

3. The genocidal results in Bangladesh

Victims of the severe floods that struck Bangladesh in late 1974 have unwillingly become human guinea pigs for one of the largest-scale and cruelest experiments in labor-intensive "appropriate technologies."

Initially, impoverished Bangladesh attempted to cope with the flood relief chore by setting up 6,000 gruel kitchens throughout the country, to help with the daily feeding of some 4.5 million people who were homeless or had had their crops destroyed. But 1974 was a year of international austerity, and Bangladesh, one of the poorest of the developing sector countries, was soon unable to find the foreign exchange to sustain even this miserable level of relief.

Bangladesh turned for help with its food problems to a United Nations operation spawned out of the Kissingerian 1973 World Food Conference, called the World Food Programme.

The World Food Programme's solution: a massive "Food-for-Work" program. Accordingly, the relief programs were condemned as demeaning, and, in the words of a Bengali government report, "the gruel kitchens were, therefore, closed down, alms and doles in all forms were discouraged and Food-for-Work programme was initiated (sic), bringing radical change in the scope of relief."

Under the conditions of the program, which is now administered jointly by Bangladesh, the World Food Programme, and CARE on behalf of U.S. AID, Bengalis earn approximately 6 pounds of wheat for excavating over a ton of earth — by hand. Noting that one of the goals of the program is "to check inflation," the government boasts that "one of the major factors in the success of Food-for-Work Programme in Bangladesh" has been "paying food wage at less than half the rate of normal wage."

If the government or one of the agencies participating in running the program has made studies of the nutrition levels or living standards of workers in the program, the results are a closely guarded secret. But the average caloric intake for *all* Bengalis is already down to 1700-2000 calories per day — half what an active laborer needs and well below acceptable minimum nutritional levels.

Projects carried out under the program center around road-building, construction of flood embankments, and rebuilding of canals. All work is carried out by mass coolie labor using the most minimal equipment: primitive hoes for digging and wicker baskets for earth-moving. From January to

June 1975, according to the government, an unspecified number of Bengalis were paid 31,000 tons of wheat for 11.43 million man-days of work to repair 871 miles of embankment, 1,091 miles of canals, and 2,376 miles of road.

From January to June 1976, man-days spent in work-for-food projects were increased to 75.27 million, involving efforts by 2 million workers on 2164.15 miles of flood embankments, 2166.43 miles of canals, and 900 miles of roads. For 1977, the government projected a further increase to "3 million job opportunities" involving 94.52 man-days of work.

Women have also been impressed into the program. States a 1976 government report: "In Bangladesh women do not traditionally work outdoors. But the practice is fast changing both due to social development and economic compulsions. In April-May, 1975, up to 30 percent of labour force in some Food-for-Work projects in Bangladesh were women. Schemes have been worked out for greater opportunities for women to participate in food-for-work during 1976-77 season. Besides, Day Care Centres would be set up at different projects to take care of the children while their mothers work in the field."

One of the more grisly aspects of the program is that "family planning stalls" set up on the work-for-food sites are used to perform surgical sterilization procedures on the Bengali workers.

All this, says the government, "has instilled a sense of pride and dignity of labour among the poor who would otherwise have to depend on charity. They now welcome the opportunity to work hard for a living — and hard work it is indeed — excavation of 70 cft. of earth which weights over a ton — for only 2.8 kg. of wheat."

More candidly, Lewis Simons reported in a March 29, 1976 article in the *Washington Post*: "As always in projects of this magnitude, the overall figures are far more impressive than the benefits to individuals. Even as the digging goes on, workers complain about being cheated of their full rations, of poor quality food and other inequities."

But most disastrous for Bangladesh, "Food-for-Work" and similar programs are destroying the potential for the country to industrialize, and break the cycle of poverty and labor intensive technology which led to the flood and famine disaster in the first place.