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FM RANGOON
TO IMMEDIATE FCO
TELNO 419
OF 270800Z DECEMBER 91
INFO IMMEDIATE MODUK, DHAKA

1AB 020/9 p/a Burma/Bangladesh

RECEIVED IN REGISTRY	
13 JAN 1992	
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DHAKA TELNOS 761 AND 764 : BANGLADESH/BURMA BORDER CLASH

SUMMARY

1. DEMARCHES BY THE BANGLADESHI CHARGE D'AFFAIRES. CONFUSED RESPONSES INITIALLY BY THE BURMESE BUT POSITION NOW APPARENTLY HARDENING. POSSIBLE BURMESE TROOP REINFORCEMENTS TO THE BORDER.

DETAIL

2. THE BANGLADESHI CHARGE D'AFFAIRES AND DEFENCE ATTACHE AT MY REQUEST BRIEFED ME THIS MORNING ON THE CURRENT POSITION. THE CHARGE SAID THAT ALTHOUGH THE INCIDENT ON 21 DECEMBER WAS THE FIRST FORMALLY REGISTERED CLASH BETWEEN BURMESE AND BANGLADESHI SECURITY FORCES FOR MANY YEARS, TENSION HAD BEEN BUILDING UP IN THE AREA SINCE MID-NOVEMBER. A CLASH HAD OCCURRED ON 10 NOVEMBER WHEN A GROUP OF ABOUT 30 - 40 ARMED ARIF GUERILLAS RAIDED A BURMESE BORDER POST CAUSING THE DEATH OF SEVERAL BURMESE CIVILIANS AND ONE BURMESE BORDER GUARD. THIS INCIDENT HAD ONLY BEEN REFERRED TO BRIEFLY DURING THE BANGLADESHI FOREIGN MINISTER'S VISIT AT THE END OF NOVEMBER (PARA 6 OF SHELTON'S TELELETTER OF 27 NOVEMBER). BUT ON 11 DECEMBER MY BANGLADESHI COLLEAGUE HAD BEEN CALLED IN TO THE MFA TO RECEIVE A PROTEST ABOUT THE 10 NOVEMBER INCIDENT WHICH ACCUSED THE BANGLADESHI GOVERNMENT OF HARBOURING ROHINGYA INSURGENTS IN A NUMBER OF CAMPS JUST INSIDE THE BANGLADESHI BORDER AND A LIST OF SOME 200 NAMES OF SUCH PURPORTED INSURGENTS WAS HANDED OVER. THE BANGLADESHI RESPONSE, WHICH HAD BEEN ROBUST, WAS THAT THE PEOPLE CONCERNED WERE REFUGEES AND NOT INSURGENTS AND THE BANGLADESHI GOVERNMENT DENIED HAVING ANY CONNECTION WITH ARIF.

3. FOLLOWING THE INCIDENT ON 21 DECEMBER (FIRST TUR) THE CHARGE HAD RECEIVED INSTRUCTIONS TO MAKE A PARALLEL DEMARCHE TO THAT BEING CARRIED OUT BY THE BANGLADESHI MFA (SECOND TUR). THIS HE EFFECTED EARLY ON 23 DECEMBER WHEN HE DELIVERED A NOTE WHICH QUOTE EXPRESSED CONCERN UNQUOTE OVER THE INCIDENT AND ASKED THE BURMESE TO TAKE STEPS TO RETURN THE WEAPONS STOLEN, PROVIDE COMPENSATION TO THOSE KILLED OR INJURED AND REDUCE TENSION. IT ALSO PROPOSED FURTHER NEGOTIATIONS ON THE REFUGEE/INSURGENT

PROBLEM. THE MFA'S INITIAL RESPONSE AT DESK LEVEL (DIRECTOR OF SEA DIVISION) WAS CONCILIATORY AND REGRET WAS EXPRESSED. BUT THE DEFENCE ATTACHE WHO WAS SUMMONED THE SAME MORNING BY THE DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF INTELLIGENCE, COLONEL THAN TUN, WAS GIVEN A RATHER DIFFERENT RECEPTION. BRANDISHING A BANGKOK NEWSPAPER ARTICLE OF THE PREVIOUS DAY THAN TUN LAUNCHED INTO A DIATRIBE AGAINST THE ACTIVITIES OF ARIF INSURGENTS, CLAIMED THAT THE INCIDENT ON 21 DECEMBER HAD TAKEN PLACE ON BURMESE TERRITORY AND HAD INVOLVED AN ATTACK BY ARIF INSURGENTS ON A BDR PATROL AND DENIED ANY INVOLVEMENT BY THE BURMESE ARMY IN THE INCIDENT.

4. WHILE THE EMBASSY WAS DIGESTING THIS APPARENTLY CONTRADICTORY BURMESE ATTITUDE, THE CHARGE RECEIVED A SUMMONS ON THE AFTERNOON OF 23 DECEMBER TO BE GIVEN A REPLY TO THE NOTE HE HAD HANDED OVER THAT MORNING. HE WAS RECEIVED AT A MORE SENIOR LEVEL (ACTING POLITICAL DIRECTOR GENERAL, U AYE) WHO CHALLENGED THE BANGLADESHI ACCOUNT OF THE INCIDENT IN TERMS ALMOST IDENTICAL TO THAT USED EARLIER THAT MORNING BY COLONEL THAN TUN. HE DENIED THAT THE INCIDENT HAD BEEN ON BANGLADESHI TERRITORY. HE SAID THAT IT HAD BEEN ESSENTIALLY A CLASH INVOLVING INSURGENT GROUPS FROM ARIF AND THE BURMESE COMMUNIST PARTY (EXCLAM). THERE HAD BEEN NO ATTACK ON ANY BDR OUTPOST. BUT HE ADMITTED THAT THE BURMESE SECURITY FORCES HAD BEEN INVOLVED ALTHOUGH IN QUOTE SELF DEFENCE UNQUOTE. U AYE ALSO DREW THE CHARGE'S ATTENTION TO THE INCIDENT ON 10 NOVEMBER AND THE PROTEST HANDED OVER TO THE BANGLADESHI AMBASSADOR ON 11 DECEMBER. THE CHARGE REASSERTED THE BANGLADESHI ACCOUNT OF THE INCIDENT.

5. ON 24 DECEMBER THE CHARGE RECEIVED INSTRUCTIONS TO MAKE A FURTHER DEMARCHE. BUT HE WAS NOT GIVEN AN APPOINTMENT UNTIL 26 DECEMBER WHEN HE WAS AGAIN RECEIVED BY U AYE. HE HANDED OVER A FURTHER NOTE WHICH MADE TWO POINTS:

- (A) THE BANGLADESHI AUTHORITIES WERE PREPARED TO FLY THE BURMESE AMBASSADOR AND DEFENCE ATTACHE IN DHAKA TO THE SITE TO SEE FOR THEMSELVES AND
- (B) THEY REQUEST THAT A QUOTE FLAG MEETING UNQUOTE SHOULD BE ARRANGED UNDER THE TERMS OF THE 1978 BORDER ARRANGEMENT AGREEMENT TO DISCUSS THE INCIDENT.

U AYE MERELY TOOK NOTE AND SAID THAT THESE PROPOSALS WOULD BE CONSIDERED BY THE APPROPRIATE AUTHORITIES.

6. THE DEFENCE ATTACHE, COMMENTING ON THE BBC REPORTS OF BURMESE ARMY TROOP CONCENTRATIONS, SAID THAT HE HAD RECEIVED RELIABLE EVIDENCE THAT THESE HAD BEEN TAKING PLACE OVER THE LAST WEEK.

HE ASSESSED THE CURRENT STRENGTH OF THE BURMESE SECURITY FORCES IN THE IMMEDIATE AREA OF THE INCIDENT BEFORE IT OCCURRED AS THE EQUIVALENT OF ONE FULL BATTALION IE. 500 MEN. HOWEVER ON 20 DECEMBER, THREE FURTHER BATTALIONS HAD BEEN MOVED UP TO THE AREA FROM BUTHIDAUNG. A FURTHER TWO BATTALIONS FROM SITTWE, FURTHER SOUTH, HAD BEEN MOVED INTO THE AREA ON 24 DECEMBER. DURING THE SAME PERIOD SOME TWO BATTALIONS OF ADDITIONAL TROOPS HAD BEEN MOVED FROM MONYWA TO AN AREA ON THE BORDER TO THE EAST OF THE INCIDENT NEAR PALETWA. LOCAL REPORTS SAID THAT THE TROOPS WERE DIGGING IN. THERE WAS ALSO, HE SAID, EVIDENCE THAT THE BURMESE HAD MOVED SOME NAVAL CRAFT UP THE MAYU RIVER FROM SITTWE TO THE NORTH OF BUTHIDAUNG. I HAVE NO WAY OF KNOWING WHETHER THESE REPORTS ARE ACCURATE (THERE HAS BEEN NOTHING AT ALL ABOUT THE 21 DECEMBER INCIDENT IN THE OFFICIAL MEDIA) BUT THEY GO SOME WAY TO CONFIRMING WHAT THE BBC IS CLAIMING. THE DA'S VIEW WAS THAT THE ATTACK ON 21 DECEMBER HAD BEEN DESIGNED AS RETALIATION FOR THE 10 NOVEMBER INCIDENT.

COMMENT

7. DESPITE THE TROOP MOVEMENTS BY THE BURMESE ARMY AND THE OBDURATE REFUSAL OF THE BURMESE AUTHORITIES TO ADMIT THE FACTS OF THE INCIDENT, IT SEEMS UNLIKELY THAT THE BURMESE ARE REALLY INTENDING TO ESCALATE THIS INTO A SERIOUS ARMED CONFRONTATION. BUT THEY ARE UNLIKELY TO BACK DOWN PUBLICLY AND THE REGIME'S INCREASING PARANOIA ABOUT THREATS TO NATIONAL SECURITY MAKE IT UNLIKELY THAT THIS WILL BLOW OVER QUICKLY, PARTICULARLY SINCE THEY SHOW LITTLE DISPOSITION TO RELAX THEIR POLICY OF SYSTEMATIC REPRESSION OF THE MUSLIM POPULATION IN ARAKAN STATE FOR LARGELY POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC REASONS.

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