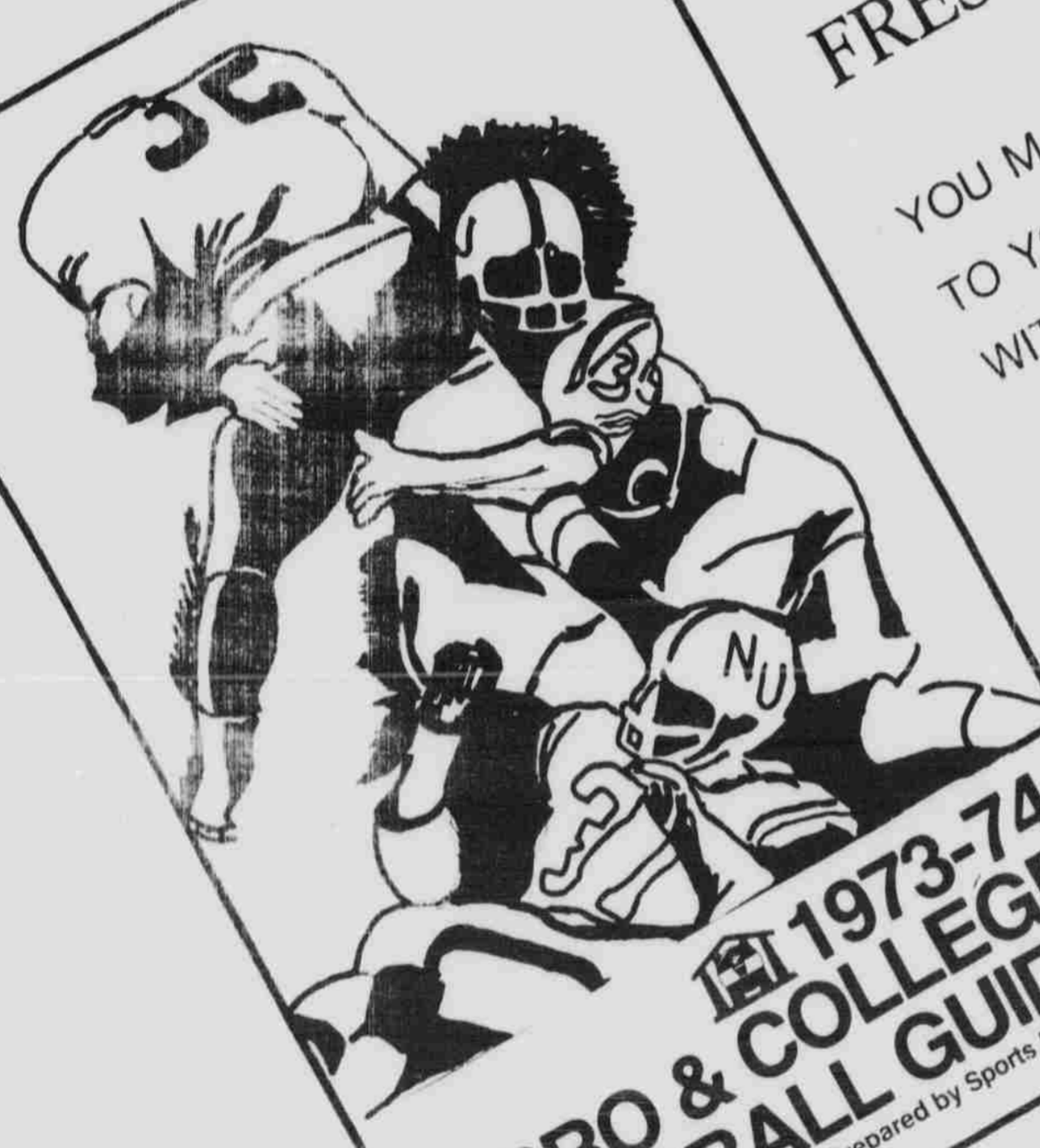
This use of blackmail by the Pakistani government must be met with immediate vigorous diplomatic pressure. The press of the Free World has a great role to play to bring this humanitarian issue to the knowledge of the people.

As Mark Twain once said, "A newspaper is not just for reporting the news as it is, but to make people mad enough to do something about it."

We Bengalis expect at least this much from the people and press of the Free World: to "do something about it" and now!



"Ahh! To be in America and be worried merely about the PRICE of food!"



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