

## Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

### World Bank supports Bangladesh river plan

A spokesman for the World Bank shocked the Washington press corps Sept. 12 by using a term it has considered a "dirty word" in its vocabulary for the last two decades: "large-scale." The reference was in response to a query by this reporter during a press conference on the World Bank's annual report, released in advance of its annual meeting later this month in Berlin.

I asked if the World Bank would consider funding a project to provide comprehensive flood control and irrigation for the two major river systems that have been responsible for the recent record flooding in Bangladesh—the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers.

The last thing I expected in reply was a positive answer, given the history over the last two decades of the World Bank's fetish for a "small is beautiful" approach to what it calls development. Its history has been not only to avoid "large-scale" projects, but to denounce them on all sorts of grounds—including, most emphatically, the fact that they tend to promote population growth, which the bank deems the number-one "problem" in the developing sector.

Therefore, my question was aimed at offering a little enlightenment to my colleagues in the press—namely, that if the World Bank were on the ball, there is a way of averting the Bangladesh disaster, as well as the earlier record drought in India. I noted that such a project could not only avert

future disasters, but would also could irrigate hundreds of millions of acres of land and allow for planting three crops a year. Now, due to the monsoons, people in the region are lucky to get one crop a year, and that at very low yields.

Having had my say with this somewhat lengthy question, I was stunned by the World Bank spokesman's reply. Instead of calling such a program "impractical," "cost prohibitive," or "environmentally unsound" (the usual litany of protests to large-scale projects), he said that the World Bank was, indeed, very interested in such a plan. The spokesman, Attila Karaosmanoglu, vice president of the World Bank for the Asian region, said the extent of the drought in India last year and the record flooding in Bangladesh this year "have been the cause of great concern," and, he added, have caused people at the Bank to look at prospects for a comprehensive flood control and water management project "that could benefit three or four nations."

He said "a host of programs" is needed, including reforestation in the Himalayas, the building of dams and water works, and flood control technologies. The biggest problem has been getting the "riparian" nations through which the relevant rivers flow—India, Nepal, Bangladesh, and possibly also the People's Republic of China—to agree politically on what kind of projects to build. "Unfortunately," he said, "this political problem must be solved first, before any technical solutions can be applied." However, he added, "Maybe one benefit of the unfortunate situation now in Bangladesh will be that this issue will be driven by world public opinion, and some progress can be made. Until now, the magnitude of the problem has not been taken into account."

He noted that the President of

Bangladesh has already called for a meeting of the heads of state of the "riparian" nations involved to be held in Dhaka to discuss just this issue. "We'd be willing to help if they felt it was useful and necessary," he said. "We'd consider it an issue of the highest importance." He said the World Bank could function as a go-between for bringing the nations into accord on a plan, and could provide technical expertise in developing a plan. It could also, of course, provide funding if a plan were agreed on by all parties.

Karaosmanoglu's response also startled two reporters for Indian newspapers, who followed up my question with a battery of their own. A reporter for the Associated Press international wire told me later that he filed a story based on the response to my question.

### What about the White House?

The next day at the daily White House briefing, I reiterated what the World Bank spokesman said in a question to spokesman Marlin Fitzwater. "Would the President support such a project, and will he discuss it when he goes to the opening of the United Nations General Assembly on Sept. 25?" I asked.

Fitzwater replied that he did not know anything about the subject, and referred me to the State Department for a response.

Whether or not the U.S. administration is allowed to get away with a non-response to such a vital issue will ultimately be determined by public pressure. Whatever the reason the World Bank has departed from its former profile to embrace the idea of a large-scale project solution to the recent crises in India and Bangladesh, certainly the Reagan administration and the Congress should be convinced to follow suit.