

# So Near and Yet So Far PROSPERITY FOR BANGLADESH

IT may seem like naive optimism to talk about prosperity at a time when the country seems to be spiralling into chaos. Politics is at a stalemate, most of the country's major educational institutions are closed due to clashes between opposing armed student groups, economic activity is severely constrained with the endless cycle of hartals and blockades, street violence is on the rise — have I left anything out? Bangladesh seems destined to forever perpetuate its international image of impending doom. And yet, it can get past our genius for "never missing an opportunity to miss an opportunity", there is so much potential here, that it makes you cry out in frustration.

The crux of this problem is of course the current political stalemate. As our politicians keep dancing their minutes, the country sinks deeper into chaos and uncertainty. We are treated to an endless litany of blame, recriminations, and finger pointing. No one is willing to take any responsibility, it is always the other person or

party's faults. Of course, these are the rules of the political game in every society, propaganda over unpalatable truths, image over substance. I fear, however, that we have reached a stage, where in order to avert disaster, we must stop playing this particular game. It is time to confront reality — bleak as it may be.

The other day, the Economist, in a widely publicized article, wrote that each day of hartal costs Bangladesh 30 million dollars in lost output. But greater than the lost output is the impact on long term foreign investment. Foreign investors who not too long ago saw Bangladesh as a potentially attractive place for investment, are apparently having second thoughts. The political instability has given them pause. This is a message which has been echoed in recent BBC television coverage as well. There is of course, a certain irony that these dire pronouncements about Bangladesh are

only taken seriously within the country, when they come from outside the country.

Be that as it may, it is time that we in Bangladesh come to grips with the harsh realities of the new global economy, where we are one of many potential suitors for investments, a very minor actor

better deal, we may get shut out. There is only so much patience out there. Other countries will take up our slack, we will have once again lost the window of opportunity. There is ample historical precedence for this happening. Sri Lanka had a flourishing export-driven garment

world economy with all its benefits and its disadvantages. Investors all over the world are flocking, they are looking for the highest return on their investment, if Bangladesh cannot provide an appropriate climate for investment, they will desert us in the blink of an eye and go elsewhere. No one cares about our internal problems — they just want to get the job done as efficiently as possible.

It is time now for the grand political gesture, to go beyond petty partisan concerns. A workable compromise on the peaceful transition of power must be arrived at. If democracy is to survive and the country to prosper, this next election is crucial. What we need is a credible, orderly, transition of power from one elected government to the next. Credibility is the key here. There must be a general consensus that elections are fair and non-partisan and that all major political actors have participated.



## REFLECTIONS

by Dr Omar Rahman

on a huge stage. What we essentially have to offer is cheap hard-working labour. But the advantages of lower wages has to be balanced with the ability to get the job done, the work completed. If deadlines cannot be met due to political instability, then investors/manufacturers will look elsewhere. In an increasingly competitive world, with everyone scrambling to undercut others, to offer a

industry. The civil war and accompanying chaos in the 1980's completely finished their garment industry. One of the major beneficiaries was Bangladesh. From then on we have moved from strength to strength, with garments now becoming one of the primary sources of revenue for the country. Other export-driven industries have also started flourishing — we are now inextricably linked with the

## Helping the Third World

by Rolf H Simen

The IFS was founded in 1972 as an international — non-governmental — organisation in Stockholm.

ONE of the most pressing problems facing the countries of the Third World is the so-called brain drain, which takes place when young technicians or scientists educated in the industrialised world do not return to their impoverished native countries.

Months back, at a press conference in Bonn, the Stockholm-based International Foundation for Science (IFS), presented itself as a "small organisation with a big mission", namely that of combating this brain drain. In the developing countries throughout the world it is fostering young scientists not only in financial terms, but is also striving to ensure that the whole educational infrastructure — research centres, equipment, staff and scientific cooperation — is coordinated. The foundation has formulated a tailor-made

support programme focussing on agricultural and human sciences in the areas of animal production, crop cultivation, forestry and agroforestry, food sciences, raw-material sciences and water-supply technology.

The IFS was founded in 1972 as an international — non-governmental — organisation in Stockholm. Since 1990 the IFS's budget has been of the order of 5 million US dollars or slightly more. According to the foundation, over half this sum represents "throughout" funds which flow immediately to current research and project funding. Since its inception, the foundation has supported some 2,500 scientists throughout the developing world and approved some 3,500 grants, in addition to staging 100 workshops, seminars and training courses.

— GRS

## Environmental Degradation Causes Human Dislocation

by Ayub Ali

THERE is a direct relationship among environmental degradation, impoverishment and population displacement. The relationships are complex, multi-dimensional, conditional and determinant. The relationships are historically, socially and politically evident. Environmental degradation produces waves of environmental refugees and migrants that spill across the border and to the urban city with destabilising effects both on domestic order and international stability. This process poses social conflict. The consequences of environmental changes are particularly severe in poor and agriculture communities, whose production system is mostly dependent on natural cycle and who lack the means to protect themselves through technological innovations.

**Types of migration:** The environmental refugees refer to especially vulnerable people who are displaced by extreme environmental degradation. People when displaced as a result of sudden and catastrophic changes of the environmental component are called environmental refugees; and population displaced by the gradual deterioration of the natural environment: where the decision to move is voluntary; and hence, the term should be used environmental migration. This group may well represent the faster growing population of environmental refugees and migrants.

The environmental refugees are those who have been forced to leave their traditional habitats, temporarily or permanently, because of a marked environmental disruption that jeopardised their existence or seriously affects their quality of life. People displaced by disruption in the natural environment are not officially classified as refugees. About 10 million people in the world are displaced not by political problems, but through degradation of the environment.

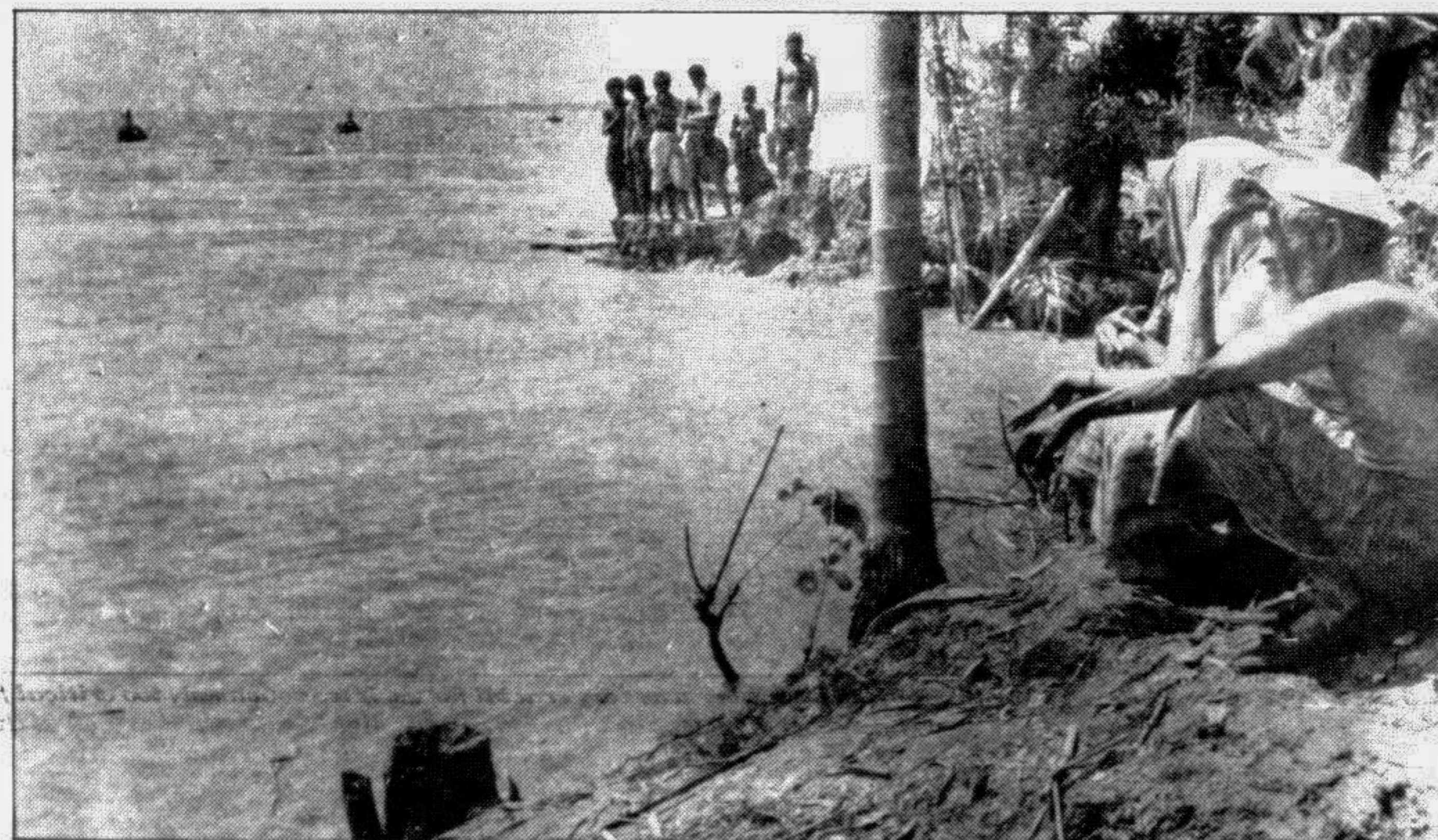
The common forms of environmental degradation includes desertification, land degradation, rising of sea level induced by global warming, floods, drought, cyclone, tidal surge, river erosion, salinity intrusion are displacing more and more

people every year, and such disasters are often not natural. The people of many developing nations are altering their physical environment in a way which makes it more vulnerable to disaster. Rapid increase of population are over utilising the natural resources and degrading the land which enhance the migration.

With all other factors, environmental degradation by some development intervention caused migration in Bangladesh. Land degradation plays the key role in migration because of the country's agro-based economy. About 90 per cent of the people directly or indirectly involved in agriculture. So, land degradation caused by river erosion and some ill-conceived development project affect them more than the other components of the environment. The environmental refugees and migrants thus would include agricultural communities displaced by dams, coastal communities flushed out by floods or development intervention and people displaced by drought.

Contemporary forces of modernisation process have increasingly marginalised indigenous peoples and a huge number of people were physically displaced as dams and roads have been constructed. Some specific examples are Kaptai dam, Beel Dakatia, shrimp cultivation areas of the Khulna and Shatkhira districts, and drought-prone areas of the northern part of the country. Frequent river-bank erosion in different parts of Bangladesh has also caused huge rural-to-urban migration and they are certainly the victims of environmental causes.

**Environmental degradation of Kaptai dam area caused migration:** To enhance the urbanisation and industrialisation in the former East Pakistan, Kaptai Hydro-electric Project was undertaken at the cost of Tk 48 crore. The project was completed during 1959-1963 with the financial assistance of USAID. As an impact of the dam 54,000 ha arable land became inundated permanently. As a result, more than one lakh tribal



River erosion: The mighty Padma has devoured their homes; dislocated they look to a bleak future.

— Star photo

people of the Karnafuli river valley became refugees, who were about one-fourth of total Hill Tract population.

Though the government had the responsibility to rehabilitate the affected people, but most of them did not get any compensation and majority of the displaced people migrated to India and still they are living as refugees. Though the Kaptai Hydro-electricity Project contributed to modernisation and industrialisation process of the country, it has damaged the ecological balance of the whole region. A long-term cost benefit analysis shows that strong negative impact resulted internal ethnic conflict, threatened international security and disregarded human rights.

**Beel Dakatia — a man-made disaster and migration:** Beel Dakatia is the second largest waterlogging comprising as of 31,566 ha in Khulna. An ill-conceived development project in the '60s brought about an unmitigated environmental disaster for half a million people about two decades. Once it was a vast tract of flourishing agricultural land.

This disaster was not spawned by nature but through an ill-conceived and ambitious costal embankment project of the government's Water Development Board, ostensibly to protect vast areas of the region from the onrush of sea water during high tide. But after one decade of embankment built,

the drainage system got choked up for a variety of causes turning whole beel water logged with increasing salinity. Lives of the people living by side of the beel became almost impossible. Agricultural yield decreased and people were dislocated not only from their homes but also from their occupa-

tions leading to serious social anomalies.

**River erosion and migration:** Bangladesh is predominantly a riverine country. The shifting of major river in the country has long been a dominant environmental problem affecting a sizeable portion of population. Land and the popula-

tion are the two main resources of the country. Thousands of villages located along the banks of the major rivers like Padma, Meghna and Jamuna are highly vulnerable to erosion with any degree of river activities for their alluvial soil. Due to the geographical condition river channel migration and riverine erosion deprives a hundred thousand population of their only source of livelihood and forced them to migrate. The country has around 250 rivers with a stretch of 2400 kilometers of bankline. There are 283 locations and 83 towns and growth centres on the bankline that have been seriously affected by the river erosion and another 1200 km have been identified as vulnerable. During 1954 to 1988, 2000sq km land has been devoured by river erosion, and a total of 2,695,048 people became homeless and 550,207 acres of land has been devoured in 51 districts during 1990 to 1994.

**Drought-prone places in the northwestern part:** The northwestern region was gripped by drought over past few years. Drought occurs because of uncertain and insufficient rainfall and its uneven distribution. More than 30 districts, which is one-fourth of the total area of the country experiencing moderate to

severe drought, due to inadequate rainfall, low soil moisture and continuous heatwaves. Now drought is not the temporary phenomena but has become endemic. As a result, agriculture, forest and other natural resources which are the bases of their livelihood are gradually depleting and making inhabitants more vulnerable. Seventy-five per cent of agricultural labourer, 60 per cent of small and marginal farmers are becoming dislocated from their occupation which is aggravating rural poverty and forcing people to migrate in urban areas.

**Conclusion:** Considering all the perspectives, regarding the environmental changes and the population migration nowadays, it has been realised that environmental degradation is an acute cause to population displacement all over the world. In addition to economic variables, social components also have profound influence. In most cases, such floating families have to live on public lands such as embankment, abandoned railway tracks. Many of them increase the concentration of population in the urban slums. To project environmental migration, environmental accounting should be introduced in development intervention programmes.

The writer is an M.Phil research, Department of Sociology, University of Dhaka.

## Best of Both Worlds for Datuk Noor

Orphaned orang-utans face a tough task surviving. Gemini News Service reports from a special centre in Malaysia, which is teaching them to climb and find food before returning them to the wild, where they must also learn to get on with touchy neighbours.



Orang-utan: a walk on the wild side

Bob Holmes writes from Sepilok sanctuary, Malaysia

and perhaps snatch a banana, chocolate bar or handbag. Babies cling to their mothers. Clementine, a 10-year-old female and Datuk Noor's mate, preens herself as he closes in.

"Datuk Noor enjoys the best of both worlds," says Dr Edwin Bost, a veterinary officer at Sepilok who monitors the orang-utan population at the centre.

"At 17 years of age, he is more than capable of looking after himself in the wild, but knows where he can get a good food nearby at a regular time of day."

More than 100 orang-utans have been rehabilitated since the centre opened 30 years ago to handle mainly orphans who have lost their mothers to logging or poaching. Like Datuk Noor, they have been taught to fend for themselves, but many still return for handouts.

Life in the wild is not all milk and bananas — especially during the monsoons.

Orang-utans need a lot of sustenance and yet they have neither the balance nor the manoeuvrability of other, lighter tree-dwellers.

Those released from the sanctuary must make adjustments after their time in the care of humans. And then there is the reception they are likely to get from their wild cousins, who can be touchy about territory.

The figures are modest — a handful of orang-utans are rehabilitated annually — and the results are, as Bost acknowledges, "not conclusive as we don't really have a follow-up programme". But the Sepilok experiment has been acclaimed as one of the most imaginative wildlife conservation initiatives in the world.

It has also become a pillar of the Sabah tourism industry. "It's one of the state's main attractions," says Jannette Padasan of the Sabah Tourism Promotion Corporation.

For Bost this represents a

dilemma. "We are caught between tourism and conservation. The two are not really compatible, which is why we have restricted the times tourists can come and see the orang-utans," he says.

"On the other hand, tourist revenue contributes to the project (which is mainly government-funded) and tourism has heightened awareness worldwide of the dangers of the animals. At the moment, it is a compromise."

Set in 43 square kilometres of rain forest, 25 kilometres from the port of Sandakan on Sabah's east coast, Sepilok had been a forest reserve since 1931. In 1964, the orang-utan centre was founded.

Although not an endangered species, the animals' natural habitat was becoming increasingly vulnerable to the chainsaw.

some people keep the babies as pets, allowing them to sleep on mattresses, and even dressing them in baby clothes.

"They're cute when they're young and are so like humans," Bost says. "The problems really arise when they get older. We have found some mature ones which are kept all day in cages."

When animals are brought in, they spend their first two months in quarantine on a diet of mainly milk, bananas and vitamin supplements.

When they are deemed healthy, they are released into the sanctuary, where they learn to lead a more normal and independent life. Rangers feed them and teach them to climb, encouraging them to grasp ropes and wooden structures as well as trees.

"All this can take years," explains Bost. "But gradually as they become more adept at looking after themselves, we toughen the regime. Food is reduced, time spent out in the wild is increased and their dependency on humans is reduced."

It is a long process that gets more complicated as the animal reaches sexual maturity — "then the trouble starts," chuckles Bost, again comparing them to humans. "They lose respect for the people who raised them and want to go off on their own while being unable to support themselves properly."

There are 200 orang-utans at the centre now, "none of which would probably be alive now were it not for the centre," says Bost.

With an estimated population of between 5,000 and 10,000 in Sabah alone — others live in Sarawak and Kalimantan on Borneo and on the island of Sumatra — the orang-utan has a reasonably healthy gene pool for survival.

So far, the "compromise" is working well.

Bob Holmes is a British freelance journalist based in Kuala Lumpur.



## Garfield®

by Jim Davis

