

Photo Feature

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"I had nothing, can you help me?" Banskhali woman pleads, mistaking journalists for government or NGO officials.



Dailapara sub-centre which was supposed to act as a shelter but nearly got swept away.



For Maheshkhali girl, life goes on.

COMMUNITY BASED CALAMITY PREPAREDNESS AND REHABILITATION PROGRAM (CBCPR) SITE FOR CYCLONE SHELTER NO-3 MAXIMUM CAPACITY - 2,500 PEOPLE ESTIMATED COST TK. 25,00,000 CONSTRUCTION PERIOD NOV. 1991 - MAY, 1992

The Struggle Continues

from Sabir Mustafa in Banskhali and Maheshkhali

Photo by A K M Mohsin

Ali Hossain had a tough life even before the cyclone of April 29 last year. With no land of his own, Hossain and his eight-member family survived on odd jobs like working on fishing trawlers and day-labouring.

When the cyclone came, they along with the entire population of south Jaldi of Banskhali, moved out to the upazila headquarters. Not to a shelter, because there was none, and nor because somebody had warned them of the impending danger, because nobody had done so.

"The storm was going on since midnight or before, but when we got too scared and could stand it no longer, we moved out. But nobody came to warn us or take us", Hossain recalled as his wife and young daughter dug earth from the yard.

The wet, black earth dug out was being used to strengthen the base of their house, which was still being re-built, bit by bit, a year after its destruction.

"I got this tin roof from the government about five months after the flood, but nothing else after that. I've had to find the money to build the house with these bamboo walls and straw on the roof. As you can see, we're still working on it, it's still not complete", Hossain said.

Hossain's story is not a unique one in this village where human fatality was low but material loss extensive. Almost to a man, villagers spoke of a lack of government concern for their fate after the worst impact of the cyclone or flood, as they continually referred to the tidal wave, was over.

Most people received few kilograms of rice or wheat, some both, while others got none.

Here at South Jaldi, rehabilitation meant a corrugated iron sheet to put on their roof, while they were left to build the house themselves.

Whether at Ghorokkata Union of Maheshkhali or Jaldi Union of Banskhali, the story is virtually one and the same.

Very few complained of having had no relief in the days following the flood, but even fewer said they received anything like adequate help to re-start their shattered lives. Mesbahud Dowla, a 21-year old day-labourer of Mankirchar of Banskhali saw the problem from a different angle.

"Only the rich got help. Those who managed to pay the Union Parishad chairman and members got help, but the poor got nothing," he said as the women of the family laboured away, re-building a mud house with earth dug from the yard. Most of the men of the extended family were away looking for odd jobs.

Nearly a dozen families, all related, lived in three 'houses', two of which still did not have any roofs, within a small compound surrounded by farmland none of which belonged to them.

The coastal farmlands, whether in Banskhali or Maheshkhali, seemed to have suffered little from the invasion of saline water. The tremendous regenerating power of the land meant it was fit for cultivation within months of the flood.

Still much of the fertile land lay idle under the scorching April sun. Farmers were waiting for the monsoon to soak the land.

Yet, half a kilometre from where Mesbah and his relatives struggled to survive, one small patch of land had ripe paddies, nearly four feet tall, swaying in the breeze.

With the monsoon approaching, repair work on the long, windy road leading from Satkania on the Chittagong-Cox's Bazar highway to Jaldi, a three-hour drive by bus, had only started.

The road, mainly laid with red bricks, looked as if few major battles of World War II were fought on it.

It would have been difficult to believe that on-rushing sea water could do such severe damage to raised roads, had it not actually happened.

The slow pace of road reconstruction was visible in Maheshkhali where the impact of the cyclone was less severe on the upazila headquarters at Ghorokkata than elsewhere on the island such as Matarbari.

Less than a third of the road leading from the jetty five or six kilometers inland to the salt farms, had been rebuilt, mostly in and just beyond the town.

Near the salt fields, rows of newly-built houses with tin roofs gleaming in the sun, testified to non-government efforts to help poor farmers and fishermen recover.

"Those houses were built by Kuwait, other NGOs have also given help to many poor families, but the farmers are still struggling", Mohammad Ishaq, member of the local Union Parishad, said, "The government did the right thing by giving NGOs the job of helping people, because if it was upto government or semi-government or even union chairmen and members, then not even five per cent of the needy would have got any help."

Lives are being rebuilt at the very spots from where they were uprooted a year ago, because there is nowhere else for them to go; the struggle continues, because there is no choice; and frustration is shown everytime a visitor from the outside world comes trudging to inspect: "I had no help, nothing."



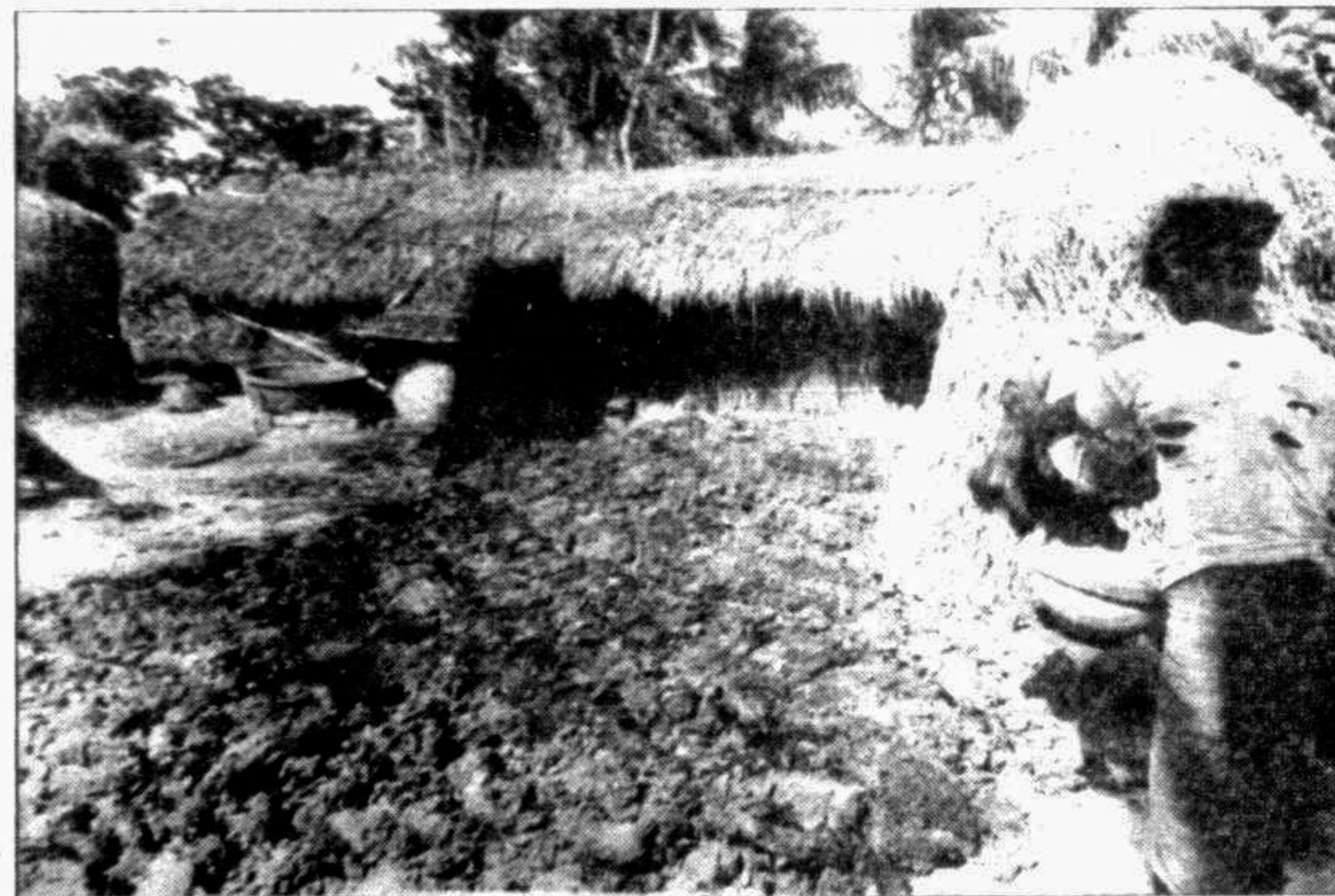
Rehabilitation remains a foreign word at Muhuripukur Para in Banskhali.



As if nothing happened... Playful kids on the newly-raised embankment road at Jaldi Union of Banskhali.



A year after the storm, the devastated primary school at Kalipur, Banskhali on the Satkania road lies unrepaired.



Taking earth from the field, Banskhali farmer raises level of his yard.



For Nurul Alam's family in Mankirchar in Banskhali, the struggle to rebuild their home and lives continues.



Right on the water's edge, a new cyclone shelter is being built at Ghorokkata Union of Maheshkhali. Although work was supposed to be completed by May this year, the contractors started work in the last week of April.