

The Devouring Deluge

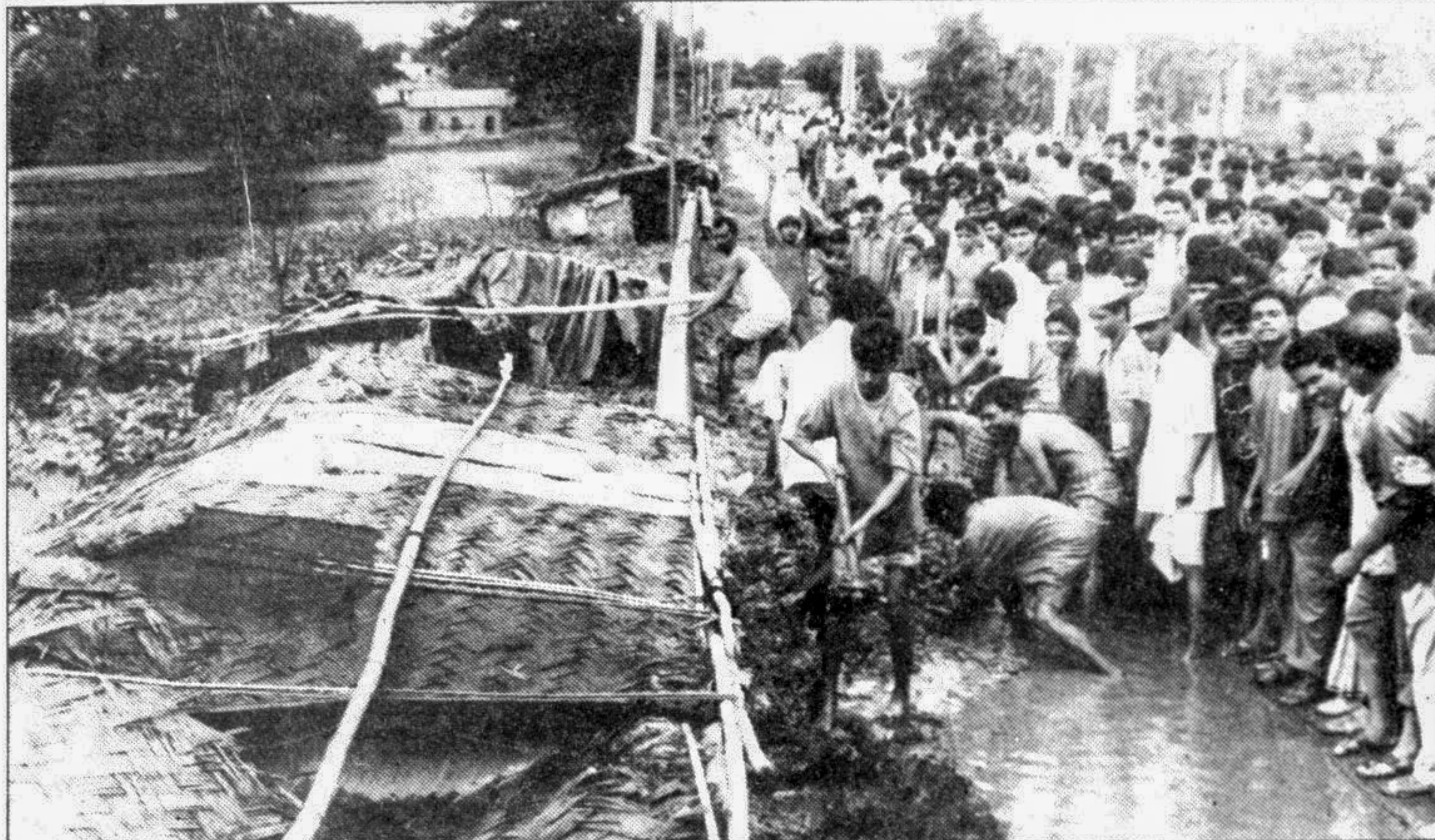
PHOTO FEATURE ON FLOOD



Local residents frantically trying to mend the breach in DND near Kajla (above). Soon the whole locality joined hand to stop leaking of water through the breach (below). — Star photos by Amran Hossain



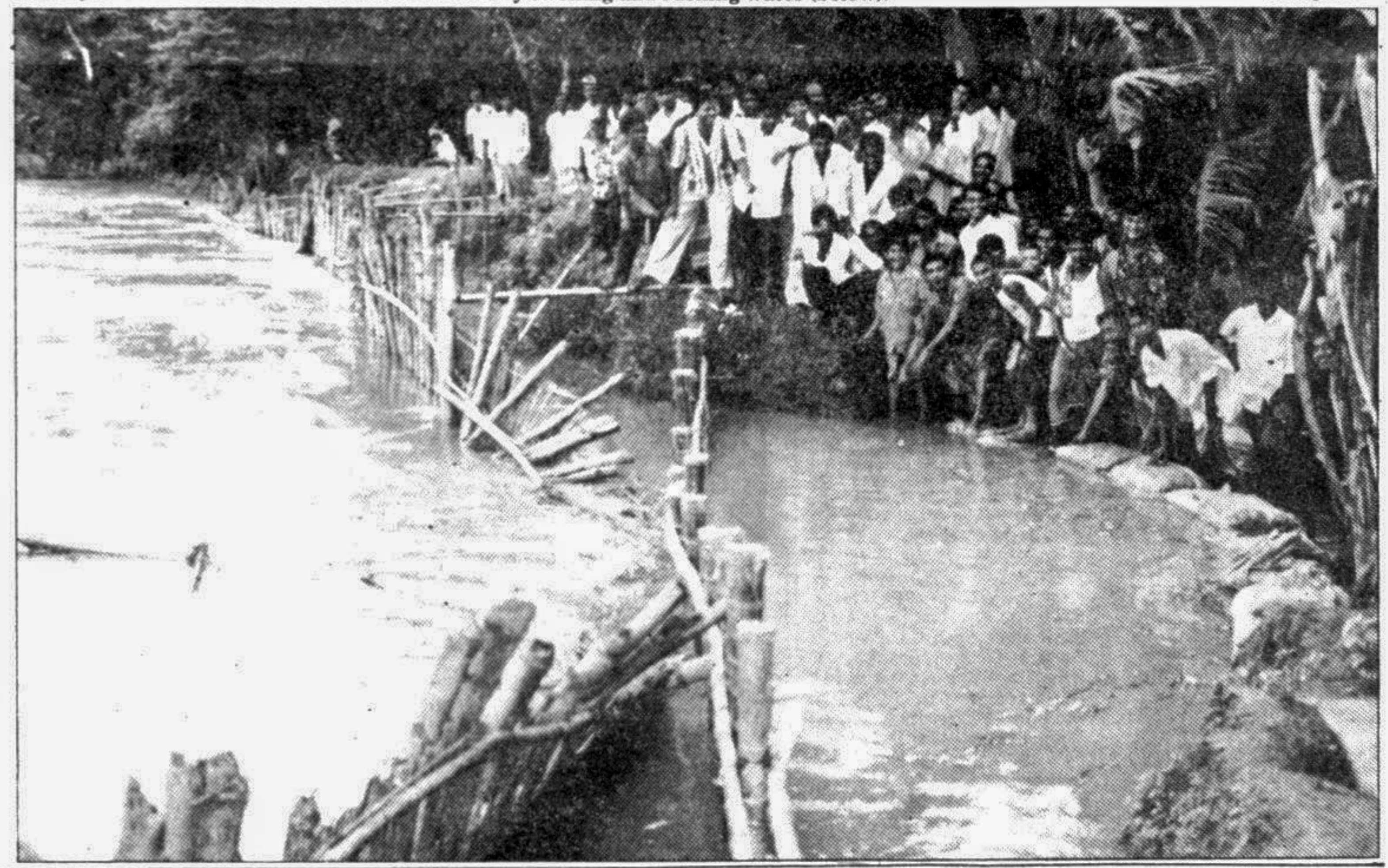
Embankment in Postagola eroded and the swelling waters rushed into Zurain area. (above: Star photo by Amran Hossain). Postagola crematorium protection embankment desperately raised to hold the rising waters, but can it? (below: Star photo by AKM Mohsin)



Chandpur: A primary school that provided shelter to flood victims now itself in the grip of flood (below). — Star photo



Jamalpur: Futile human effort to check erosion by swelling and rushing water (below). — Star photo



Flood: An Experience in the Field

by Hasna Hena

THE flood 1998 will certainly be marked for its prolonged duration and severity in the history of natural disasters in Bangladesh. Recently I had an opportunity to visit several flood hit areas under Madaripur, Faridpur, Gopalganj and Rajbari districts. To travel to the interior areas boats (local engine boat and speed boat) were used, therefore we could reach the people at their root. It was heart breaking to see the sufferings of the flood victims, at the same time it was rewarding to be able to stand beside, listening to their sorrows, giving them a sense of support and the filling of humanity.

above mentioned four districts, conversation with the distressed people at their flooded home, in the flood shelter, and discussions with the relevant officials.

OBSERVATIONS

The Coping Mechanism: The dreadful flood has turned the life upside down. Most of the families inquired are living on loan. In case of cash loan from the money lenders they have to pay 10 per cent interest per month. To get some money to survive, some people are trying to sell their livestock, but there is nobody to buy. Now there is hardly any difference between poorest of the poor, the poor, and lower middle class. Their conditions have become the same. Before the flood they had work, a source of income, therefore could feed their children.

Now every thing is washed away and under water. People are sitting idle with no work, no income, and no food.

Food/Cash in Hand: It has been about two months that the people are captive of flood. Whatever they had in hand consumed in first few days, then started the real bad time. Now they have virtually nothing in hand. Nurjahan of Madaripur said, "we have one Kg rice, will wait until evening to cook, so that the children sleep after eating and no question of getting hungry again arise till next day."

The Worst Sufferer: The worst sufferer of this devastating flood as observed are the women. It was she who was in the flood water, trying to save and manage household nitty gritty, trying to collect drinking

water and fuel, the long sharee on her body wet all the time. Getting sick, sacrificing her share of food for the children, husband or for the elderly. Waiting until dark to answer nature's call. Rokeya of Char Vadrason said, "their is no bush left to sit behind and hide". Rebeka was captive for all the time, day and night in a 3 x 4 feet raised Chowki, two feet water underneath and a little baby on her lap. Almost all women we talked to looked very pale and anaemic.

The flood has affected the infants seriously. They are not getting required milk since their mothers are not generating it sufficiently due to lack of food intake. One official opined that tinned milk might be an

alternative to save those babies, but not advisable to give as relief, since it might disappear on the way.

The Relief Situation: As per the secondary data, a good amount of relief has been distributed to the flood victims, but while checking in the field it was found that almost no relief neither from the Government nor from the NGOs had reached the flood victims. Members of about forty flood affected households, mostly rural poor, were interviewed at seven different areas under the four districts. However, the picture was same, except some families in the road and flood shelters who have received some relief. The reason of this situation might be i) the gov-

ernment relief through the UP Chairmen/members not always reach the real victims and ii) the coverage of NGOs relief is negligible in respect of number of victims. It was learned from every corner that, so far no one came to give some relief or to list the name assuring it. To the question of NGOs' loan to the poor, in several places people have even commented it to be as — "no good but torture".

Distribution Mechanism: It was extremely unfortunate to note that all the families interviewed expressed their frustration about UP Chairman and members. They have perceived the UP officials as insensitive to people's most distressed condition, favouring 'own people' for political reason and thus using relief goods for 'self interest'. It was again very un-

fortunate that the relevant officials also expressed the same views about the UP Chairmen and members. The flood affected families made repeated request "if you really mean to give us something, give us directly, not through the UP, it will never reach to us."

Market Price: While inquired about the market price in several areas under different districts, it was found that the price of rice, wheat, pulses, oil, salt etc. is raised slightly higher than before flood time. The price of all kinds of vegetables has jumped very high, since its production base has been destroyed and severely damaged.

NGOs' Relief: BRAC is distributing ruti and molasses. It was learned that some other NGOs are also giving some relief. As informed, Government

authority indicates the areas for relief operation by the NGOs. In most cases lack of coordination between Govt. and NGOs was observed. Government is not well aware what items are given by which NGO, in which areas and to whom.

CONCLUSION

At this moment a package support to the flood victims mainly in the areas of food, water, health service, and primary healthcare is essential. The lack of resources does not seem to be the main problem but the poor management. The outside world may give resources, but it is the Government who should make best use of it and make the machinery function at the grass-roots level.

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