

FOCUS

# Karachi in Flames

An Exclusive Interview with MQM's Leader-in-Exile Altaf Hussain

by Shekhar Gupta

By arrangement with INDIA TODAY

THE Indian subcontinent is no stranger to the species: the charismatic rabble-rouser who articulates a minority's real and imagined sense of discrimination and builds it into a mass persecution complex and, ultimately, a militant movement. But Altaf Hussain, 41, the supreme of Pakistan's Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM) — the refugees' national front — and the most wanted man in Pakistan, is in a class apart. Unscathed by allegations of fascism, extortion and terrorism, his party commands almost total sway among the nearly 20-million-strong community of Urdu-speaking Pakistanis who migrated from India during the Partition, and now forms the majority in Sindh's urban centres. For nearly a decade, the party has held sway in the province's cities, sweeping elections when it has participated in them, or otherwise holding them, including Karachi, to ransom.

The violence in Karachi is complicated by religious and sectarian factors and the drug mafia. But the primary discord is ethnic, with the armed militants of the MQM fighting rival factions within the Mohajir community and militants of other ethnicities besides government forces. The toll in 1994 was 1,800. This year, the toll has already crossed the 800 mark and there is no sign of a let-up. Last month, Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto squarely blamed the MQM for the trouble and called its cadres "gun-toting rats".

With the police and the army hunting for him, Hussain has been in exile in London for nearly two years. But his charisma is intact, as evident from the large crowds that gather in Karachi to listen to his live "phone-in" speeches relayed on cellular phones — at one time, he addressed 19 different meetings simultaneously. Never short on rhetoric, Hussain, the son of a station master of pre-Partition Agra railway station, and the grandson of the Grand Mufti of Agra, had never spoken to the Indian media, fearing that they would buttress charges of his having links with India. Last fortnight, he broke this silence and spoke to The INDIA TODAY Senior Editor Shekhar Gupta for over two hours at his home in northern London's upmarket Mill Hill area. Excerpts:

**Q. How does it feel to live in exile?**

A. One who hasn't suffered it cannot understand it. The Mohajirs of Pakistan have already suffered the curse once in 1947. They left in India the graves of their ancestors, their cultural heritage, all the memories attached with that soil. And for so many of us, now exiled, fearing for our lives in Pakistan, this is the repeat of that curse.

**Q. How do you look back on Partition?**

A. The Hindus and Muslims were fighting for independence together. But the British created distrust between them. The leaders of the Hindus as well as the Muslims are to blame, for it only they had accepted each other's existence and rights, the

Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and all the others would have continued living together as they had done for centuries. There would have then been no relevance of the two-nation theory, and India would not have been divided. Gandhi did not want India's division. He wanted all religions to live together. But there were some biased Hindu leaders. The point is, what had to happen, happened. Our ancestors suffered migration, and the curse has stayed with us.

**Q. Has the two-nation theory been successful?**

A. Today the theory has become the butt of jokes. Pakistan was made in the name of Islam. But two and a half lakh Urdu-speaking Pakistanis (the so-called Biharis) who did not support the Bengali independence

movement, and were victimised, have been waiting to return to Pakistan since the fall of Dhaka. Many of these people lost their fathers defending Pakistan's integrity. Our country's leaders shed tears for Muslims wherever they are victimised. But they have no time for their own people who defended the two-nation theory. And the Mohajirs have been victimised politically and economically. Are you then surprised that people laugh at the theory?

**Q. Why did you leave Pakistan?**

A. I am not afraid of jail or courts. But my partymen requested me. 'Altaf bhai, it is time for you to lead us from where you can be safe from assassination plans being hatched by

feudo-democracy. This is a rule of the feudals, for the feudals, by the feudals. Extra-judicial executions have become the order of the day. Mohajir boys are picked up, tortured at night, their bodies thrown on the streets the next day. And the Government says they were killed in encounters. There are some people in the ruling hierarchy who want to paint Mohajirs as Indian agents.

**Q. Who are these people?**

A. The same people who first called the Bengalis Indian agents. Then they called the Baluch people Indian agents. Then the Pakhtoons, the Sindhis, and now the Mohajirs are being called Indian agents. There is a section of people here which wants

Benazir's village. She has two faces. One, for the West, is secular and democratic. The other, the real one, in Pakistan, is that of a dictator, feudal and tyrant. She says, 'I'm not the prime minister. I'm the queen of the country. All of you act like my subjects'. She and her types hate me because I'm not a feudal, nor a tribal head, nor a capitalist.

**Q. Nor a general?**

A. Yes. And nor was my father a general. So they hate me. Because they know that I come from among the real masses. Only the MQM is an organisation where you cannot name one elected member who is a feudal or a capitalist. So all the power barons and corrupt generals are afraid of it.

### THE MQM'S DEMANDS

- Discontinuation of operations against Mohajirs and withdrawal of all military and paramilitary forces from civilian areas.
- Representation proportionate to the population in the national and provincial assemblies and the Senate.
- Increase in urban quota in federal and provincial services.
- Sharing of the posts of governor and chief minister of Sindh in rotation by Mohajirs and Sindhis.
- Repatriation of Pakistanis stranded in Bangladesh without further delay.
- Compensation for MQM workers killed or injured and for their loss of property.
- Unconditional withdrawal of cases against MQM leaders.

government agencies'. The fact is, we pine to go back to our country despite the atrocities. We are not separatists.

**Q. But what are you fighting for?**

A. Equality for the Mohajir people. Then, against feudalism, power barons and undemocratic forces. Pakistan does not have a real democracy. It has a pseudo- or rather, a

to prove that only they are patriots and the others are all traitors.

**Q. That leaves only the Punjabis.**

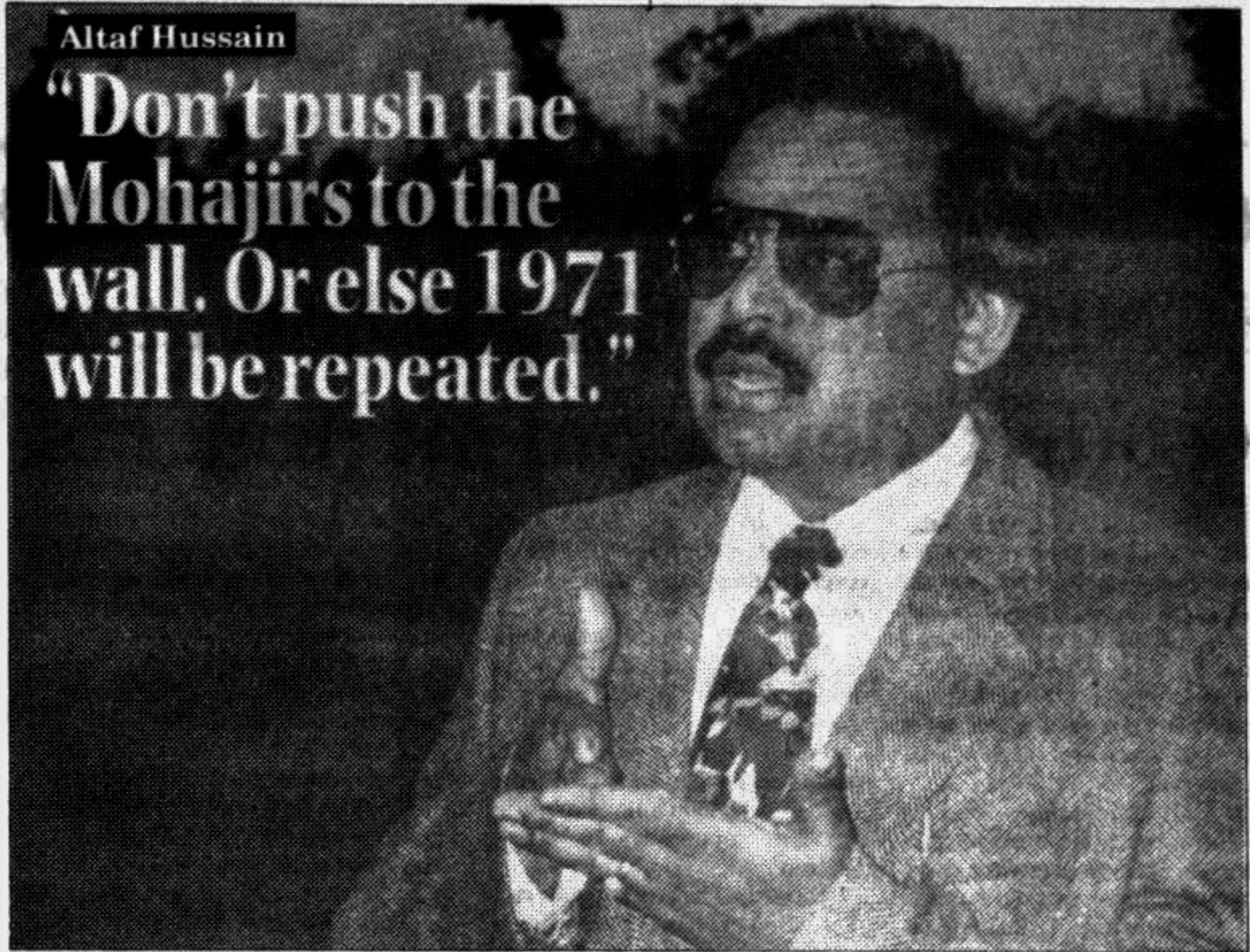
A. Yes. But not all the Punjabis are like that. The problem is a section of the ruling elite. They tell the Punjabis that the loyalty of the Pathans, Baluch, Sindhis and Mohajirs is suspect. Even common Punjabis are victimised. They are made to live like slaves. Like the people who work in

**Q. But a lot of people believe that the MQM ran torture cells and held Karachi under siege.**

A. Okay, if you were under siege by a terrorist organisation and someone freed you, wouldn't you be happy? So, when the army launched a campaign against the MQM in Karachi and other urban areas of Sindh, people should have welcomed them. Did anyone come to the streets to welcome the army? People were crying. Their babies were being massacred. People were treated as prisoners of war, as in an occupied nation. There were cries of distress all over, corpses were surfacing in the streets, fathers were killed in place of sons, brother in place of brother. Every house was in mourning.

**Q. I know many people in Pakistan who differ with that.**

A. Well, government propaganda was that people were happy. If that was the case, why did the army generals, in the 1993 elections, tell us not to participate? They said, 'Contest only from four constituencies. Why? Because they were scared that if the MQM swept the polls, they would be exposed. At the same time, if we boycotted completely, their election would have no credibility. So they wanted a situation where they could say that we contested but won only four seats. This, after the army had run a year-long operation, killed thousands of our people and circulated fake pictures of our alleged torture cells. How would the army have looked if we had still won the election?



knows these agencies hire terrorist groups. Look at the MQM (Haqiqi). It is no MQM faction. General Asif Nawaz picked all the people expelled from the MQM, trained them and armed them with weapons and the licence to kill.

**Q. But why should the Government do this? This only embarrasses it.**

A. Because they are mad. That is all I can say. Dictators think like that. They think they are gods. Didn't the

integrity of any nation. India should accept Pakistan's existence. The two should solve the Kashmir problem. The Indian Government must stop atrocities over the Kashmiris. They should be allowed to decide their fate, whether they want to live with India or Pakistan, or if they want to choose another option. Ask them to stop the atrocities.

**Q. What have the Muslims of the subcontinent lost and gained since Partition? How does the balance sheet read?**

A. If you look at it materialistically, we have lost everything. But if you look at it spiritually, we have built a country for the Muslims. So the spiritual success is there. That satisfaction is there. As far as material gains are concerned, bhai, we have

gained nothing. Materially, it is a case of na khuda hee mila, na visaal-e-sanam, na idhar ke rahe, na udhar ke rahe (I got neither God, nor a glance at my lover. I ended up neither here, nor there).

**Q. You obviously regret that the Mohajirs did not get political power.**

A. We had not moved out hoping to become the monarchs of Pakistan. But at least do not deny us basic human and fundamental rights in a country we have helped create. Just give us those rights. When the one in authority does not give people their rights, then Nature intervenes. And when Nature intervenes, it doesn't bother about anybody's power. No one can stop it. You can draw whatever conclusion you want from this.

**"We feel sorry for Muslims in Bosnia and Kashmir. But we are also Muslims suffering suppression. Why is the world ignoring us?"**

## MQM: THE GENESIS

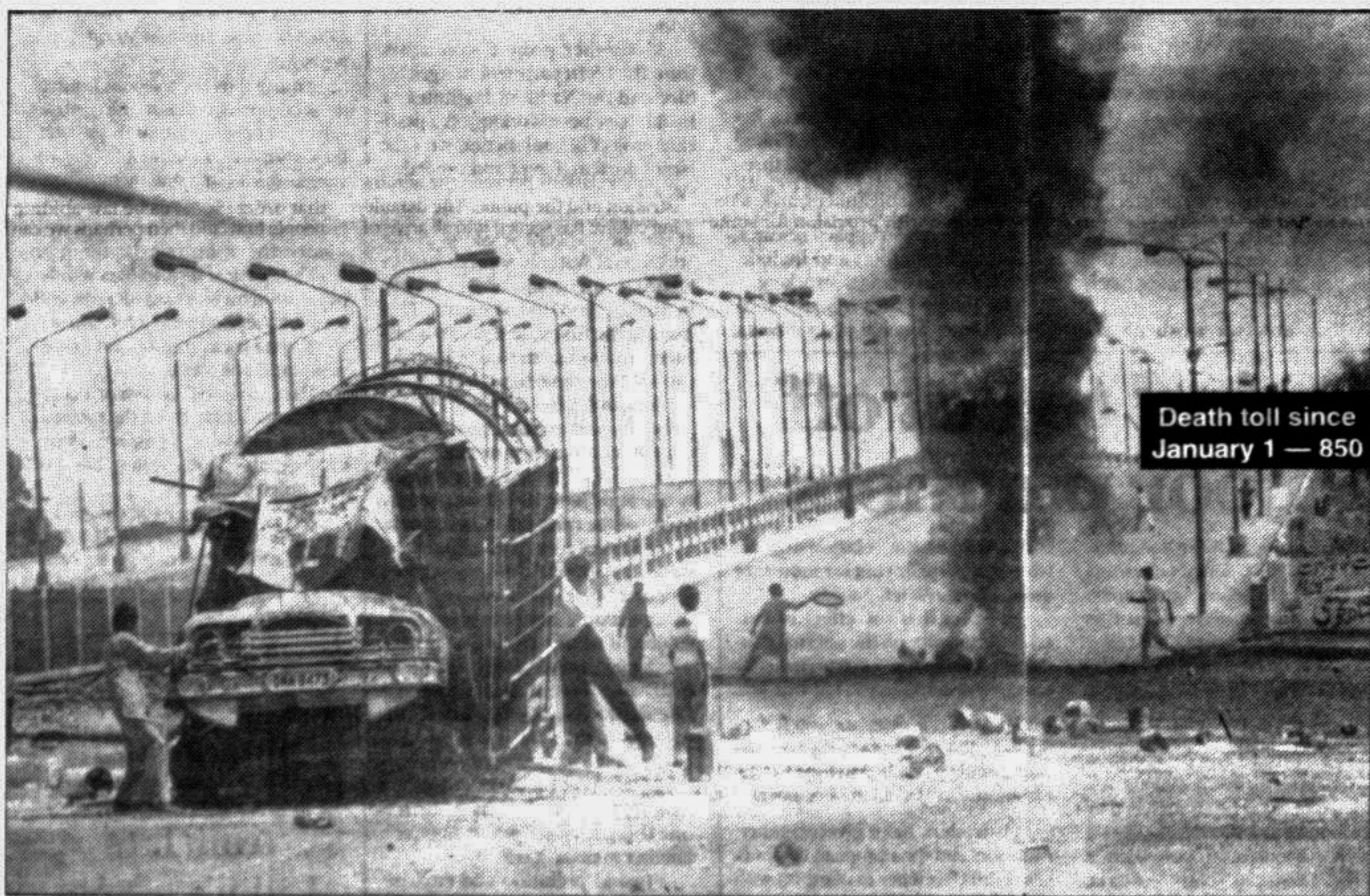
IN the early '80s, when the All Pakistan Mohajir Students' Organisation was set up by Altaf Hussain, it failed to elicit any noticeable support. Soon after, Hussain formed the MQM and, in the winter of 1986-87, the party announced its arrival when busloads of its supporters on their way to a public meeting clashed with the police. Shortly afterwards, a Mohajir locality was attacked, reportedly by Pathan gunmen, and dozens of people were lynched. The next day saw Pathans killed in retaliation.

Politically, it was in 1987 that the MQM established itself—by winning the Karachi and Hyderabad local-body elections. This inevitably brought the organisation in conflict with the native Sindhis. And before the 1988 general elections, a group of Sindh militant went on the rampage in the Mohajir-dominated parts of Hyderabad, killing more than 200 people. Sindh had been ethnically divided along ethnic lines.

In the elections that followed, Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party had to enter into an alliance with the MQM, which had swept the polls in Karachi and Hyderabad, to form a government. The alliance, and Benazir's government as well, did not last, with the MQM crossing over to the Nawaz Sharif camp.

Soon after Sharif won the next elections—and the MQM got its first real taste of power—Altaf's supporters antagonised the army, which launched an operation against them, only to call it off at the first hint of defiance. In the meantime, Bhutto found herself back in power. Since then, she has dealt with the MQM—which boycotted the last national assembly elections in 1993—through administrative means. Now, with both Bhutto and Hussain sticking to their guns, there is little hope of Karachi being restored to normalcy soon.

—ABBAS NASIR



## Sexcapades, Protests, Rows — and Still a Year to Go

George Frank Asmah writes from Accra

HAVING been embroiled in a tirade-tat row with his Vice President over allegations of sexual misconduct, a series of anti-government demonstrations and an about-turn on a key aspect of economic policy, President Jerry Rawlings must have been thinking that next year's elections would seem peaceful by comparison.

But now a row has broken out over electoral identity cards, and an opposition politician has warned of the dangers of another Rwanda. "We must ensure that the nation is not pushed too far on the road to Kigali."

Rawlings' economic programme continues to win the praise of the International Monetary Fund, though it received a setback when public protests forced the withdrawal of an important revenue-raising instrument, value added tax.

It was an embarrassing U-turn for the government, not only because it had insisted the tax would stay, but because one of the tax's critics was 65-year-old Harvard-trained Vice-President Kwame Ninsin Arkaah — a bitter opponent of the 46-year-old soldier-turned-constitutional President.

Arkaah fled Rawlings' 1981 coup, but after a series of manoeuvres found himself in the Vice-President's chair.

He has little power, however, and presidential officials say that since his inauguration in 1992 he and Rawlings have not spoken together for more than ten minutes.

The gap between the two men deepened last year when Rawlings



Ghana's President Jerry Rawlings. Clash with the Vice-President

called for the Vice-President's resignation following allegations in the local press about the latter's sexual exploits with a 25-year-old woman. Many Ghanaians were annoyed by the call because allegations of Rawlings' own "sexcapades" had car-

ried hit the headlines. Arkaah got his own back in a May Day speech which urged the repeal of the value added tax and criticised the government's failure to respond to workers' demands for pay rises.

The spat continues, with the Vice-President threatening to appeal to the Supreme Court to force the government to allow him to fulfill his constitutional duties.

While the clash of personalities rumbles on, the government is facing a row over voter identification cards, which ruling National Democratic Congress research director Dr Tony Aidoo says should not be managed by a non-government organisation selected by aid-giving donor countries. He says the policy would compromise Ghana's sovereignty.

Spokesmen for opposition parties — which boycotted the 1992 elections — dismiss the suggestion as a ploy to enable the NDC to withdraw from current discussions between the parties, the Electoral Commission and the donors.

Kwame Piamon of the New Patriotic party (NPP) says that far from infringing sovereignty, donor support would "buttress and entrench our democratic constitutional experiment, and our very survival as a

sovereign nation." He also called for the Electoral Commission to be purged of "the hard-core Cuban and Bulgarian-trained cadres."

Similarly, Professor Mawuse Dake of the recently-formed People's Convention Party — and the man who raised the spectre of Rwanda — describes the fairness of the 1996 presidential and parliamentary elections as crucial.

"The donors know that prevention is better than cure," he says, "and they must continue to insist and provide the necessary assistance to make absolutely certain that they are not called, sooner or later, to intervene with emergency funds for refugee management, peace-keeping or peace-making operations, the Rwandese, Liberian or Somali way."

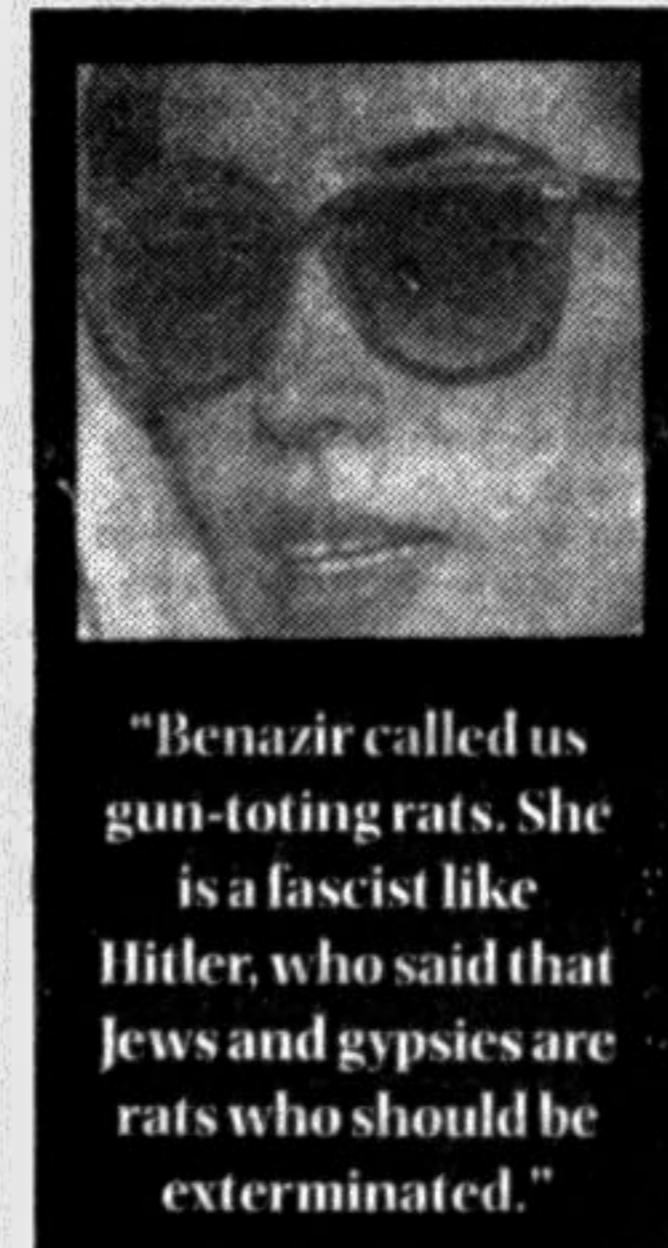
For this reason, he says, it is hypocritical to veto any of the identity card options as too expensive.

The estimated cost of options given in a submission sponsored by the United States Agency for International Development are: ID cards with photograph, \$21 million; ID cards with thumbprint, \$22 million; ID cards with thumbprint and photo, \$47 million.

After several discussions, all parties except the NDC have agreed a hybrid formula in which photographs will be used in the 10 regional capitals and thumbprints elsewhere.

The chairman of the Electoral Commission, Dr Afari-Gyan, has set September as the target for compiling a new voters register. It will be conducted at 20,000 polling stations and monitored by agents of all registered parties.

For Dr Afari-Gyan, the ID card dispute is just the first of many controversies.



**Q. So you are confirming that you were forced to stay out of the polls?**

A. Yes. Since then thousands of my people have disappeared. There are cases where a parent of one of my underground people dies, and they go and surround his house. In our culture, as in yours, the son helps carry the body to the graveyard. That's when they arrest him. We believed in Pakistan, so we left our homes to build it. Was that a mistake for which we are being punished? We are the builders of Pakistan and we are being treated as third-rate citizens. We sacrificed two million lives. This country's foundations are soaked in our parents' blood. And this is the way we are treated?

**Q. Do you have regrets about Partition?**

A. That question is not relevant. The point is, we, from the Muslim-minority provinces of India, wanted Pakistan and built Pakistan. We want to preserve it within its boundaries. We have the greatest stake in it.

**Q. Who is responsible for the violence in Karachi?**

A. The Government and its intelligence agencies. There are things I cannot say to the Indian media. As such they call us Indian agents, Hindus, all kinds of things. But everyone