

bangladesh

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Camps are still flooded creating the most difficult conditions imaginable. Some areas have had to go without supplies because it was impossible for transport to move.

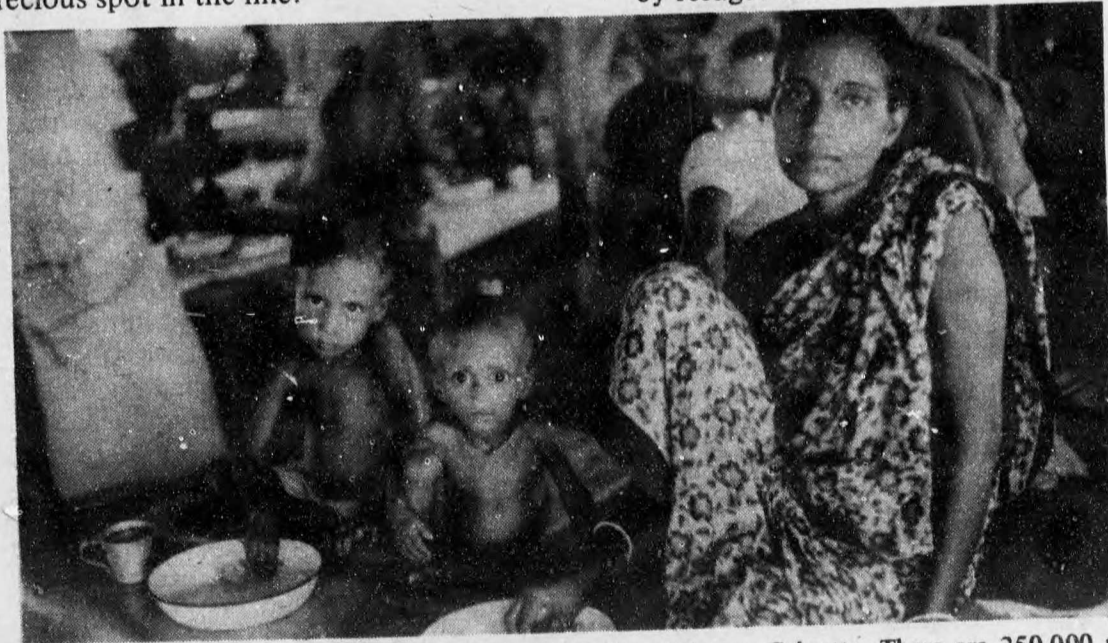
Who are the refugees? They are a cross-section of the whole Bangladesh society in exile! The majority are peasants, fishermen, but there are also about 12,000 lecturers and teachers. There are lawyers, musicians, writers, artists, doctors, bankers, students, shopkeepers, journalists, etc. It is somewhat "easier" for the peasant folk to adjust, but educated and professional people's suffering is almost intolerable. Most of the students, however, are in the Liberation Forces.

What are some of the camp conditions. One visit to any camp, there are so many, is more than enough to convince one that an immediate solution is needed. It is clear immediately that an enormous tragedy has been allowed in the past months to create such brutal suffering for millions of people. The camps are as well run as possible, but does not in any way minimize the colossal agony of a sea of humanity. The life of a refugee, even at the best of times with organization and shelter and food, is so dehumanizing. Some of these camps have as many as 250,000 people! Once such big camp near the Calcutta Airport will have eventually 500,000 people! These "Refugee Cities" stretch for hundreds of miles. Some camps are constantly under water. Some are seas of mud. There are enormous lines of people who spend whole days, every day, to get their meagre rations. In camp I observed the people waiting up 4 hours for just a cup of milk, and sometimes they have to stand through rainstorms so as not to lose their precious spot in the line!

at hand. This gigantic task is also the responsibility of the international community.

The Relief program is now costing the Indian Government well over \$2 million a day, and this means that the refugees are getting only the barest minimum for survival. Each refugee is allotted about 800-900 calories daily, according to a knowledgeable source. In terms of food stuffs the 800-900 calories amounts to about 400 grams of rice, 100 grams of dahl, 240 grams of potatoes and onions, some salt (some camps did not even have salt!) Other agencies in some of the camps distribute milk, and in some instances, as at Salt Lake near Calcutta, some get bread. Children under 8 years get half-adult ration, and those under 1 year get no allowance because of being nursed by the mother. But the poor lactating mother, who has gone through such deprivation already, also does not get an extra allowance. Hence the reason for so much malnutrition.

An official communique issued by the Government 2 days ago has warned that about 100,000 refugee children may die of malnutrition very soon. This kind of warning was sounded some time ago! The deaths are quite apart from the development retardation that is bound to affect the very young. Now there is a crash program called "Lifeline Project" under the direction of the Red Cross and UNICEF which will involve 1.3 million children in a special high protein feeding. Actually there are about 2 million refugee children, the most delightful and cheerful of the lot, except for the many sick ones in the field hospitals. In some areas Orphanages are also being set up. In many camps schools are being set up for the children and are staffed by refugee teachers.



Recovery from malnutrition at the Save the Children hospital near Calcutta. There are 250,000 refugees in this camp.

Relief

In spite of the astronomical relief effort required to provide for 8 million people, the total population of some countries, somehow the situation is under "control." Scores of voluntary Agencies, Groups, volunteers have pitched in to help the Government, but as one man who is involved in Relief work said, "if all the voluntary agencies pulled out tomorrow, the relief work would continue," so involved and committed is the Government of India to alleviate the distressed millions who seek refuge in the only friendly country

On the whole it is amazing how the refugees have taken this immense calamity. They are generally docile and submissive, most of them are still in a state of shock. Where have they to turn. There are complaints about not enough food, and sometimes about the quality of rations, as once in awhile a bad lot of potatoes and onions are the only ration available. For many of these people there is a tremendous vacuum, especially for those who have lost family members, a father shot by the Army, a child or more from cholera. Some have lost all their meagre earthly

possessions as they fled with only the clothes they had on. And some have very sick children. In one hospital I saw a haggard mother with three seriously ill children, who seemed to have little chance of survival. To face each standing in line of 40,000, to cope with wet shelter, and countless problems is very debilitating. Morale is going down, but there are attempts to keep it up now that a Bangladesh Volunteer Corps consisting of campers, or "inmates" as they call themselves, are springing up in most camps. People are encouraged to carry on familiar activities such as singing, dances, sports, etc. Tensions are rising between the local people and the campers, especially in the areas where they outnumber the locals. Many refugees have squatted just almost anywhere there was space, and now the Government is trying to put all refugees into camps, even by moving into the interior. Keeping everyone in camps will create hardships on the refugees, as they will feel as though they are in concentration camps, but what other choice is there? Some measure of "control" is very necessary and just how long will this be possible.

The refugees do want to go back to their country, but not in the present circumstances. Some people in India are saying that the refugees do not want to return. India has made it very clear that she cannot keep them indefinitely, but she will not force them to go back until there is a viable political solution. The International also has responsibility to help create a just political solution very soon, so that it will be safe for the refugees to return.

The role of the International community in alleviating the suffering of the refugees, though in some instances very commendable, on the whole is very shocking. India is bearing the whole costly burden almost entirely by herself, which she can ill afford, and just will not be able to carry on indefinitely. She has repeatedly warned the world about this, at one point stating that she cannot go beyond 6 months, which are now up! Figures released the other day claim of all the Aid promised by the world, totalling about only \$140 millions, less than 25 percent of the offer has been received. Governments have so far given \$10 million in cash, and \$7.8 million in kind; \$4.3 million from 4 UN Agencies \$14.7 million from 26 voluntary organizations. But the daily cost to India is well over \$2 million.

It has just been reported that 6 countries and UNICEF have promised \$20 million for relief work in East Bengal. The Pakistan Army, however, has taken over thousands of UNICEF vehicles and boats, and other relief materials for its own use. Relief food parcels, it has been reported, have been found on captured Army soldiers. Bangladesh is no phantom.

Bangladesh is very real, it really exists, and it is desperately fighting for its life. Bangladesh is no game of obscure guerillas, it is a life and death struggle of the East Bengali people for their dignity and freedom. This painful, costly struggle is well

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