

Responding to Drought in Bangladesh

by Dr Mohammad Habibur Rahman

IN 1994, the northern districts of Bangladesh experienced the most severe drought since independence. A number of indicators suggested that this region was extremely affected by one of the worst of the century. In these areas, crop yield was reported to have declined by 60-70 percent, resulting food grain crisis all over the country. The decrease in demand in agricultural wage-labourer also had a harmful effect on the lives of millions of villagers. In the aftermath of the long-drawn drought, the situation in these areas is feared to have declined further. This year again, another drought is very much in existence in the same part of the country. There has not been any rain since a long time. The 'fertiliser crisis' and high price of essential commodities have further exacerbated the situation.

The RDRS/ODA Drought Response Project Phase-1, funded by British ODA and executed by Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS), supplemented the efforts of the government of Bangladesh and other agencies to provide relief in different forms to the worst affected families in six northern districts of Bangladesh (Kurigram, Lalmonirhat,

Nilphamari, Thakurgaon, Dinajpur, Panchagarh) through a targeted programme of employment creation, education and agricultural rehabilitation. The worst affected char lands (river sandbars) of Kurigram and Lalmonirhat Districts also received a share of this £ 1 million project.

One other important feature of the project was that it targeted mainly women beneficiaries of the worst-affected HH providing up to 75 percent of the benefits to them. This project distributed benefits not only to RDRS Group Member Households (GMHs), but also to non-RDRS Households (HHs). In this connection, RDRS worked in collaboration with the local councils like Union Parishad and Thana Administration and its Union Federations.

A study was conducted between 1-21 April 1995 in seven selected Thanas under seven RDRS Comprehensive Project Units (CPUs) to study the socio-economic impact of the project on people.

Major Findings

Data, information and observation, gathered from the field survey, suggest that with some constraints in pro-

gramme designing and implementation, RDRS operated the project successfully and benefited the targeted population. RDRS has clearly demonstrated its potential in utilizing the ODA fund. The secrets of its success in operating this project lie in its sensitiveness to the needs of the community it serves. RDRS field staff, working at local level, enjoy a considerable degree of autonomy in discharging their responsibilities.

In preparing the selection list of beneficiaries from non-RDRS HHs in this project, RDRS sought and received co-operation from local government (Union Council and Thana Administration) and Union Federations, apex body of phased-out RDRS Groups. This sets for other NGOs a good example of government (GO)-NGO cooperation and collaboration at the local level.

The senior management and field workers of RDRS worked well in a good team-spirit in executing the project. It was a well-planned and well-managed project which RDRS successfully completed without disrupting too much its normal programmes. This project helped RDRS to demonstrate to other devel-

opment NGOs a model of pragmatic NGO operation to respond to disaster situations and yet carry on other programmes for the sustainable development of the rural people. There were, however, some constraints and weaknesses which RDRS has to review carefully. The problems are of both macro and micro nature, from greater environmental issues to RDRS's operational procedures. RDRS has to adjust itself to meet the needs of the hour.

In the short term though, RDRS should launch another drought response project to support those who are already affected by this year's catastrophe and economic crisis.

Programme Designing and Implementation

To administer this project, RDRS devised an implementation strategy that probably best served the interests of its clients. Though it was targeted that 101,860 HHs would participate in this project, but a total of 116,910 HHs were actually benefited from it, registering an increase by nearly 15%. Commencing in late October 1994, the RDRS/ODA Drought Response Project Phase-1 was completed on 31 March 1995. It involved five different programme-components which provided both relief and support for development. The components of the project were: a) Cash for Work (CFW), b) Cash for Education (CFE), c) Fish Pond/Re Excavation, d) Survival Credit and Homegardening Support.

A total of 64.2% of the targeted population received relief in the form of CFW and CFE. These two relief programmes were completed in November 1994, the first month of the project. The two agricultural rehabilitation components — Survival Credit and Homegardening Support were implemented as a package programme which took an average 6-8 weeks between November-December 1994. Finally, Fish Pond/Re-Excavation, the last component of the project, was finished by March 1995. A total of 35.8% of the participants received support in these three programme activities. The total number of female beneficiaries was 87,574 (74.9%) compared to 29,336 male participants (which constituted only 25.1% of the total beneficiary population).

Socio-economic Impact of the Project

RDRS/ODA Drought Response Project has had a significant impact upon the development process in RDRS working area. Although the coverage is not exhaustive compared to the needs of the drought-affected people, a qualitative analysis using primary data reveals that both RDRS GMHs and non-group HHs have benefited from the ODA-funded package programme covering a wide range of support such as cash for short-term benefit and other assistance in the fields for

longer-term benefit like credit for agricultural development, homegarden improvement, pond re/excavation, development education and conscientization.

The most immediate benefit was that the project helped halting the process of marginalisation of people. People were in the process of selling out assets at nominal prices, mortgaging out land, selling labour in advance and even withdrawing children from school for family support. The project, by providing quick financial and material support, rescued people from this state of disaster.

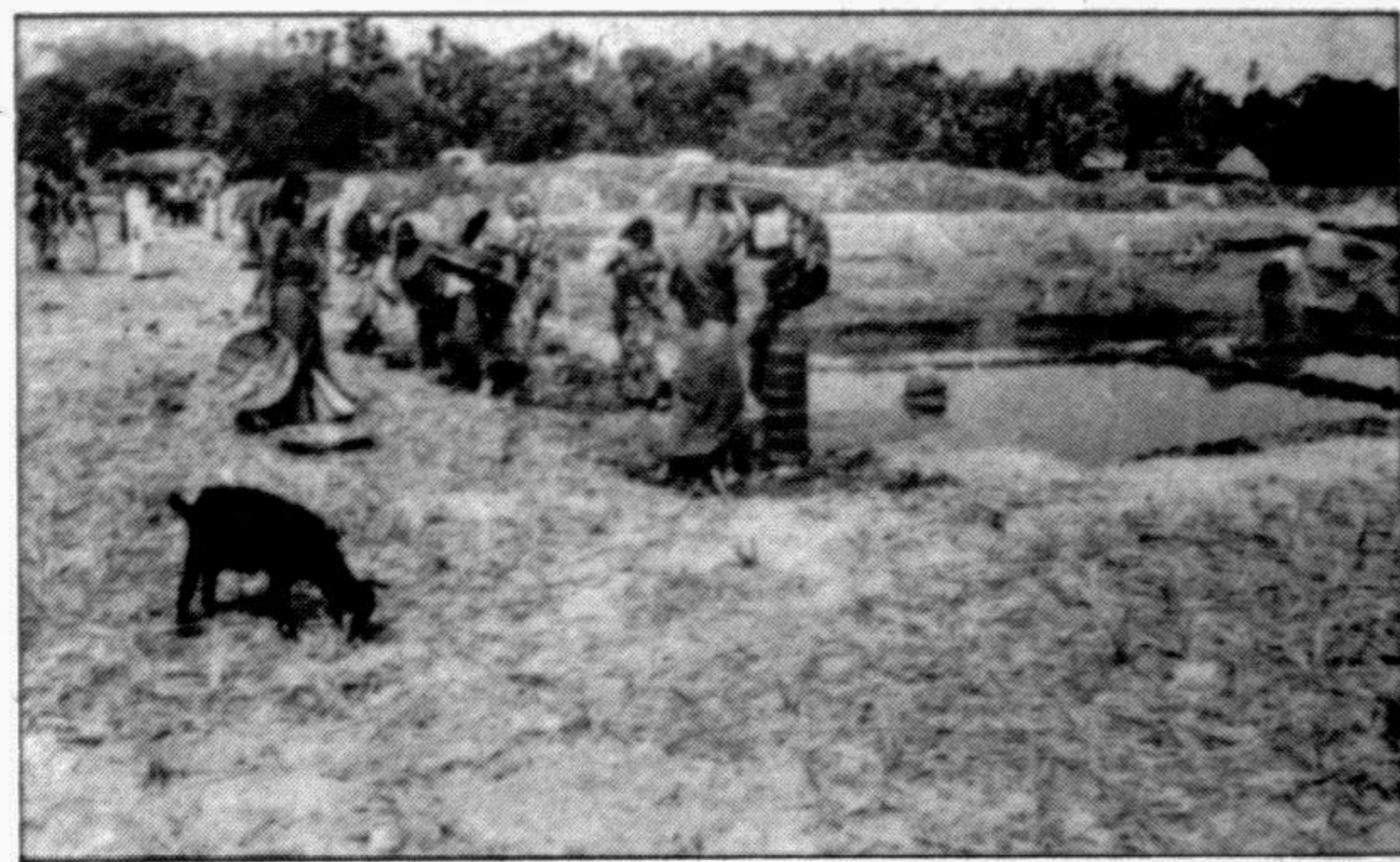
As the package programme was intended to have both short-term and longer-term implications, it was a blend of both relief and development. The project efficiently tackled the immediate effect of drought by distributing relief to the most vulnerable people. Then the agricultural rehabilitation programmes — survival credit, homegardening support and fish pond re/excavation helped addressed the worsening situation caused by the loss of food production.

Under the CFW, a wide-range of earth works were initiated. The programme, which provided employment to 49,505 people, include excavation and re-excavation of fish ponds, repair of village roads, preparing roads, preparing roadside ground for tree plantation, ground raising of school and other places of public utility and erection of embankment in the char areas.

Fish pond re/excavation provided employment to 26,082 people of which 23,787 were female (91.2%). In collaboration with Union Federations, RDRS staff carried out this programme between December and March. Underutilized ponds for re-excavation and land for excavation were taken on lease for Groups and Federations. The fishculture will start as soon as the monsoon begins.

The two Agricultural Rehabilitation components — Homegardening and Survival Credit enabled selected beneficiaries to produce vegetables and winter crops for consumption and sale. The participants in these two programmes are RDRS GMHs (both existing and phased-out) only who received both credit and material resources. For homegardens cash was provided on a credit basis and inputs, such as treadle pump (bamboo), vegetable seeds and fertiliser were given as grant.

A total of Taka 15,700,000 was disbursed through Survival credit to the hands of 8682 beneficiaries. It was to encourage them to produce wheat, maize and other winter crops. Landless GMHs received the credit to purchase shallow tubewell to sale irrigation water to farmers. People derived a number of benefits from shallow tubewell operation. It was acknowledged by all 10 respondents (those who received shallow tubewell from



Providing much needed employment — an effect of the project.

the project) that the crop production would substantially increase due to extended irrigation area. They also feel that it helps to 'keep the environment cool and to get safe drinking water. In Nageswari CPU for instance, 125 shallow tubewells were distributed, which means an extended 2000 acres of irrigated land will yearly produce an extra 4000 MT of rice.

The project has been a great success in distributing relief and supporting sustainable development. The beneficiaries from the RDRS GMHs, particularly the women, were able to rehabilitate themselves in the post-project period. Utilizing the available funds from this project, some of them have diversified their sources of income as well. However, the benefits of the project were not equally retained by Group and non-group HHs. The RDRS GMHs have much higher level of disaster preparedness (during drought) and the level of development (in the post-project period) than those of the non-RDRS HHs.

Conclusion

The RDRS/ODA Drought Response Project sets a good example before other NGOs, who are in the quest for steering relief programmes to support development. Involving other actors like local councillors and Union Federations, RDRS has demonstrated that local need based relief programmes can be instrumental for development. The mode of operation, RDRS opted in executing this project, is unique in addressing the twin purpose of distributing relief and at the same time succoring development. These two approaches went hand in hand during the planning and implementation phases of the project.

This project strengthened the confidence of both NGO workers and the programme beneficiaries. From NGO workers' point of view (as it is explained by many field staff of RDRS) the successful end of the project, while continuing routine development work, is a significant achievement. They feel that they can effectively carry on similar projects in

future. From the beneficiaries' point of analysis (who have demonstrated that their level of disaster consciousness in quite high) support the view that relief of this kind helps the Groups to consolidate by keeping high moral to encounter disasters boldly. This is not merely because they get some kind of financial and material support, but more importantly, because they strongly feel that RDRS stands by them during their critical hours. This psychological favour of RDRS can contribute a lot to achieve sustainable development for the needy.

It must also be noted that through successful implementation of the project, RDRS has demonstrated a new model of effective operation of both relief and development programmes under one organiza-

tional arrangement and institutional setup. This model can be effectively used by other development NGOs to provide short-term relief assistance to the poor in times of need without sacrificing the primary purposes of such development NGOs. In fact, the empirical evidence of this study suggests that relief could be a 'soft landing' for sustainable development. It does not contradict with, rather it can have longer-term implications for sustainable development if it is designed, organised and implemented within a strong institutional purview of an experienced development NGO like RDRS, which has also got strong relief experience from its initial years of operation.

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125,000 People will Benefit from Drought Response Intervention in 6 Northern Districts

by Aloysius Milon Khan

AT least 124,260 people (from the 26,520 households) will directly benefit from the second phase RDRS/ODA Drought Response Project. The target population of this project will be mainly children and poor women identified as the neediest by local organisations of the landless.

In most northern districts the monsoon rains failed last year and continuing drought has led to serious unemployment and distress.

Other relief measures, such as those organised by Government, and the amon harvest helped further alleviate distress. The poor have been made vulnerable, however, by extended deprivation including a cold winter and the present lean season, from February to May, is already becoming more serious. Apart from the impoverishing and weakening effect of drought, the excessively high (and unseasonal) price for basic grains together with indications of malnutrition among children provide evidence of increasing distress. The poorest households are again facing very serious hardship.

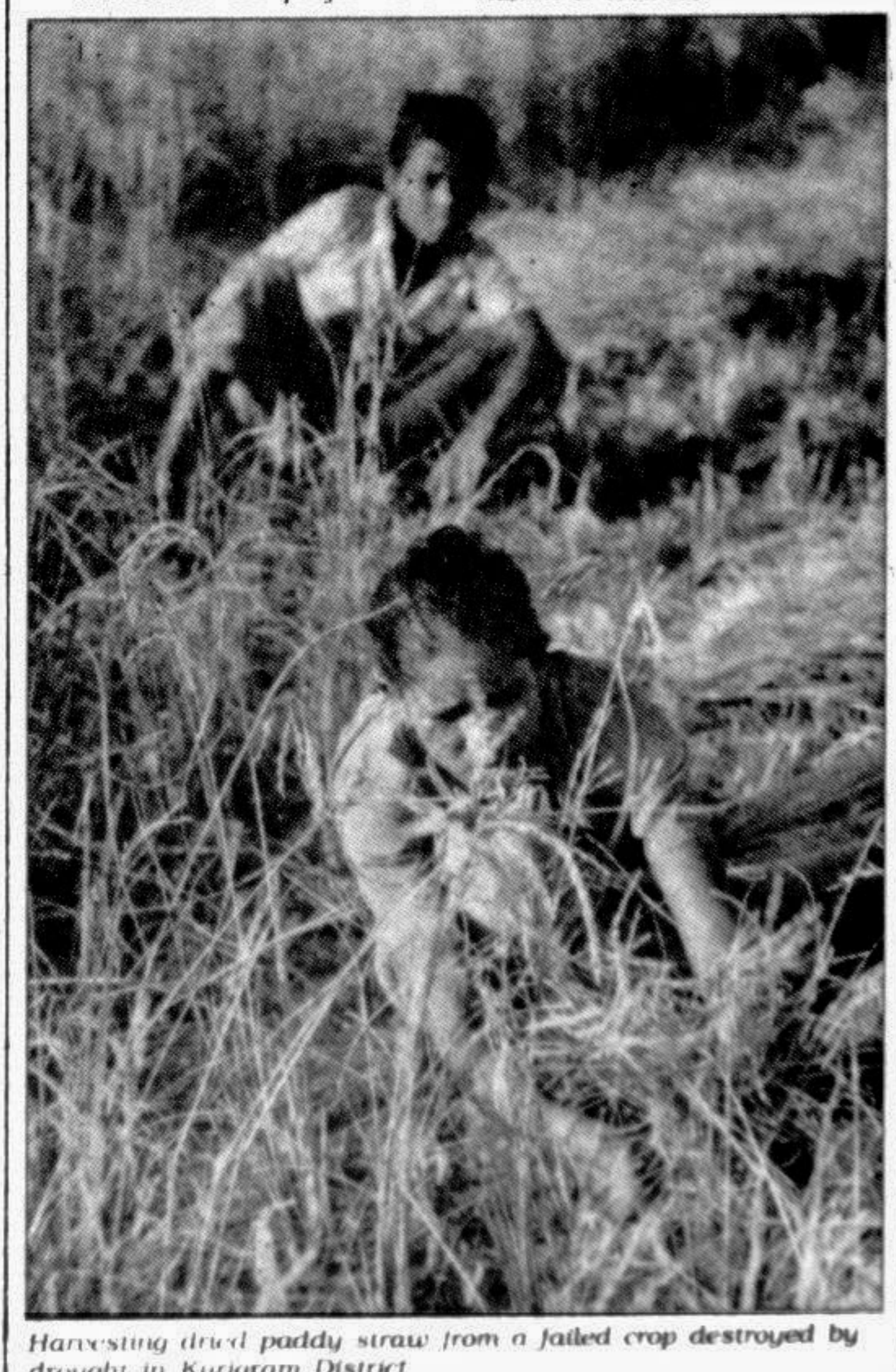
The RDRS-ODA Drought Response Project Phase I implemented between late October 1994 and March 1995 gave relief to over 100,000 of the worse affected households.

To address continuing need, a follow-up Drought Response Project Phase II is being implemented by RDRS beginning 1st May. The aim of the project is to

reduce the adverse impact of drought by providing for the poorest families, immediate employment and income generation and, primarily for mothers and children, and a special programme of survival education (including health, medical treatment and nutrition) will also be undertaken. Under this project, emergency assistance will be provided to 26,520 worst affected households, particularly children and women; immediate employment and wage income for 18,520 affected households, mainly women in earthworks, tree planting and caretaking and homegardening; health education, nutrition supplementation and medical assistance to 5,600 vulnerable women and 16,800 children.

The project working area will be six drought-affected districts of Kurigram, Lalmonirhat, Nilphamari, Panchagarh, Thakurgaon and Dinajpur in northern Bangladesh. Since recent surveys show the situation to be most serious in the eastern districts, the interventions will be concentrated primarily in the three north-eastern districts, including the char areas (sandbar). The duration of this project will be 3 months (except for the tree plantation component, which will be implemented over a period of 9 months).

Total cost of the project is Taka 37,017,308. This relief-oriented project will seek larger term development impact as well as short term alleviation of distress.



Harvesting dried paddy straw from a failed crop destroyed by drought in Kurigram District.



Excavating fish ponds: Women are the main beneficiaries.

15 May: International Family Day Our Ties are Still Strong

by Mir Lutful Kabir Saadi

"HAPPY families are all alike, every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way". These opening words of the famous novel, Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy, have not lost their validity since they were written more than one hundred years ago.

Family is a universal phenomenon and the concept of family is perhaps the most basic in social life. Families, however, manifest in diverse forms and functions; subsequently, there is no single view of the family, nor can there be a universally applicable definition. So too, perceptions of the function and role of the family and notions on the ideal interpersonal relationships within the family differ both among and within national societies, regions and cultures. Therefore, perhaps one of the major universally applicable notions about the family concerns its diversity and dynamism.

The United Nations General Assembly in its resolution of 8 December 1989 proclaimed 1994 as the 'International Year of the Family' and it was observed throughout the world. The theme of the year was 'family resources and responsibilities in a changing world'. The United Nations also declared 15 May as International Family Day.

The family is universally recognized as a basic unit of the society. In spite of the many changes in society that have altered their roles and functions, families continue to provide the natural framework for the emotional and material support essential to the growth and well-being of their members. Additionally, families are basic social units of production and consumption and, as such are at the heart of the economic process. They need to be intimately connected with the objectives of economic and social development, as a minimum requirement for progress. In short, families are engines of the economic and social development process, and must be accounted for when establishing policies and priorities for economic and social development.

Global concern for the family is not born out of a nostalgic desire for that bygone times, when rules and roles were less clouded with ambiguity, and the future less uncertain. Indeed, the so-called less complicated world of yesterday was in many ways not the sort

of the society that people might want to live in tomorrow; notably, for example, in respect of the elderly and persons with disabilities.

The family like the society itself, has undergone a process of wholesale transformation. In this process, the family has been both the purveyor and the recipient of change: sometimes acting as its agent or, alternatively, being transformed by external forces. In some cases, the process has been adaptive; in others, often destructive, threatening the survival of the family. Whatever the specific causes, many of the things that are nostalgically understood to constitute a family, for better or worse, are now lost in history. In addition, many of the stereotypes or conventions used to describe family life are often anachronistic and no longer borne out by reality.

The pace of change to which families are subjected, both internally and externally, has never been so rapid. The rate of cultural, economic and political transformation in the world beggars description. The incessant pounding for change on their consciousness taxes the ability of people to understand, adapt or act thoughtfully in the world about them. Their capacity to cope with change through meaningful and productive action is constantly being challenged. Families everywhere are in need of support to increase their capacity to adapt to and meet the demands of change.

Rapid change is also a time of opportunity, when new and positive social forms can quickly replace those that are antiquated, inappropriate or unjust. History is full of examples of such positive changes. It should not, however, be assumed that change will come how independently generate benefits. The capacity for thoughtful human action is necessary for positive social change and the evidence of that thoughtfulness should be seen in the societies that people build.

Families can play important roles in the progression of constructive changes in society. When the family's need for ability to discharge its function are unmet, the individual initiative and personal development of members may not be fulfilled. Families everywhere are 'in transition'. Transitions in families may have both positive and negative impacts.

The forces of change that have wrought immense transformations in society have brought about equally profound changes in families themselves. Foremost among these changes, particularly in the developed world, are the sweeping accomplishments by and on behalf of women. Although this work is far from complete and there is much more to be achieved, nothing can diminish the remarkable reforms that have already taken place, in families and human society, in response to the rising tide of feminist thought and collective action.

Once born as humans, we gain our first experience of love and support from our parents. It is in the family context that we learn our first lessons about the meaning of existence, and about the roles and attitudes expected from us. The traditional role of families in Bangladesh in strengthening the bonds of relationship between family members have weakened, though the rich cultural heritage of oriental solidarity still exists to act as a unique form of maintaining traditional values which is the strength behind national and religious identity.

Family ties are still strong and permanent in Bangladesh, though poverty, illiteracy, unemployment brought about breach in some families. Young people of the country are suffering from frustration and tension as they feel that their future is dark and dismal. Some of them are drug addicted and taking recourse to unsocial activities. If they are given employment, we can get them rid themselves of the vice.

The family, as a living, evolving social institution, faces what may be its difficult challenge in the history of the human species. Many societies are changing so rapidly that the speed of change alone is a major factor of stress in families.

"We stand at a crossroads between the conception of the family which prevailed in the past and that of the future. We must take account of the past, we must work in the present, and we must look towards the future. We must strengthen the family — because it is the family that has a bearing on the future."

The writer is Correspondent IMPACT International, published from London.

Farmers, Congressmen Stress Fair Global Farm Trade

by Jeanne Holden

USIA Staff Writer

SECRETARY of Agriculture Dan Glickman says that fairness in international trade is a top concern of US farmers.

Glickman told the Senate Appropriations Committee May 3 that in rural forums held in six states in April and at the National Rural Conference in Ames, Iowa, on April 25, farmers kept returning to the theme of the importance of fairness in international trade. During the hearing, several US congressmen encouraged Glickman to find ways to assure that US farmers compete on a level playing field in world markets.

In the post-Uruguay Round trade environment and with the opportunities made possible by the North American Free Trade Agreement, Senator Thad Cochran said, "It would be appropriate for the administration to come forward with some recommendations to the Congress for either new initiatives or improvements for old programs to try to help make sure that our producers and our agricultural exporters are treated fairly and have equal access" in foreign markets.

Cochran (R-Miss.) is the Chairman of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development and Related Agencies.

He stressed that United States should not sit idly by or encourage those in Congress who say export promotion programs are unnecessary. Otherwise, Cochran warned, the United States will "lose market share (and) we're going to see our exports decline

rather than increase like they should."

According to Agriculture Department officials, the European Union and Canada are gearing up to promote and support their farm commodities in ways that are legal and consistent with the Uruguay Round accord, Cochran said.

Glickman pointed out that the European Union is currently spending four or five times what the United States is spending on direct payments to farmer. He stressed that it is inappropriate for policy makers to talk about eliminating US farm programs without considering the context of what other countries that are competitors are doing.

Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Richard Lugar has proposed eliminating the Agriculture Department's Export Enhancement Program as well as federal price supports and income subsidies. The proposal is under consideration by Congress, which is getting ready to write a new five-year farm bill.

Glickman said he would be meeting with the Canadian Agricultural and Agri-Food Minister Ralph Goodale in Washington later May 3 and would be stressing the US belief in a firm and fair trade policy.

According to press reports, US Trade Representative Mickey Kantor recently said that Canada must reform its wheat marketing system before the United States will open its borders again to unrestrained imports of Canadian wheat. After negotiations last

summer, the United States imposed a one-year tariff-rate quota on US imports of Canadian wheat.

Republican Senator Conrad Burns added that he is concerned about processed meats imported from Canada to his home state of Montana. He told Glickman that he wants to see additional food inspection and safety efforts applied to these imports.

Senator Dale Bumpers said that he believes the Agriculture Department's export enhancement programs are useful for promoting US commodities, but he emphasized his opposition to using federal market promotion programs to support big corporations like Sunkist (fruit) or Gallo (wines). Bumpers is a Democratic senator from Arkansas.

Glickman pointed out that Congress and the USDA have made changes in the export promotion programs during the last year or two to ensure the benefits go to small agricultural producers and businessmen who truly need market assistance.

Senator Robert Kerrey (D-Nebr.) suggested that the administration should put the Chinese market at the top of its agricultural export efforts. It is a great opportunity that could be a winning situation for American commodity producers and Chinese consumers, Kerrey said.

The Chinese are said to be "relentless in pursuit of objectives" and the USDA needs to be equally relentless, Kerrey said.