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Commonwealth survives Comex 3

"The Commonwealth may yet founder over a bowl of contaminated cornflakes." The former "Guardian" cartoonist Abu's jaundiced prophecy in the "Indian Express" has not come true after all.

Tomorrow 500 travel-stained but cheerful Britons leave Delhi in 20 busloads for home, via Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey. But by the time Comex Three had completed its Indian programme, culminating in last night's "beat" show, there were plenty of doubts as to what exactly the Commonwealth had gained.

Comex Three had a bad press in Delhi. An "Indian Express" reporter found that the only real mixing between the 500 young Britons and 500 Indians

From WALTER SCHWARZ, New Delhi, September 9

who joined them in the camp was of a romantic nature.

Today's "Hindustan Times" has a front page account of an orgiastic riot at last night's "beat" show in which baton-wielding police saved a group of Delhi university girls from male colleagues "attempting to molest them."

A week of drought in Delhi left their giant camp with insufficient water, until a night of rain flooded them out. A thousand campers also proved to much for the catering firm, which apparently served nothing but omelettes.

A last-minute plan to take 17 Indian students back to London almost foundered on the crags of Indian politics. All of the 500 wanted to go and the Indian

selection committee was subject to devious pressures which were exhaustively analysed in the press.

Commonwealth idealism and the military efficiency of Colonel Gregory, the expedition's organiser, were both insufficient to persuade Pakistan to allow the Indians through. Arrangements had to be made to fly them on to Kabul.

Colonel Gregory kept both his cool and his optimism. Sitting outside his tent amid a mountain of passports (visas have been the biggest headache throughout) he insisted it had all been a success.

"We have been on the road for five weeks and in India for a fortnight, and all that time and in all those places there has been talk of the Commonwealth.

That was the idea. Mishaps are part of the game."

As with most travellers, the strongest impression was how much better things are at home. "I never appreciated how nice it is to have an honest police force and live in a country where things are organised," Susan Reeve, a teacher from Swansea, said.

The colonel's optimism about the Commonwealth was not widely shared. "That was the one subject no one talked about. Frankly the Indians could not care less about the Commonwealth," Carolyn Mackinnon, of Kent University, said amid general assent.

Comex Four will go to Singapore and Ceylon, with a splinter group to West Africa, before converging again on Delhi. Then they will take back several hundred Indian students.