

# The struggles of Bangladesh

by Clyde Sanger

During the liberation war in 1971 when the people of Bangladesh broke away from Pakistan, this nation of poets kept writing even as they took to the fields with rifles. One young man, Omar Ali, poured his patriotism into a short lyrical poem that he called *Courageous*:

Even the little bird opens up its wings to fly  
Though it falls on branches, on the earth;  
I am not looking at the bird.  
I only see the courage to fly in the sky  
With its small heart.

In the dozen years that followed, Bangladesh — “the little bird” — has been falling all over the place. Democracy crashed to the ground in 1975 when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, leader of the Awami League that had swept the country and Bangladesh's first prime minister, was murdered in an army coup. Hopes that were raised with the incisive rule of Major-General Ziaur Rahman were dashed again when he in turn was shot dead by soldiers in 1981. Now, in 1984, the second Chief Martial Law Administrator to make himself President, Lt-General Hussein Mohammed Ershad, with a good deal of fluttering and hesitation, is preparing to launch into elections and the uncertain skies beyond. Are we about to see a third *débâcle*?

Quickly it should be said that, however many times the frail hopes of some political and economic take-off seem to collapse, the courage to go on trying remains with the people. Every gloomy thing that could have been said about Bangladesh's prospects must have been said by now, and among the dreary voices has been that of the government itself. In a 1976 report it lamented, “Nowhere in the world is there anything like so much poverty shared by so many squeezed into so little land area.” The right note, however, was struck recently by Roger Ehrhardt in the preface to his study, *Canadian Development Assistance to Bangladesh*, published by the North-South Institute in Ottawa:

Poverty and malnutrition are still much in evidence and severe obstacles to development abound. Yet the situation does not seem as hopeless as it once did, and there are some grounds for tempered optimism.

A good part of this optimism stems from the actions of ordinary (and some extraordinary) people at community

level. As governments flounder under the weight of problems, the people — whether they are small traders or landless peasants or destitute women — have been organizing themselves. It really came down to a matter of survival: organize or be submerged finally in a flood of troubles.

## Political problems

First we should see why the Ershad administration has been floundering. There are two broad reasons. The first is a failure of his and previous governments during the 1970s to make progress on what are now identified as the main objectives of the second five-year plan (1980-85), food self-sufficiency and an attack on poverty. But that is a continuing situation, and the more urgent problem — for a president trying to keep his hold on power — is the accumulation of political challenges from the survivors and heirs of earlier regimes. The alliances headed by the Awami League and by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) which was founded by President Ziaur have refused to subside under martial law, and threaten to pull President Ershad down.

To an outside observer this can seem surprising. The Awami League was universally popular in 1970-73 as the expression of the country's resistance to West Pakistan and its record of exploiting and then repressing its eastern partner. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, 13 years a political prisoner, was the honored martyr — but he was not the leader for an independent country. Arnold Smith, who as Commonwealth Secretary-General helped Bangladesh gain diplomatic recognition and international financing, has written in *Stiches in Time*:

... in some ways Mujib was ‘airborne’ and impractical. He had charm and charisma. He spoke and acted like a prophet. But he was not an administrator; nor did he make the effort to build a machine to follow through on his verbal decisions and pronouncements.

By the time he was killed in 1975, his government had become notorious for corruption as well as inefficiency. As well, it was seen as a close ally of the Indian Government, once enormously popular for ending Pakistani rule but increasingly disliked as the threateningly large neighbor. Relations with India have worsened recently for several reasons: its holding back of water on the Ganges through the Farakka dam and another scheme to divert the Brahmaputra waters; its gunboat diplomacy in the Gulf of Bengal in the dispute over South Talpatty island (which emerged from the sea after the tidal bore of 1970); and its

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