

plan to build a fence round Bangladesh, primarily to stop immigration into Assam.

Despite these disadvantages, the Awami League has kept wide support; and Mujib's daughter, Sheikh Hasina, has led a 15-party alliance with skill through the skirmishing of the past year.

Not so surprising is the survival of the BNP formed by the late president Zia. For he was the soldier-hero who had broadcast the first call for resistance in March 1971; the administrator who had reduced corruption; and the political leader who had hustled around the country by helicopter encouraging community projects of irrigation and self-help schemes, and who besides preached Bangladeshi nationalism and a more equal distribution of wealth. The

diately offered posts in the government. But he has had more setbacks. Because of widespread rioting and a national "protest week", he was forced to cancel the sub-district elections in March. He also bowed to the alliances' demands that parliamentary elections be held before rather than after the presidential elections in which his position was to be legitimized. Parliamentary elections will now probably take place in November; but whether the new MPs can agree on a constitution that will restrain the power of the president, or indeed put up a credible alternative to Ershad in the presidential elections, is doubtful. The Awami League's 15-party alliance wants to return to prime ministerial government with a titular president, while the BNP is in favor of an executive president, in the pattern of Zia's constitution which Ershad suspended but would be happy to restore if he could be the beneficiary as unchallenged president.

All this is at the level of high politics in the capital, Dhaka. Out in the countryside, however, real changes are occurring.

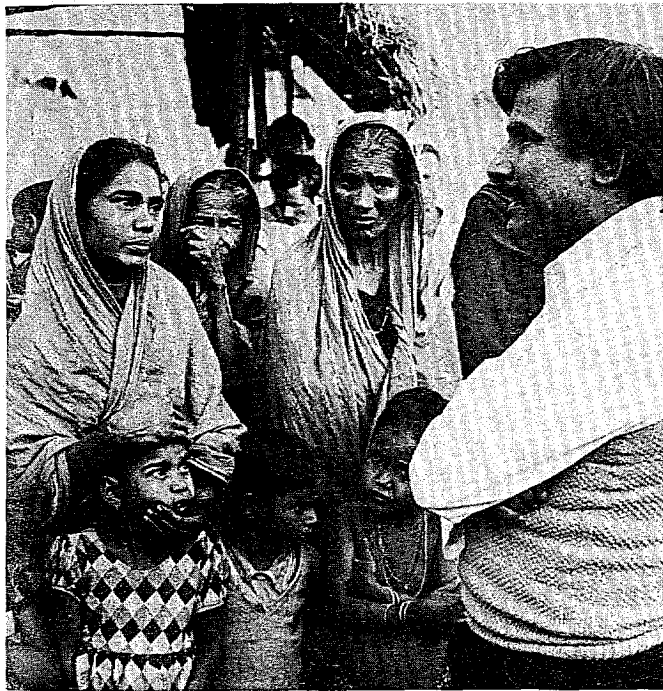
NGO successes

There are at least three reasons why non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are being particularly active and successful now. The first is that they have become better at their job, and have learned from earlier mistakes. The second is that donor agencies in the West, such as the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and British and Swedish agencies, have been channeling more funds to them and pressing the Bangladesh Government to allow them more scope. The third is that, anyway, during a period of political flux like the present, communication and control between officials in Dhaka and their men in the districts (including the land-owning elite) slacken and agents of change — which is what the NGOs are, or try to be — have a freer hand.

What is the job of the NGOs, and what are they trying to change? There are a host of appalling statistics that pinpoint the problems of poverty in Bangladesh. To thrust too many at a reader would be numbing, but the following figures indicate the size of the problem. During the 1970s the population of Bangladesh increased by 2.6 percent a year, but food production by only 1.9 percent. Some 95 million people now live in an area about the size of the three Canadian maritime provinces, and the vast majority depend on agriculture for a livelihood. yet two-thirds of them do not own land; and the land, which could be extremely productive (for three great rivers run through it and spread fresh silt with each year's flood), yields a disappointing harvest. The average yield of 1.2 metric tons of rice per hectare is less than half that of Sri Lanka or Malaysia.

The reasons for this poor yield are interwoven. Landholdings, for the fortunate minority who own it, are fragmented because a father divides it among his several sons. A single holding is usually too small to irrigate economically so only about 12 percent of the cultivated land is irrigated and bears a second crop. The landowners do not spend money to improve their land since they can get better returns from trade — or money-lending at up to 100 percent interest. The share-croppers who lease land by the year rarely have any surplus money to improve yields with fertilizer or better seed, especially as they have to give half their

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party's decline after his death, under the elderly ex-judge Abdus Sattar who was elected president in November 1981 only to be ousted by General Ershad's coup in March 1982, has not dimmed the memory of Zia. Indeed, Ershad has tried to wrap his policies in Zia's mantle, pledging himself to finish his "incomplete task", even as he was building up another party — the Janadal or People's Party — as his own political instrument.

The year's skirmishing has pitted President Ershad against the 15-party alliance and the other seven-party alliance led by the BNP and Begum Khaleda Zia, widow of President Zia. Ershad's aim has been to consolidate the Janadal, partly by holding elections first at a new sub-district level and partly by chipping away politicians from either of the two big alliances or the 50-odd other parties that have sprouted in Bangladesh.

He has had some modest success. In July a former Information Minister from the Awami League, Korban Ali, and a former Education Minister from the BNP, Yusuf Ali, were induced to defect to Janadal and were imme-