

FOCUS

As global attention turns to the upcoming Fourth World Women's Conference in Beijing — and the forum for non-government organizations (NGOs) which has been forced to meet 60 kilometres from the main event — Gemini News Service looks at the role NGOs are beginning to play in China.

NGO forum starts 30 August 1995, in Huairou.

Fourth World Women's Conference 4-15 September, 1995, in Beijing

Grassroots Groups Put down New Roots

DESPITE rigid government control over all facets of life in China, non-government organisations (NGOs) are slowly breaking the ties that bind them to the state.

As more than 35,000 representatives from NGOs all over the world get ready for 10 days of meetings in Huairou, 60 kilometres from the United Nations-sponsored Fourth World Women's Conference which is running from 4-15 September, the spotlight is being turned on the host country's own record of support for grassroots groups.

One bold project which runs counter to the trend of government control is the Zhiling School for mentally handicapped children. The school was set up 10 years ago in Guangzhou by a group of determined individuals and parents, with neither support nor permission from the authorities.

With some subsequent support from the Hong Kong office of Catholic aid organisation Caritas, the school thrived and expanded. It now enrolls 170 students and the founders are establishing a training centre for the

school's graduates. According to Dr Joe Leung, a Hong Kong university lecturer in Social Administration, the authorities' attitude "has shifted from suspicion to conditional support," even though Zhiling still has no official status.

Other recognised groups which appear to have become increasingly autonomous are the Gong He Cooperative Movement, set up in the 1930s, which designs its own rural training programmes, and the Amity Foundation, set up in 1985 by Protestant churches, which undertakes health, education and rural development projects with backing from foreign NGOs.

According to the International Council of Voluntary Agencies, 22 NGOs from seven different countries now fund development projects carried out by Chinese organisations.

These numbers are small compared to many Asian countries, but some international groups believe work in China can have more impact than elsewhere.

"With the current change of pace in China, a lot of welfare policy and practice is in the process of being in-

Nick Young writes from Hong Kong

vented," says Kate Wedgwood, China Field Director of Save the Children Fund (UK) which runs education, sanitation, and child welfare projects in Tibet and Anhui. "If NGOs find effective ways of working," she adds, "there is enormous potential for scaling up."

Oxfam Hong Kong operates rural credit and training schemes in Yunnan and Guizhou. Director John Sayer finds that "a small amount of intervention in terms of outside experience and money seems to make a lot more happen than it would in a place more used to foreign aid."

But as Leung points out, "all 'social organisations' must have government or party patronage."

The emergence of business and recreational clubs, he says, shows that "people have more room to move and more private space, that's true, but it's still a kind of freedom that's strictly delimited by the state."

In the case of welfare organisations, according to Leung, a lot of societies are being organised with a non-

governmental label, to facilitate government communication with outside bodies — raising funds for example.

He gives the example of the Disabled Person's Federation, founded by Deng Fong, son of China's leader, Deng Xiaoping.

"It has raised a lot of money overseas because it is using a non-governmental title. But all these organisations have party structures, and must have a government department or ministry which is accountable for their behaviour."

Government also controls organisations such as the Red Cross, the Foundation for the Underdeveloped Regions and the Committee on Elderly Problems.

Yet international aid agencies are often prepared to support the work of these quasi-non governmental organisations, rather than giving or lending directly to government. Being distanced from government also helps to raise money from private donations.

The China Youth Development Foundation, for example, which raised money

from the public in Hong Kong to support rural education projects, was set up and is managed by the Communist Party's official youth movement.

Dr Jude Howell, a lecturer in Development Studies at the University of East Anglia, in Britain, argued in a recent issue of the journal *Development in Practice*, that "restructuring" in China has made room for Chinese and international NGOs to "operate in the space between the Party/State and society."

Howell believes that with the "iron rice bowl" of Maoist cradle-to-grave social provision effectively smashed by market reforms, government is "open to alternatives" and prepared to see NGOs working in areas that could reduce its own burdens.

She quotes a senior official as saying "The government cannot totally manage health, culture, social welfare and education. In future China will have a big society and a small government. Social organisations will play an important role."

The effectiveness of NGOs in China is enhanced, says

Sayer of Oxfam Hong Kong, because "the Chinese are hugely receptive to new ideas and techniques, provided your approach is not confrontational".

Oxfam's techniques for poverty alleviation in harsh, marginal environments are, according to Sayer, very simple: "flexibility, responsiveness, listening to what people have to say."

This can be a significant innovation in a society used to receiving orders from above and suppressing initiative lower down.

After 1997, Oxfam Hong Kong and an array of other independent or church-based relief and welfare organisations which have flourished in the territory, will no longer be 'international' NGOs but fully Chinese.

Oxfam Hong Kong's considerable organisational experience and fundraising ability raised US \$4 million from the Hong Kong public last year, and may catalyse the emergence of, if not a civil society, at least of a thriving NGO community on the mainland.

NICK YOUNG is Hong Kong-based journalist.

Beijing agenda

The fourth World Conference on Women will be held in Beijing, China from 4-15 Sept 1995

The UN's 12 critical areas of concern for today's women

- Help women to overcome poverty
- Ensure quality education
- Improve health care
- Eliminate violence against women
- Protect women from armed conflicts
- Encourage women's economic participation
- Promote women in politics
- Establish gender equality in public policy making
- Promote women's human rights
- Ensure equal access to information and media
- Involve women in sustainable development of the environment
- End discrimination and abuse against girls

Source: Draft Platform for Action prepared by the UN Commission on Status of Women in consultation with NGOs

Bosnia

by Rashida Ahmad

A Little Hope in Hell

"These women are more than soldiers, they are our national heroes."

— Bosnian soldier, speaking about rape-camp victims

FROM four-year-olds to ninety-year-olds, regardless of age, for years the Serbs were capturing Bosnian children, girls and women to torture in their 'rape-camps'. The youngest children (4 to 6 years of age) were taken and raped through the night, and then ordered to give a statement to their mothers in the morning — who was the 'best' of the Serbs last night. If a mother refused to allow their daughter to go with the soldiers, the child was shot. The older girls and younger women were gang-raped by as many as 50 soldiers a day.

For one Bosnian Muslim woman, a former high-school teacher, the most traumatic experience was that many of the young Bosnian Serb soldiers had been taught by her before the war — "my own students were raping me..."

We have all heard of the Bosnian 'rape-camps' and the systematic policy by the Serbs of using rape as a weapon of war. But few of us can really imagine, or care to think about, the atrocities that were being carried out in these camps day by day, hour by hour. Even fewer of us, however horrified or sympathetic we may be, have

ourselves made any attempt to help the victims of such inhumanity.

Zainab Salbi, Iraqi-born, now living in the US, is one of the few 'outsiders' who has cared enough to actively help these women and children, and has been brave enough to come face to face with rape-camp survivors to hear their stories, disturbing personal accounts such as those related above. The President and founder of Women for Women in Bosnia, her own story is one of compassion and commitment.

When news about Bosnia first started being aired, "hearing the horrendous stories of what was happening to the women there," Salbi decided to help by giving money. But she could find no women's groups in the US that were involved. As news of the suffering in Bosnia increased, Salbi became determined to organise some kind of relief effort herself.

Asked what made her act while most people looked on helplessly, she replies that she herself has experienced two wars — the Iran-Iraq and the Gulf war. "I knew how it feels to be in war. Also Iraq received a lot of aid in its war against Iran. Now I was witnessing someone else's war. I felt that as my country received, I should give."

Salbi went to different organisations asking for support and funding through April and May of 1993. "I found a lot of people who wanted to help but didn't know how. Once I started, I received so much help and support from others."

Then in June of 1993, Salbi made the first trip to the war-torn former Yugoslavia. Visiting Croatia, where she met with Bosnian refugees, was a real turning point, Salbi recalls gravely.

"Before going there I felt no absolute commitment. But listening to the testimonies was very different from hearing about it on the news, seeing with my own eyes, being moved to tears time and time again led to a full time commitment on my part."

The next trip for Salbi was Bosnia itself. Compared to Croatia, it was another world. "Croatia is comparatively isolated from the war. The city is like any other city," says Salbi. But Bosnia is where the real hell of war is experienced. Sarajevo was once surrounded by wooded hills. Now bare, the hills are filled with the graves of the dead. The trees have been cut for fuel and coffins.

It's a struggle to survive not just on the front, where until recently there were no uniforms and only two machine-guns for every 100 soldiers, but in the city itself. In the UN 'safe area' of Sarajevo, teachers, engineers, doctors, risk their lives every time they leave their houses as they continue to work without pay (soldiers are paid two packets of cigarettes a month).

"When I asked them why do they work for no money, they replied, 'What else can we do? We can't just sit in one room,'" recounts Salbi. "Their struggle is to live as normally as possible, to keep life going, not to give up."

The Bosnians are not only facing genocide but 'urbicide' too, according to Salbi, as the Serbs attempt to destroy all repositories of culture — galleries, libraries, mosques, schools and concert halls. When one of the largest surviving libraries of the Ottoman Empire caught fire from a bomb attack on Sarajevo, the Serbs targeted the firemen as they fought to save the culture and heritage contained in the thousands of ancient tomes. The city was soon covered in the ashes of those books.

This is so symbolic of how their past is being destroyed and of their fight to preserve their culture. This is why they risk their lives

The Ideology of Rape

Many captured soldiers from Serbian armies are now describing how they were forced to rape Bosnian women and children. As part of their military orders, they were told it was their patriotic duty to do so. Those that attempted to refuse were branded as cowards. Threats of being shot as a traitor were used to make them comply; these often proved not to be idle threats.

One of the myths that fueled the Serbian ideology of rape was that the Bosnian soldiers, unlike the Serbs, were impotent, not manly enough to rape Serbian women. Otherwise they would be doing the same to their women and children. Another myth was that by raping the enemy, a Serb was helping to wipe out the Bosnians, the child would not be Bosnian but Serbian.

But a weapon such as rape serves only to strip the abuser of his humanity. Since the beginning of the war, Serbian domestic rape has been seen to rise as the Serbs weapon of war backfires.

everyday, to keep their city alive," says Salbi. It is inspiring that such spirit can survive as one hears of people forced to eat grass because UN supplies failed to come through, of men naked in the streets, screaming and crying (the survivors of concentration camps), of children being shot and killed, of risking life and limb just to collect water everyday.

Of course there are many Bosnians who are utterly disillusioned, who believe, there is nothing to do but fight the bitter end, who realise they cannot depend on the UN, or the West, and their unkept promises. There is little hope left in their lives.

The hope that lives remain in Bosnia is the hope of humanity that still shines in a dark world. The tales of decency and humanity among the brutality of 'ethnic cleansing', that Salbi relates, defy expectation.

At the start of the war, when Bosnian Muslim women were first raped by Serb soldiers and told 'your baby is a Serb' (one form of 'ethnic cleansing'), many of the women rejected their babies

after birth. A lot of money was made by unscrupulous dealers selling these children on the black market for adoption. "Now both the Croatian and Bosnian government have made such adoption illegal, they are claiming 'these children are our children, they are Bosnian children,'" says Salbi.

It is still difficult for the mothers to accept the children born of brutal rape. "But the children are institutionally protected now. The community takes care of the child until the mother is ready to deal with the situation," says Salbi. In many cases where the mother is not able to accept the baby at all, the father or extended family adopts the child. "They are not ashamed of these children, but accepting of them. This is such a healthy, civilised and humane way of dealing with a normally inconceivable situation."

Another sentiment which is indicative of the Bosnians' courage in the face of adversity is that the survivors of the rape camps are regarded as 'more than soldiers'. "It

defies all stereotypes of Muslims," Salbi exclaims. "These women are not marginalised or shunned, but claimed as heroes." They community is also very protective of them. Many of the Bosnian women's groups will not allow interviews of rape victims, refusing to add to their trauma by singling them out. "The therapists ask what can you do for them, anyway, by interviewing them?"

Such care and concern among the horror of war is rare. It comes from an attempt to keep a fragile grip on 'normality'. "There are Bosnian soldiers who commit rape. But they are punished," says Salbi, as they would be under normal circumstances. It is a matter of realising human priorities, such as right and wrong.

Another human priority is art and music. "What moved me immensely was to see art in Bosnia," says Salbi. "The art galleries may be destroyed but the Bosnians still hold exhibitions in the ruined buildings, sculptures made of war debris. It is incredible to listen to a concert

in Sarajevo. They are held at night during blackout, in the streets. You may be walking along and suddenly you will hear music in the dark, people will gather, it's amazing. Schools which are only just standing will have kids playing violins, piano music floating from the windows. It is life among war, life from death. It is beautiful. It touched me a lot."

Bosnia touched Salbi to such an extent that she is determined to return and live there after the war. "At present my work makes it necessary for me to be in the States. But after the war I hope to settle over there." She plans to continue her work with women refugees and victims of the war by trying to replicate the Grameen Bank in Bosnia, which was the main reason for her recent trip to Bangladesh. Meanwhile, Women for Women in Bosnia continues to grow, as it has done from 35 to 500 members since its conception two years ago, providing some hope and refuge for the women of Bosnia.



DEADLY TREK: Water mains are cut off in Sarajevo. Anita must walk far to fill her jug, risking gunfire and shelling on the way. — photo: Courtesy Time

Women for Women in Bosnia

In September 1993, the first aid was sent by Women for Women in Bosnia (WWB). The programme began by matching refugees in Bosnia and Croatia with women in the US and Canada. Now there are women taking part from Germany, from Kenya and, since Zainab Salbi's visit here, from Bangladesh.

"Our representatives, chosen from women's groups over there, send us the information we require — names and addresses of women refugees in need. That's all," says Salbi, President of WWB. "We don't ask for any more specific details. We don't ask about their experiences in the refugee camps, whether it was a rape camp or a concentration camp. They don't have to justify to us that they need our help." Although religion is not specified, obviously, the majority — about 90 per cent — are Muslim, as they are the largest persecuted group.

Each woman receives \$22 and a letter every month from her counterpart. "The money, which can be spent on the black market, provides freedom and independence," says Salbi. Although there are social services for refugees, they provide only basic food, clothes and medicine. In Croatia, Bosnian refugees are not allowed to work. In

Bosnia there is simply very little money. Some of the women eventually get jobs — these are the success stories — and they themselves ask their sponsors to transfer the monthly payments to someone else they know who is in need.

"The money is for support in their time of need. We don't ask them what they do with it," says Salbi. Although this information is often related in their letters. "The letters we receive often describe in detail the food bought and meals cooked, the school supplies for the children." A simple thing like a lip-stick can provide an immense sense of morale for these women amid their suffering.

The letters are a two way mutual aid. "For us they are an educational tool," says Salbi. "They provide a link to the war, ensuring more commitment on our part. For the Bosnian women who feel bitter and isolated, writing provides an emotional outlet and receiving a letter shows someone cares. It can be therapeutic too; one woman wrote 'I want to know about happy things, tell me about Disneyland'. There is so much sadness in their lives, a link to the 'normal' world outside is very important."

'May God Send the UN to Protect You!'

"In Bosnia these days this phrase is used as a curse," says Salbi, laughing. If somewhat cynical, it may well be considered justifiable considering the UN's track record in Bosnia so far.

UN forces have made no attempt to stop 'safe areas' falling to the Serbs, yet the continuing arms embargo denies Bosnians the right to defend themselves against the Serbian onslaughts. This much is common knowledge of the UN's 'peacekeeping' mission.

As, perhaps, is the fact that a UN soldier can only watch helplessly as a child wanders into the line of fire and is shot, or a woman is taken and raped in front of him. Because of the UN's official position of 'non-intervention', however much he may wish to intervene, he is unable to do so, for fear of losing his job will stop him.

A lesser known fact is that any humanitarian aid delivered through the UN must be approved by the Serbs as it passes Serbian lines. "This in effect means that the UN is

allowing the aggressor to vet all supplies to those being protected," says Salbi. In this process, 30 per cent of the aid sent to Bosnia goes to the Serbs — not to civilians, but to the Serbian army itself," she says angrily. "Meanwhile, Bosnian refugees have been receiving one can of tuna per week". If they are lucky, they may buy UN supplies that have found their way onto the black market. Many independent NGOs are now risking the lives of their representatives by sending supplies through non-UN channels.

Most disturbing of all, however, are the accounts which tell of the prostitution rooms, in the UN camps themselves. "It is well-known that 8, 9 and 10 year-old girls work there," Salbi relates sadly. "It is thought that teenagers and young adolescents are often the most devastated group in a war. Many young girls are turning to prostitution in their disturbed state, for no more than food and cigarettes which, more often than not, are part of humanitarian aid consignments meant for delivery by the UN."

AL-BNP Compromise Formula Need of the Hour

by Atiqul Karim

THERE is, perhaps, no reason for the Bangladesh Awami League becoming hard about the proposal made by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party for a negotiated settlement of the current political exigency. But the disapproval made by the Awami League General Secretary Zillur Rahman to start a fresh and effective dialogue with the BNP will, once again, lead the nation to a virtual point of no return, perhaps more perilously than before. Truly speaking, countrymen didn't expect such an imprudent statement from the Awami League General Secretary at this critical political situation.

It may be mentioned here that Zillur Rahman, General Secretary of the Bangladesh Awami League, disclosed on August 20 (Sunday) that his party was not willing to initiate any dialogue with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party in a strange predicament.

On the other hand, in an apparent positive move, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party assigned earlier Barrister Abdus Salam Talukder, Secretary General, to contact the Opposition for a negotiated settlement of the current political stalemate.

It is now an obvious question whether the leader Zillur Rahman (in the light of his previous experience) that 'BNP breaches trust' will hold good in context of the recent advisory opinion delivered by the Bangladesh Supreme Court. Conscience-

smitten people are of the view that the opinion passed by the court of the highest judicature should be considered as the turning-point in politics at the moment for both the ruling party as well as the major opposition parties. But the ice has not started to melt yet in as much as the Awami League is determined to carry forward agitation programmes through hartals as it did in the past, several times.

It is, therefore, an irony that Awami League prefers only hartals as the means to implement the demand for a non-party caretaker government to conduct the next general elections without responding to the fresh BNP call for a constructive dialogue. Moreover, the economic infra-structure of the country will hardly be able to bear the brunt of anymore hartals or other forms of movement of civil disorder that the Awami League leaders were time and again warned.

The policy-making body of the Awami League didn't take stock of the current political situation as expected by the people. A recent opinion survey conducted by the Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad (BUP) showed that an overwhelming 82.4 per cent respondents covering a sample size of 2,161 voting-age men and women from 60 districts were vehemently against hartals as a method to look for solution of nation's problems. Besides, the survey also

revealed that 30.1 per cent were of the view that the problems of the country should be solved through discussions and parleys, not through hartals and strikes. So, resorting to any sort of movement having no public approval, especially, in the light of the aforesaid survey, will be highly risky for the Awami League preceding the general elections — only months ahead. Rather, it may leave a negative impact on the politico-economic situation of the country.

In the aftermath of the Advisory Opinion delivered by the Bangladesh Supreme Court concerning the abstention of the opposition MPs from the parliament, the nation had a greater expectation from both the ruling and the opposition parties. Rather, it was an opportune moment for them to bury the hatchet and pave the way for a durable solution to the imbroglio. For the ruling BNP, the havoc wrought by the terrible floods has been a political plus point to prolong its stay in power. Thus, the deferment of the announcement of the election schedule by the election Commission on account of the deluge amply proves that nature has partly favoured the ruling party to complete its term against which the opposition parties have nothing to say or do other than accepting as mere Act of God.

Under the changed political scenario, the ruling party has the only option to dissolve the parliament immediately and precipitate the way of either 'by' or 'general elections'. I don't think it will be wise to go for elections. Moreover, in the back-drop of Bangladesh's socio-economic condition it can be stated that the idea of holding by elections will be futile preceding the general elections only for a few months. The deferment of the announcement of the by-election schedule also manifests that the government is not apparently in favour of holding by-elections either.

Leadership crisis is a crisis of great magnitude. Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia and the opposition leader Sheikh Hasina have shown political immaturity on occasions, more than one, risking the very existence of our nascent democracy. It has to be stopped for the greater interest of the people. Time is ripe for them to realise, with impunity, that people may not have faith in 'Female leadership' if they fail again to create an ideal situation for flourishing democracy to which they are deeply committed to Democracy. In fact, needs a lot of sacrifice to be made by those who claim themselves to be the 'vanguard' of it.

Therefore, both the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the major opposition parties, led by the Awami League, will have to evolve a 'Compromise Formula' sinking petty difference as the only way to tide over the current political impasse. The sooner it is, the better for the nation.