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THE QUETTA EARTHQUAKE

1935



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of
THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

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FOREWORD.

This pamphlet has been compiled from a large variety of sources—almost entirely official—with the object of presenting to the public a short, authentic and graphic account of the Quetta disaster and the steps taken to deal with it. It does not pretend to be exhaustive. Little or nothing has been said, for example, of the fine work of the Royal Corps of Signals and Posts and Telegraphs Department, or of the official relief measures organized by the North-West Frontier Province, the United Provinces, and Bombay ; while the extent of the help given by un-official organizations and private persons is too wide to be indicated in anything but the broadest outline.

It will serve its purpose if it brings home to its readers the magnificent efforts of those—British and Indian alike—who strove in a time of common calamity to bring relief and alleviate suffering.

29th August, 1935.

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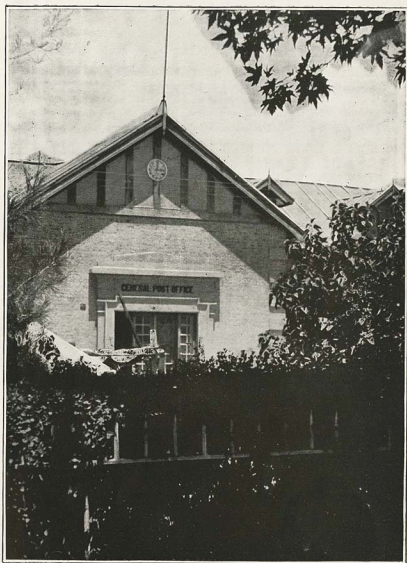
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The General Post Office, Quetta.
The clock stopped at the first shock.



The General Post Office, Quetta.
The clock stopped at the first shock.

CHAPTER I.

QUETTA AND ITS ENVIRONS.

Quetta (or Shal, meaning "Fort", a name dating back to the X Century) is the largest and probably the most important strategical garrison in the Indian Empire. As the capital of the Baluchistan Agency it has, since 1876 when it was formally leased from the Khan of Kalat, continued to attract to itself an ever increasing population, both civil and military. In the last fifty years the population has trebled itself and on the 31st May 1935, the numbers were estimated to be in the region of 70,000 souls. Of these between 15,000 and 20,000 perished in a minute at 3 o'clock that fateful morning.

The Quetta region has been prone to earthquakes from earliest times. Owing to the peculiar geological formation of its strata, and the conformation of the lie of the mountain ranges between Peshawar and Karachi there appears to be a constant underground pressure in this Baluchistan plateau which seeks periodical relief in rolling spasmodically onwards. These facts are brought to light very clearly in the Government of India "Geological Account of the Earthquake and its Origin", published on 13th August 1935. Despite the memories of the two severe earthquakes in 1931, none of Quetta's inhabitants dreamt of the approaching disaster when they went to bed on the evening of the 30th May. Earthquakes, unlike storms at sea, cyclones and other uncontrollable natural manifestations, appear to give no warning.

To give the reader a better understanding of the disaster a general description of Quetta might be acceptable. The total area of the Cantonments, Civil Station and city is about 25 square miles. It is divided by the Durani Nullah; Cantonments to the north, city and Civil Station to the south. At the extreme west are the Royal Air Force Lines and aerodrome, and to the extreme east is the Staff College.

The garrison inhabiting cantonments consisted of the following formations and troops :—

Headquarters, Western Command (Major-General H. Karslake,
Officiating General Officer Commanding-in-Chief).

Headquarters, Baluchistan District.

Headquarters, two Indian Infantry Brigades.

Staff and Students, Staff College.

1 Cavalry Regiment.

2 Batteries Field Artillery.

1 Brigade Mountain Artillery.

2 Companies, Sappers and Miners.

Military Engineering Service, Baluchistan District.

1 Survey Company.

1 Indian Divisional Signals.

2 British Infantry battalions.

5 Indian Infantry battalions (with one attached training company).

Royal Indian Army Service Corps :—

- 1 Supply Depot.
 - 3 Army Transport Companies.
 - 2 Motor Transport Companies.
 - One British Military Hospital.
 - One Indian Military Hospital.
 - 1 Company Indian Hospital Corps.
 - 1 Military Veterinary Hospital.
 - Military Farms Department.
 - Government Military Dairy.
 - One Wireless Detachment.
 - The Quetta Arsenal.
-

The Royal Air Force Lines (not situated in Cantonments proper) were inhabited by the 3rd Wing, R. A. F., Nos. 5 and 31 Army Co-operation Squadrons. None of the Cantonment buildings are earthquake-proof, and the area is laid out, like most cantonments, with broad roads and open spaces.

South of the fatal *nullah* lies Quetta City, with the Civil Station and Railway Colony bordering it to the west and south. The city itself, in comparison with other capital cities, was small in area, but like many Indian cities seemed to have grown inward and upward rather than outward. Save for a few main thoroughfares, like Bruce and Gaisford Roads, its streets were narrow, numerous and short. With the usual exceptions of houses built by its wealthier citizens the vast majority of the dwellings were built of brick, cemented with adulterated mortar, or of mud. As the pressure of population increased extra stories had been added fortuitously. In an earthquake it was a veritable death-trap.

The Civil Station, with the beautiful avenue Lytton Road as its main artery, lies between the city and the N. W. Railway Station, and consisted of the older type of bungalows built for officials in more spacious days. Further west beyond the railway line and station was the Race Course and the Quetta Police Lines.

Around this southern area within a few miles radius were clusters of small villages inhabited by agriculturists and peasants who supplied the farming needs of the community.

The cataclysm of Quetta naturally rivets our attention, but the remainder of the devastated area demands our notice. From Quetta in the north to Kalat in the south, through the towns of Sariab, Mastung and Margi, an area seventy miles long by fifteen miles wide, was ravaged. Mercifully, compared with Bihar or Kangra, it is a sparsely inhabited country of shallow valleys and barren hills. This was the epicentre of the earthquake.



No. 2.—Habib Road.



No. 3.—The City Police Station.

CHAPTER II.

THE EARTHQUAKE.

At three minutes past 3 A.M. on the morning of the 31st May 1935, the irresistible processes of geological evolution caught Quetta by the throat—shook her for twenty-five vicious seconds—and left her, dead. The terror had sped for over seventy miles from Kalat through Mastung and Sariat, leaving in its wake broken hamlets and crushed villages.

In Quetta, south of that fatal nullah, the scene is indescribable. A whole sleeping city ; men, women and children crowded in small rooms, large rooms and corridors, on roofs and on pavements ; animals tethered in tiny enclosures ; a mass of humanity sleeping in a house of cards, each card of which weighed a ton. In the Civil Station, Railway Quarters, Police Lines and R. A. F. Lines—men, women and children all asleep.

The street lamps are alight ; police constables patrol their beats ; chowkidars call to each other for mutual confidence ; nights are still cool and only the more hardy or impoverished are sleeping on verandahs or out-of-doors.

Then, a sudden dynamic convulsion ; a surging, implacable wave roared over the surface of the earth and made Quetta—in less than half a minute—a shambles, a catacomb. In its pitilessness, its suddenness and its cold-blooded finality this earthquake must have the impious privilege of depriving Kangra and Bihar of their melancholic notoriety. The wave passed through Quetta leaving few fissures, no boiling mud or other outward marks—except a heap of *debris* and ruins, the city which was once Quetta.

For the next ten minutes no one knew what had happened. Then humanity began to re-assert itself, and our imagination will help us to visualise the heart-breaking scenes.....

There was no moon. It was a night of pitch black darkness. The roads and streets in the city were unrecognisable, buried under masses of masonry and bricks. All landmarks had disappeared. The electricity had failed. The Police were dead, and there seemed to be no communication left with the outside world.

The Royal Air Force suffered cruelly. No. 3 (Indian) Wing was practically wiped out. At 3-30 A.M. four officers, who had dug themselves out of their ruined homes, arrived at the lines where nearly all the barracks had collapsed. There was no sign of life anywhere. "The barrack blocks were completely wiped out and looked like a village in the front line in France after three years of war". Of a total strength, British and Indian, of 656 persons 148 were killed and 31 *per cent.* injured. This isolated community spent the remainder of the night in extricating their comrades and wondering what daylight would show. (In passing it might be mentioned that of the 27 machines in the hangars only 3 were found to be serviceable, and by 11-30 A.M. these three were flying on reconnaissance duties to Chaman, Pishin, Ziarat, Loralai and Sibi. Thus do the R. A. F. live up to their motto : *per ardua ad astra.*)

Fortunately, and one might almost say, providentially, help of an unmeasured nature was at hand. The shock had penetrated only a little

northwards beyond the Habib Nullah towards the Durani Nullah, laying the unoccupied house of the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief flat and destroying several other occupied bungalows, mercifully without a great toll on human life ; but as a whole the cantonments had escaped with a severe shaking. There were left 12,000 able-bodied, disciplined troops ready to leap to any command.

Then occurred one of the finest and quickest appreciations of a situation, either in war or peace, of which the history of the Army in India bears record. The Quetta garrison and its commander, General Karslake, might appear to have received sufficient praise in the Indian and world press and in Government *communiqués*, but only when one digs into the depths of the earnest, colourless, rigidly-written reports of the units and formations engaged can one really estimate the magnificent work they did and how impossible it is to exaggerate it.

General Karslake, aroused by his falling bungalow, sent a staff officer immediately by car to the city and ordered the garrison to "stand-to". Owing to the darkness an accurate reconnaissance was impossible, but before daylight it was ascertained that the following places had been completely destroyed :—

- (a) The entire city.
- (b) The Civil Lines, including the Residency, Post Office, Telegraph Office, Hospitals, Railway quarters.
- (c) Most of the R. A. F. Lines.
- (d) Many of the officers' bungalows in the southern quarter of the Cantonment.
- (e) Two barrack rooms of the Royal Bombay Sappers and Miners.

Three small fires immediately broke out in the City. Until dawn broke it was not possible to co-ordinate all efforts at rescue work, but from unit records it is interesting to note how the mute appeal from the stricken city was met by the troops. A few extracts will suffice :—

2nd Indian Divisional Signals.—Within half an hour of the first shock this unit, brought down in their own motor transport, were at work in the City. The lights of their lorries and motor cycles were used to light up the main road of the City.

2nd Indian Divisional Engineers.—3-30 A.M. 21st Field Company, Royal Bombay Sappers and Miners sent the bulk of the company into the City.

24th Mountain Brigade, Royal Artillery.—5-30 A.M. One party went to the main road of the City, up which they began to clear a path. Another party went to the Civil Hospital and Police Lines where the drag ropes they had brought with them were of great assistance in pulling away fallen roofs.

1st West Yorkshire Regiment.—3-45 A.M. 20 men in officers' motor cars and 40 on bicycles started work in the Civil Lines. At 4 A.M. half a company arrived in the main road of the City and tackled the fires. 4-30 A.M., one company arrived at the

Civil Hospital. The rest of the battalion proceeded into the City.

7th Light Tank Company.—4-30 A.M. All lorries went down to the City to work as ambulances. 6-30 A.M., the Company, complete with tanks started rescue work in the R. A. F. Lines. One sub-section was detached to the City for excavation work and another was sent into the Civil Lines to tow away dead camels and bullocks.

5th Bn., 8th Punjab Regiment.—3-30 A.M. First parties went to the Civil Hospital and Civil Lines. 4-15 A.M., remainder of battalion went to the City.

4th Bn., 19th Hyderabad Regt.—5-20 A.M. The whole battalion was sent to the city for rescue work.

1st Bn., 8th Gurkha Rifles.—3-45 A.M. Parties in officers' motors went to the Residency to dig out the survivors of their guard. The remainder of the battalion followed as fast as they could to the Civil area.

2nd Bn., 8th Gurkha Rifles.—3-45 A.M. One company in Motor Transport was sent to the City. Another company went on foot to the Police Lines, where it was joined by the remainder of the battalion by 6-15 A.M.

The 1st Bn., The Queen's Regiment, and the 2nd/11th Sikh Regiment were outside Quetta engaged in night operations. They felt the full force of the shock but marched twenty miles towards Cantonments. The Sikh Regiment arrived at 7 A.M. at the R. A. F. Lines and gave immediate assistance whilst the Queens went at once to the Civil area and City.

Obviously the most pressing need was transport. Nearly all the privately owned cars in the Civil Area had been smashed. Every available army lorry and vehicle was turned out at once to bring the troops to the devastated areas. The vehicles were then used to augment the ambulance services sent down by the British and Indian Military Hospitals, to collect and bring the injured to the military hospitals.

At 6 A.M., a Relief Headquarters had been opened up on the lawn of the ruined Quetta Club, and General Karslake in conference with Sir Norman Cater, the Agent to the Governor-General, was able to allot definite areas, covering the whole of the City and the Civil Lines, to his troops for rescue work. Sir Norman Cater, who himself escaped from the Residency in the nick of time, had suffered grievous loss. Practically all his staff, officers, subordinates and their families, had been killed or injured. The Quetta Police, owing to their appalling casualties, were non-existent as a force. There was no civil administrative machinery left.

Sir Norman Cater and General Karslake had a gigantic task before them, a situation unparalleled in its difficulties and responsibilities. It is not easy for the outside public to imagine the work that confronted them at day-break on that hideous morning. They were in the midst of the dead and dying, dealing with terror-stricken survivors maddened with fear and grief, thousands of them agonised by serious injuries and loss of near relatives; how the authorities met this appalling situation will bear more detailed study in the next chapter.

CHAPTER III

HOW THE AUTHORITIES MET THE SITUATION IN QUETTA.

In our last chapter we have sketched briefly the action taken by the authorities and the Quetta garrison during the two and a half hours of darkness and obscurity which elapsed before dawn broke on the 31st May.

By 6 A.M., on the 31st May, orders had been issued allotting the devastated area to the troops for rescue work.* The whole city and civil lines were sub-divided into unit allotments, medical aid posts were arranged, ambulance services organized and the work of evacuation and rescue went on without pause for the next week.

Before examining this work in closer detail it is necessary to consider some of the pressing major problems which confronted General Karslake and his staff. Quetta is connected with the outside world by a fragile single loop railway with Sibi. The steep branch up the Pass, through Mach, has about twenty tunnels and some hundreds of bridges and culverts, all susceptible to earthquake damage. The Harnai link is of lighter construction and even more sensitive. This railway had suffered badly in the 1931 earthquake, and for all that the authorities knew that morning it was probably wrecked. Quetta depends on this railway for its food and supplies. The first necessity therefore was to conserve the existing food supply held in reserve by the military supply depot. The scale of rations of all troops was at once reduced so that sufficient food would be available for the civilian population, and an organization for supplying free rations to civilians was immediately set up. The Supply Depot put up an amazing record. Ten out of a normal strength of forty-six Indian subordinates were able to report for duty. The average issue *per diem* in Quetta is 10,600 rations. Figures for the 31st May are not available as all demands were met without the formality of audit. On June 1st : 33,000 rations. June 2nd : 45,000 rations. June 3rd : 102,500 rations. June 4th : 66,000 rations. During the month of June an average of 45,000 rations were issued daily in Quetta and the district. In addition over 50,000 gallons of petrol were supplied in twelve days. (N.B.—A normal month's requirement is 18,000 gallons.) Rations to feed the refugees on the Race Course were loaded before 10 A.M. and issued by midday. The abnormal requirements of milk, tea, sugar and brandy for the Hospitals were met, and 38,000 lbs. of fire wood were supplied the first day for cremating the Hindu dead.

Communications with the outside world had been destroyed except by wireless. The Royal Corps of Signals took over charge and before 8 A.M. set up a local organisation. By 1-30 P.M., they had repaired the civil telegraphs and were able to accept private messages. 446 messages were dealt with in the next few hours.

Burial places were selected and organised. Christian dead were taken to the Station Christian Cemetery, and Parsi dead to the Parsi Cemetery. Muhammadan and Hindu dead were taken to three places outside the city. One British Officer with a platoon for burial work, one Muhammadan and

*Vide sketch map.

one Hindu, were placed at each of these places to ensure that the proper rites were observed for each religion.

A police force was organised. As soon as paths had been cleared in the city these police controlled the traffic and directed survivors to the collecting areas for the Refugee Camp. This force was officered by students from the Staff College. In addition guards and patrols were formed to prevent looting and to protect public buildings, banks, shops, etc. An outer cordon of cavalry patrols was established to prevent undesirables from entering the area.

Extra medical assistance was requisitioned from India, but in the meantime the local medical staffs of the two military hospitals, some of whom had been injured, assisted by their civilian colleagues, carried on. The Civil and Missionary hospitals had been destroyed. The military hospital buildings were cracked and unsafe to use, so recourse was had to the verandahs and tents. Stretchers and mattresses were used as beds. Before dawn about a hundred wives of British Officers reported for duty at the hospitals, and they considered no task too trivial or too menial if it brought help or comfort to the thousands of sufferers. This spontaneous action by these ladies, most of whom had never dealt with anything more serious than a cut finger, must be recorded as one of the many examples of public duty and personal service performed during these awful days. No praise can be too high for the doctors, nurses and staff. One gallant doctor, extricated after several hours from the ruins of his bungalow, reported immediately for duty and worked for 48 hours without rest.

The brunt of rescue work fell inevitably on the medical profession and they rose to the occasion in the most superb manner. The injured were treated at the following centres :—

- (a) Emergency 1st Aid Posts in City.
- (b) British Military Hospital.
- (c) Indian Military Hospital.
- (d) Cantonment Hospital.
- (e) Refugee Camp Hospital.
- (f) Mastung Area and Kalat Agency.
- (g) Surrounding villages, Quetta area.

All the work was characterised by thoroughly efficient organisation. Doctors, nurses, staffs and volunteers worked themselves to a standstill. The subject deserves its own history, and we shall content ourselves with a few striking figures. The Indian Military Hospital with a depleted staff of seven doctors was turned into a colossal Casualty Clearing Station. By 10 A.M., on the 31st, 1,000 injured had arrived, and they continued to arrive at the rate of 200 each hour for the rest of the day. By the evening of 1st June 4,500 injured had been admitted. Although this is the largest military hospital in India, with a maximum capacity of 600 beds, this was obviously an undertaking of the first magnitude. The staff, augmented by extra doctors and 45 officers' and British soldiers' wives, organised wards in verandahs and tents. In this hospital alone 450 major operations were performed, 1,200 anaesthetics administered and 300 fractures set. One surgeon performed 157 major operations in four days. During the earthquake period from 31st May until the 14th June it is

estimated that between 20,000 and 25,000 patients received medical treatment. The fact that the Quetta Medical Mobilisation Stores equipment was available in abundance, and the prompt assistance given by the Medical Directorate, A. H. Q., ensured a fully adequate supply of all medical and surgical necessities.

The medical authorities, also, had other grave responsibilities. These were mainly the sanitation of the devastated areas and camps, and the prevention of epidemics. As the days passed the presence of corpses, human and animal, continually being exposed during salvage operations, caused acute anxiety and became a deadly menace to public health. That no epidemic occurred shows the efficacy of the methods adopted to prevent a crowning disaster.

The restoration of the water and light supplies was an urgent necessity. The Military Engineer Service, the Irrigation department and the Quetta Electric Supply Company had ceased to function. The majority of their employees lived in the city, and of the M. E. S. alone 27 were killed outright. Under the direction of the Commanding Royal Engineer Officer the Sapper and Miner Companies assumed control. The fourteen miles of pipe line from Urak to the reservoirs above the Staff College were intact. The main 10 inch pipe line supplying the City was broken in many places. The repair of these leaks was not easy as the water could not be shut off for a sufficiently long period and fresh leaks were frequently being burst open by the subsequent quakes. The water supply, although a constant cause for anxiety, never failed.

The Sappers and Miners took over the Quetta Electric Supply Company Power House, shored up the tottering roof, manned the engines, repaired as many lines as possible—and supplied light to the hospitals the same evening.

We might now survey the work going on in the Quetta Arsenal. Situated in the Fort in the south-west corner of Cantonments the Arsenal had suffered severely, several of their stores having fallen in, and the greater number of their Indian employees having been killed or injured in the city. The Chief Ordnance Officer soon reorganised his attenuated staff. The arsenal fire engine was sent to the city manned by non-commissioned officers. From 6 A.M. until 8 P.M., the staff issued necessities; 1,000 tents, 500 stretchers, 5,400 blankets, thousands of picks and shovels, tools, incinerators, lamps;—all the vast stores of war material needed for the emergency were rushed to the City, hospitals and camps. Estimates of further requirements were made and wirelessly to Army Headquarters, and the vast mobilisation machinery of India was at once set in motion.

In the meantime the Race Course and Polo Grounds had been taken over and a Refugee Camp organised by officers from the Staff College. Sites were chosen for Hindus, Muslims and Anglo-Indians, for cooking places latrines, hospitals and ration stands. Only a few men could be spared from the more urgent rescue work, but by noon the skeleton of the camp was prepared and arrangements ready to receive the first batch of refugees. 3,000 cooked rations and 800 blankets were issued the first day. On the 1st June 15,000 rations were issued in the camp and subsequent days saw an ever growing population. Volunteer workers, tahsildars from the near villages and others with local knowledge, were of especial value



No. 4.—A Shop in Bruce Road.



No. 5.—The Royal Air Force Lines.

and assistance ; they lent their services unsparingly. Later, games and sports were organised and a cinema erected. These helped in a small way to take the poor refugees' minds from the calamity they had suffered. In addition to these refugees from the city the inhabitants of twelve villages in the vicinity were fed and clothed.

We have little space to recount the multitude of other activities going on that day. Protecting the city from sudden spates, diverting the pent-up waters in broken *karez*s, repairing roads, bridges, railways, emptying dangerous petrol pumps in the City and making emergency splints from packing-cases. Sufficient be it for us to notice that the whole energy and might of a most competent and efficient military garrison were directed to the salvation of the lives and property in the devastated areas.