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Subject BURMA-BANGLADESH BORDER TENSION

A copy of our Highlights piece this week is attached for information.

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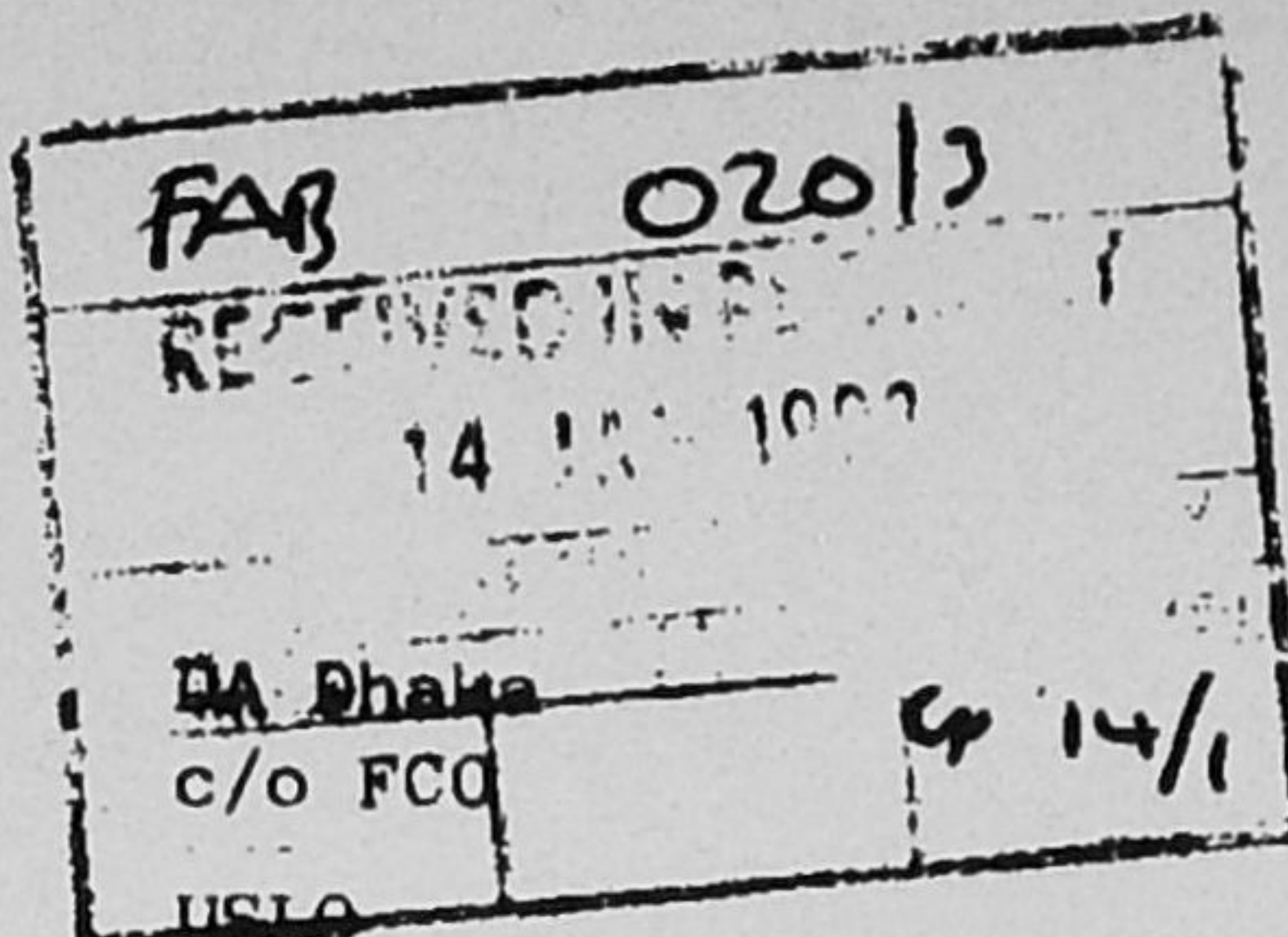
Mr Andrew Jackson  
Rm E318, SEAD  
FCO

Mr Paul Reddcliffe  
RAD, FCO

Mr Peter Balmer  
Secretariat F  
Cabinet Office

Box 850

DA Rangoon  
c/o FCO



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BANGLADESH/BURMA : BORDER INCIDENTS INCREASE TENSION

1. For the last three years the Bangladesh-Burma border has been quiet. But in Autumn 1991 the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) and the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front (ARIF) relaunched a campaign for an autonomous Muslim homeland in Arakan, Burma. The RSO is an Islamic group which claims a following of around 7000. It has the support of similar Islamic groups in Afghanistan, Kashmir, Libya, Malaysia, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The ARIF, which has about 1000 supporters, is less well armed and is reputed to be more moderate in its attitudes. Unconfirmed reports suggest that up to 50,000 Burmese Moslems (including RSO and ARIF activists) may have fled across the border to temporary camps in Bangladesh. (C)

2. In November a party of Rohingyas attacked a Burmese Army (BA) detachment across the frontier. The Burmese claimed that they had started out from Bangladesh. On 16 December a Bangladesh forestry worker was killed by the BA in a raid. On Saturday 21 December, a BA company size raid attacked a partly-occupied paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles post. One soldier was killed and seven wounded, and weapons were seized. Later a bomb attributed to the raiders went off killing a local villager and wounding five others. The incidents have occurred in hilly country where the Burmese suspect the RSO and ARIF have a number of secret training camps. The Burmese claim that the Bangladesh authorities have acquiesced in helping the militants. (U\C)

3. The Bangladesh approach has been to try to resolve the matter through diplomatic negotiations. (Although muslim, the Bangladesh Government is unlikely to want to be closely identified with militant activist movements and they will want to keep them at arms length). The Bangladesh Army has deployed an additional regular battalion to the border area, reinforced the Bangladesh Rifles and moved a flight (6) of aircraft to Chittagong. (C)

4. The Burmese appear to have misjudged the Bangladesh strength and response. Their reaction has been cumbersome and confused. At first they denied being involved, then they attributed the incidents to a misunderstanding, and more recently they have taken a harder line, accusing Bangladesh of assisting the militants. The outcome of the flag meeting on 7 January has yet to be reported. Meanwhile, the BA have moved about 12 battalions and aircraft into the area Southeast of the frontier, giving BA Western Command about 15,000 troops, mainly light infantry. The less experienced units would appear to be forward along the border. (C)

5. While Rangoon is not likely to admit to fault, both sides will not want to see the issue escalate into a major confrontation. Dhaka wants another flag meeting on 16 January. A Foreign Ministers meeting may follow. Meanwhile the flow of refugees continues. The problems on the border will not disappear. Unless current diplomatic attempts succeed, the likelihood of further clashes may grow through the carelessness or incompetence of one or more of the parties involved. (S)

*p/9  
Burma  
Bangladesh*