

## GREAT BRITAIN

# Britain's Bengalis: the latest victims of racist violence

By Mervyn Jones

L O N D O N

**G**HETTO IS AN EMOTIVE WORD, AND AT THE moment it is being splashed over the headlines of London newspapers. The reason is the decision by the Greater London Council's housing department to concentrate people of a certain racial origin—Bengalis—in earmarked public housing projects. The move is backed by both Tory and Labour GLC members because it has been made at the request of the Bengalis themselves. However, it is a departure from normal British policy, which favors dispersal and ethnic mixing.

Behind the headlines, there's an ugly story of intimidation and violence. It has been going on for years, and the fact that it has only just broken surface because of the "ghetto" decision bears witness to the general indifference to the conditions of ethnic minorities.

The district where the Bengalis live, Spitalfields, is on the eastern borders of London. There is a dramatic contrast (like the contrast between Wall Street and New York's Chinatown) between the city, the financial center and office district where a million people work and only a few thousand sleep, and the crowded, poverty-stricken streets of Spitalfields.

Spitalfields could be claimed as the world's oldest industrial district. Around the year 1700, it became the center of the clothing industry—in both wool and silk—in which religious dissenters were prominent. It was the place of refuge for French Protestants driven into exile by Catholic persecution, and at this period French was the main language heard in its narrow streets. History lives on in names like Weaver St., Worship St., Quaker St., Fournier St., Fleur-de-Lis St.

By the 19th century, the industry had changed in that its products were cheap cottons. Both employers and workers were now, in the great majority, Jews from eastern Europe. This was the period of notorious sweatshops, in which women especially toiled long hours for starvation wages. Early socialists were active in campaigning against these abuses.

Since World War II, the Jews have largely vanished from Spitalfields and its workshops, although some Jewish names remain among the employers. A new sub-proletariat arrived—Bengali by language, Moslem by religion, coming from what was East Pakistan and is now Bangladesh. The whole story is told by a handsome building in the heart of Spitalfields, on which the date 1741 is still legible. It was built as a French Protestant church (there were 30 in the neighborhood at one time); it figures as the Great Synagogue in Arnold Wesker's illustrated book about his childhood; and it is now the Great Mosque.

The Bengalis were open to exploitation by both employers and landlords. Most of them spoke no English, and the women were debarred by purdah from social life.

Wages that were atrocious by British standards were nevertheless far better than any they had known before migrating, and the rooms in the old houses were comfortable after the hovels of Dacca. These houses, however, are undoubtedly slums. They would have been demolished if their history, and remnants of their original beauty, hadn't qualified them for conservation.

In the last 20 years, Bengalis have ceased to be uncomprehending victims. A new English-speaking generation has emerged from the schools. Workers have learned to join trade unions, and the community has been standing up for its rights and exerting pressure on the local bureaucracy. Meanwhile, population growth and the demand for decent living conditions has obliged the Council to house Bengali families in the public housing that constitutes the accommodation for most people in London's East End.

## Racist slogans on the door.

Here they came up against the people of adjacent districts, either native English or Irish. Racist feeling developed, fostered by the National Front, which has made a big propaganda drive in the East End over the past decade. There is also a ranking order in the housing projects. Some, built around asphalt yards in the 1920s and 1930s, have the atmosphere of antiquated tenements and have deteriorated badly; others, more recent and with good gardens and playgrounds, are quite pleasant. Agitation began to keep the latter as white preserves and stop them from being "spoilt" by the Asians.

In one incident that I know of, a Bengali family was given an apartment in what had been an all-white building. Racist slogans were daubed on the door, windows were broken, the children were harassed by white kids on their way to school, the mother was jostled or tripped so often that she didn't dare to do her marketing until her husband returned from work. After two weeks, the family gave up the tenancy. They preferred to live as squatters in a condemned tenement, because they would be among their own people.

In another incident, a crowd—in which a local NF organizer was recognized—gathered to stop a Bengali family's furniture from being unloaded and installed. The police were called, and an officer said: "We can get you moved in, but we can't stick around to protect you." The Council gave this family a transfer to a safer location.

Both these incidents, and others of the kind, occurred in 1976. They received little publicity, nor was there any determined action to uphold the rights of the Asians. Bengalis to whom I've talked regard the borough councillors (practically all La-

bour, naturally) and the police as at best evasive and indifferent, at worst prejudiced.

## Atmosphere of terror.

Meanwhile, in the heart of Spitalfields itself, there was a concerted effort to scare the Bengalis off the streets. Gangs of youths, arriving on motor-bikes, created an atmosphere of terror. The NF held provocative marches and rallies at peak shopping times. Asians were cornered and attacked, sometimes beaten up and sometimes knifed. For a time there was a virtual curfew and Asians didn't dare to leave their homes after dark (a great deprivation, since they are fond of gathering in cafes and going to Bengali-language movie houses).

An Anti-Racist Committee was formed and proved effective by setting up protection patrols. The neighborhood became reasonably safe. But the patrols couldn't do much for Asian families who were isolated in more distant housing projects. Moreover, in 1978 the situation has worsened again. This may be the result of the NF's defeat in the recent municipal elections, when it failed to elect a single borough councillor, even in areas where it had campaigned intensively. To attract a maximum vote, an effort had been made to throw off the "thug" image, and Front members who indulged in street attacks had been warned off or disciplined. In a mood of disappointment, the "soft" policy was discounted and the inhibitions against violence were removed.

That is the background to the "ghetto" decision. Bengali community groups have petitioned the GLC to give them housing priority in projects close to Spitalfields, even though these are of older construction and inferior quality and even though a renunciation of housing opportunities elsewhere is implied. The GLC's agreement is probably sensible, but it reflects a sad state of affairs.

In the same week, the borough of Ealing (in west London) abandoned its busing policy. There is a close-knit, almost ghetto-like Indian community in one part of this borough, and since 1970 the Council has enforced a policy designed to prevent a concentration in any school of more than 40 percent of pupils belonging to any ethnic group. Indian kids have, therefore, been taken by bus to schools in white neighborhoods—never the other way about. Now the Council has decided to phase out this policy, ending it by 1983, with the known result that some schools will have at least a 75 percent Indian enrollment.

It ought to be said that there are many harmonious and conflict-free multi-ethnic districts in London and throughout Britain. Still, the trend seems to be going the wrong way. ■

## GUYANA

# Government wins the right to rewrite constitution

By Jay R. Mandle and Joan D. Mandle

**I**N CLAIMING 97 PERCENT SUPPORT in a July 10 referendum, the government of Prime Minister Forbes Burnham in Guyana accomplished a virtual political *coup d'état*. The referendum authorized postponement of elections, which had been constitutionally required not later than October 1978, and changed the amending provision of the Guyanese constitution so that the government is now able to impose a new constitution on the country.

This political stroke occurred at a time when opposition to the Peoples National Congress (PNC) regime had reached firestorm proportions.

PNC support has eroded even among such traditional sources of strength as the largely Afro-Guyanese bauxite workers in the mining town of Linden.

The opposition stems from the government's inability to reverse the sharp and steady decline in living conditions that has occurred during the last two years. Food and basic commodities like soap are scarce and require hours of waiting in line before they can be obtained; elec-

tric power was practically unavailable in the capital city of Georgetown for a two-week period in March and April and still is subject to periodic cut-offs; the water

**The Burnham government has been losing support. To ensure its rule, it launched the new referendum. Opponents called a boycott.**

supply is also unreliable, partly because of the problem with electricity, with water sometimes dark in color, sometimes salty in taste and occasionally unobtainable.

The left in Guyana has enjoyed considerable success in turning this discontent into a political force. Much of the credit for this can be assigned to a change in strategy by Dr. Cheddi Jagan's People's Progressive Party (PPP). In Guyana's racially charged environment, the PPP, despite

its desires to the contrary, remains a basically Indo-Guyanese party. Recognizing this fact and conceding that it is unlikely that large numbers of Afro-Guyanese are likely to join the party no matter how deep their feelings of estrangement from the PNC, Jagan and his party have called for the formation of a National Front Government. It would include "all parties and groups which are progressive, anti-imperialist and wish to see Guyana take a socialist-oriented or non-capitalist path of development."

## Government stifles opposition.

In the referendum vote, the electorate approved an amendment to the constitution stipulating that further changes in the constitution would require only a two-thirds vote of parliament, instead of a two-thirds vote and a referendum. With the PNC already controlling two-thirds of the parliament from the rigged 1973 elections, the government announced that the present parliament would transform itself into a constituent assembly that would draft a new constitution over the next 12 to 18 months. This would extend the life of the parliament far beyond its constitutionally defined period of life as well as grant-

ing it constitution-writing power.

Opposition to the referendum came from the Guyana Council of Churches, lawyers groups, unions, teacher associations, as well as the more directly political organizations. A Committee in Defense of Democracy (CDD) was organized. Demonstrations and public meetings were held throughout the country, including one in which the leading Guyanese poet, Martin Carter, was severely beaten.

But the PNC, by their control of the electoral machinery, were able to assure an affirmative vote. And the Guyana Defense Force has remained loyal to the government and to Burnham in particular. Army maneuvers were frequent and obvious as the referendum date drew close.

Faced with an inevitable PNC "victory" at the polls, Dr. Jagan finally called upon the opponents of the referendum to boycott the polls and signal their discontent by not participating in the vote. As of this writing the effectiveness of the boycott is subject to debate, though it appears that voter despair would have kept the turn-out low in any case. ■

Jay and Joan Mandle recently returned from Guyana.



## UNITED NATIONS

## UN investigators sour on Nestle milk

By Bruce Vandervort

GENEVA

IT HAS BEEN A ROUGH YEAR FOR Nestle, the world's biggest food company. First there was the consumers' boycott, led by the INFAC coalition in Minneapolis. INFAC and its supporters say that Nestle endangers the lives of children in developing countries through misleading advertising of its infant formula. In May this controversy fell into the laps of Sen. Edward Kennedy and his Senate Health and Anti-Trust Committee.

Now, the Swiss Bern Declaration Group, which since 1968 has defended the interests of developing countries, claims to have proof that Nestle and other Swiss multinationals "infiltrated" the UN. This charge might seem a bit strange, except for the fact that Switzerland is not yet a member of the UN. This gives a certain flavor to the "infiltration" charge.

The Bern Declaration Group has released excerpts from leaked company documents to show that Nestle and five other Swiss multi-national corporations conspired with a former president of the Swiss Federal Council to "subvert" a UN inquiry into the impact of multinationals on development and international affairs. The investigation, carried out by a so-called "Group of Eminent Persons" in 1973-74, had been launched at the request of the Allende government of Chile. The firms involved, in addition to Nestle, were Ciba-Geigy, Hoffmann-La Roche, Sandoz, Brown-Boveri, and Sulzer.

### Defending Swiss interests.

Nestle will be familiar to U.S. readers as the owner of the Libby canning company and the purveyor of Nescafe, Nestea and Nestle's chocolate. Ciba-Geigy, Hoffmann-La Roche and Sandoz together account for around 15 percent of the world's pharmaceutical sales, with Hoffmann-La Roche occupying the top rung among drug multinationals (1977 sales: some \$2.8 billion).

The six Swiss companies appear to have been afraid that the UN inquiry might result in a binding "code of conduct" on multinationals in developing countries. Given the size of the Swiss market, all of them have extensive holdings or outlets abroad. Nestle, for example, does 97 percent of its business outside Switzerland. Their fears began to border on hysteria when they realized that, Switzerland not being a UN member, no Swiss had been asked to join the panel. They therefore intervened with Bern to get a Nestle official named to the "Group of Eminent Persons."

When this scheme failed to impress the UN, the Swiss government put up the name of Hans Schaffner, an ex-president of the Swiss Federal Council and a vice-president of the Sandoz drug company. The UN accepted. To this day, however, it is unclear which of his two hats Schaffner was wearing during his tenure on the UN panel. The Bern Declaration Group says he was a Swiss government envoy. The Swiss government denies this. Schaffner will only say that he was defending "Swiss interests."

### Disciplining "extreme leftists."

In any case, it would appear that Schaffner worked closely with a "coordinating" body set up by the six Swiss firms. Letters in the possession of the Bern Declaration Group show that he slipped confidential UN documents to the combine through Sandoz's head office in Basel. And, it likewise appears that when the "Group of Eminent Persons" came to Geneva in November 1973 to interview multinational executives, Schaffner leaked the list of questions to his corporate contacts in advance.

In return, the Swiss multinationals are alleged to have fed Schaffner with information to refute critics of transnational



Tom Greensfelder

## The Swiss companies were not about to let the UN investigate the role of multinationals.

practice. Ciba-Geigy also seems to have supplied him with a translator and, on one occasion, Nestle is said to have paid a consultant \$345 a day to prepare reports for his use. The leaked company correspondence also indicates that the firms set out to "discipline" members of the "Group of Eminent Persons" that Schaffner considered to be hostile to multinationals.

One of the targets was Dr. Sicco Mansholt, ex-president of the European Economic Community, described in one letter as "perfidious-acting and extreme leftist." A second seems to have been Hans Matthoefer, the current West German Minister of Finance, also termed an "extreme leftist." (Matthoefer is an ex-official of the West German Metal Workers' Union, IG Metall.) The Swiss multinationals apparently contacted the Dutch electrical and electronics transnational, Philips, to ask how Mansholt's "extremism" could be "made to follow a more reasonable course." (Mansholt is a Dutch socialist.)

One "Eminent Person" that Schaffner apparently did get on with was the American representative, Sen. Jacob Javits (R-NY). The leaked company correspondence shows that the U.S. and Swiss governments saw eye-to-eye on the UN inves-

tigation. At the time, Javits called the panel's final report biased against the multinationals. Schaffner put together a dissenting opinion to its findings—with a little help from his friends.

### Imperial reasoning.

In retrospect, the whole episode could be written off as paranoid corporate fantasies. The UN inquiry did not pillory the multinationals, as Nestle had feared, much less devise a binding "code of conduct" to govern their operations. All of that, however, is irrelevant in the end. The information assembled by the Bern Declaration Group is useful for the insight it gives into the lengths to which multinational corporations will go when they perceive their interests to be in jeopardy.

The Bern Declaration Group papers underscore the point that multinationals, like big power governments, reason "imperial" when faced by threats, real or imagined, to their "global reach." It wasn't the 1973-74 UN inquiry itself that bothered Nestle, but the principle of oversight of MNC operations by a supranational body uncontrolled by business.

Nestle is still having its troubles with the UN. In the early '70s, Nestle and some 100 other agribusiness multinationals formed something called the Industry

Cooperative Program (ICP) within the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Rome. Being on the inside helped the agribusiness transnationals to ensure that the FAO's multi-million dollar programs for food aid and agricultural development didn't interfere with their own activities in these areas. The Bern Group also claims that Nestle tried to get the FAO to suppress an article in one of its publications that questioned multinational methods of peddling baby foods in developing countries.

Last year, following charges of obstructionism and influence-peddling by developing nations, the ICP was kicked out of the FAO. Since then, it has been lobbying the UN for a permanent slot in its system, with headquarters in Geneva. On April 6, the Geneva press reported that "former Federal Councillor Hans Schaffner" had been asked to "intervene with [UN General Secretary] Kurt Waldheim" on behalf of the Swiss members of the ICP. Which hat will he be wearing this time?

*For the full story on Nestle and its friends and the UN, write to: Erklarung von Bern, Gartenhofstrasse 27, 8004 Zurich, Switzerland. English version of documents available. No charge, but Bern Group would welcome contributions.*

## Rhodesia's real plan

By Brigitte Kirch &amp; Bill Hansen

The so-called internal settlement signed in Salisbury on March 3 has been hailed by much of the press as an agreement ending white domination and bringing about majority rule in Zimbabwe. In the House of Commons, British Foreign Secretary David Owen referred to the agreement as "a step in the right direction." The U.S. government has characterized it as being indicative of progress. But in which direction and progress for whom?

Perhaps the best answer to that question was provided by the Rhodesian Foreign Minister, P.K. van der Byl, at a closed all white meeting in the town of Chisipite on April 19. The meeting was part of a series held by the regime to explain the

terms of the settlement to Rhodesia's white population. Secret notes now in our possession and taken by one of those attending the meeting indicate that van der Byl told his audience that the ruling Rhodesian Front Party still adhered to the principles it stood for in 1962 when it was formed—that is continued domination by Rhodesia's whites. He told his audience, however, that times had changed and some cosmetic changes while maintaining the reality of continued white domination.

"According to all our friends," remarked the foreign minister, "we have to accept majority rule in one form or another. What we achieved," he went on to say, "is a masterpiece as a politico-diplomatic exercise. No one ever believed that we could get the internal leaders to agree to so much." Van der Byl explained that the settlement was so constructed as to prevent changes of any significance from taking place but had the "advantage of authentic black nationalists de-

fending our position." At another point in the speech, he said, "Also our forces will remain intact and will always defend us against illegal action."

Van der Byl also told his audience that the three black signatories—Abel Muzorewa, Ndabaningi Sithole, and Jeremiah Chirau—had joined the Rhodesian Front in rejecting any new conference that would include the Patriotic Front, while at the same time they (the black signatories) were trying to get the PF guerrillas to lay down their arms and surrender because "We cannot kill them all off, unfortunately." Besides, he added, "We are not going to have a conference with a pack of blacks."

In another reference to the government's black allies van der Byl said, "Our black collaborators want us for the disciplining of the black elements. They realize too that if the PF was to win they would be the sufferers because they have put their heads on the block of the Salisbury Agreement."