

Relief, Concerns, Thoughts and Relections

by Julian Francis

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of the respective Union Parishads.

The planned allotment of 16 kgs per family per month has gradually been reduced to 10 and then 5 kgs and at one centre allocations were of 5 or 3 kgs, depending on the size of the family. The nutritional guidelines, that most relief and development workers use, tell us that, for a maintenance diet, an adult needs 400 gms of rice or wheat per day alongwith other commodities like pulses, oil and salt. 400 gms a day translates into 12 kgs a month for an adult and for a family of five, some 42 kgs per month per family. These figures, indeed, provide serious food for thought.

Unless the government machinery gets into a new gear and the food supplies under all the varied schemes get through to the right people in the right quantities, there are likely to be serious problems. Until sufficient work is available and/or the harvest comes, there will be a lot of hungry people looking for seeds. The special role of women now, people are trying to look at the future and immediately seeds of all types are being procured and sowed, especially the nutritious and fast-growing vegetables like spinach, radish etc. There are many families who have lost the seeds which had been preserved at the household level. The reasons are as follows:

a. The farmers had already planted some of the seeds for seasonal vegetables during the month of Sraban (mid-July), and, usually, most of the farming households do not keep seeds that are already planted. After planting these seeds, there was the prolonged flood for two months or so. b. Many seeds which were still in the houses during the flood were damaged due to damp conditions. c. Marginal farmers were forced to sell the Aman rice seeds when they were unable to cultivate them.

In many areas women have always been the keepers or guardians of the seeds, and as soon as the floodwaters began to recede they started assessing the situation and started to share the seeds available between them. The rich cultural practice of 'sharing' is the key paradigm. The urge and deep feminine passion to regenerate what has been lost and the

equally intense sense of community responsibility for others is the guiding principle. Working very long hours, they do not care whether there is water still around. Their work will bring new life. Everyone is interested in planting seeds. The disaster must be turned into the celebration of life.

The unprecedented floods have been able to demonstrate the enormous importance of local seeds and indigenous varieties. For example, the disaster has proved again the wisdom of rural women who are in favour of old Aman varieties that can be grown in flood conditions, instead of the dwarf varieties of HYV. Now, as a preparation for the Rabi crop (winter season), the seeds they are recommending, for obvious reasons are being accepted by others. The whole selection process of seed is profoundly strengthening the indigenous knowledge of the community to cope with disasters.

The selection itself is a highly technical task, and impossible for the formal sector to understand and rationalize because of the subtlety of the practice and logic to meet the diverse need of the different households. So there is no 'one' single variety, or one kind of vegetable for everyone. Each and every farming household has different and diverse needs. These are met through reciprocal exchange and appreciation of each other's specific needs. In case one woman has a particular variety which she cannot plant now because of standing water in her field, she is offering the seeds to the other family.

Women are particularly interested in receiving pumpkin seeds. All the pumpkin plants are gone. A house looks bleak without a pumpkin plant growing all over it. Rushia Begum, a woman farmer was delighted to get pumpkin seeds. She expressed her happiness by singing a song, "Praner bondhu, tomar dekha pallam" — O dear friend, I am happy to see you". She was very happy because she did not have to buy from the market, which is usually of HYV or hybrid.

Farmer Bilatan said, "The local seeds are as valuable as our own lives. We, the women, never buy seeds from the market. It is the men who do it." Sharing of seeds is part of the farmer's culture. They be-

lieve that you share seeds with your neighbour and friends, the yield will be higher. If the farmers keep seeds in their stores, while other farmers have none, then it will bring misfortune to the farmers since she/he deprives others. The culture of sharing indeed ensures diversity, a system that also ensures in situ conservation. It follows, therefore, that women are likely to be very suspicious of vegetable seeds in fancy packs, even though that is the only way in which different organisations can organize seed distribution. It is a considerable dilemma.

In a way, sadly, I am in a privileged position to be able to look back and see if we have learnt from the mistakes we made at the time of the Bihar Famine (1966-67), the drought in western India (1972-73), the food crisis in this country in 1974 and the aftermath of the 1988 floods. There is no doubt that the government administration system now right down to Union level is much better than in 1974, but it is the area of coordination where there is still much to do. In some Thanas and Unions there is good coordination between local authorities and NGOs, in others it does not exist at all, and we hear reports that NGOs still deliver relief supplies to flood-affected people without informing the Union Parishad or Thana officials.

When I see the vacant stare of the old and destitute queuing up for relief food, I recall the desperate looks of the millions of refugees in the camps in India in 1971 when many of the camps were flooded by the monsoon rains that year. It is vital and very possible that, by better coordination between all of us, we can now, as then, bring smiles back to these faces. With a new growing season round the corner and plenty of moisture around, there is much hope in the agricultural sector.

We must, however, make sure that those who have nothing and cannot access anything, are not left out. Given a collective will, there need not be any starvation, but to ensure this a lot of people need to wake up, sit up and take notice.

The writer, a Disaster Preparedness Delegate, IFRC, has worked in many relief and development situations in South Asia during the last 30 years.

Assessing the Self

by Mohammad HR Talukdar

RED research finding show BRAC limitations in covering all the ultra poor living in villages. Its micro-credit system discouraged them in self-employment. What was needed for them was wage employment. So, BRAC has been creating new sources of wage employment.

A close study of BRAC Research 1997 brings out the added importance given on the implications of RED research on BRAC programmes. The publication objectively, subject-wise, discusses synthesis of BRAC research, institutional collaborations, capacity development, dissemination of research, studies completed during the year, and ongoing studies. It lastly gives a timeline of RED.

The success of an organization much depends upon regular evaluation of its work so that what is learned in the process of work is constantly used to re-define its programmes strategies, otherwise its activities become stagnant.

At the outset, while introducing BRAC, it shows more than 18,000 regular staff and 30,000 part-time functionaries now work in its development interventions that cover 50,000 of 81,000 villages of Bangladesh with an annual budget of \$ 108 million.

BRAC's core Rural Development Programme (RDP) has organized more than 2.2 million landless farmers into 62,000 village organizations (VO) and disbursed Tk 21.72 billion since 1994 with astonishingly 98 percent recovery to help develop their income generating activities (IGA).

To support all its activities, BRAC has a number of diversified programmes like training, research and evaluation, monitoring, publications and a marketing outlet called Aarong. Instead of solely depending upon donations, it has established its own source of income that includes a modern printing press, a cold storage, and a textile mill. Aarong milk is a popular source of milk to city dwellers. BRAC Bank and BRAC University are in the offing.

As we proceed significant achievements in various fields that unfold themselves filled us with awe how an organization known for its philanthropic work could shine so illuminably in research. As of December 1997, RED had produced

563 research reports. Its impact study on RDP area on 1,700 households with 1,250 BRAC participants and 250 comparison households demonstrating better performances than comparison households in terms of asset accumulation, savings, housing status, food and non-food expenditures and average per capita calorie consumption.

They also enjoy better health and sanitation facilities. Fifty-two per cent of BRAC and 69 per cent of comparison households were below the poverty line. The percentages of households living in extreme poverty were 27 for BRAC and 37 for comparison households. Seasonal fluctuations in per capita monthly food expenditure were much lower for BRAC (3%) than comparison households (18%).

BRAC enabled poor women either to become involved in new IGAs or to expand old ones. More than 90 per cent of all women owned either productive or non-productive assets.

The impact assessment of BRAC's Human Rights and Legal Education (HRLLE) training was effective as the level of training of VO members who had received it increased substantially. The training disseminated relevant practical legal knowledge to BRAC members. After getting the HRLLE training, the trainees showed an increasing desire to assert their legal rights.

To improve the condition of the poor fishermen community, the Oxbow Lakes Small-scale Fishermen Development Project that started in 1991 show several positive changes taken place in the material well-being of the participating households and indirect impact on non-participating households.

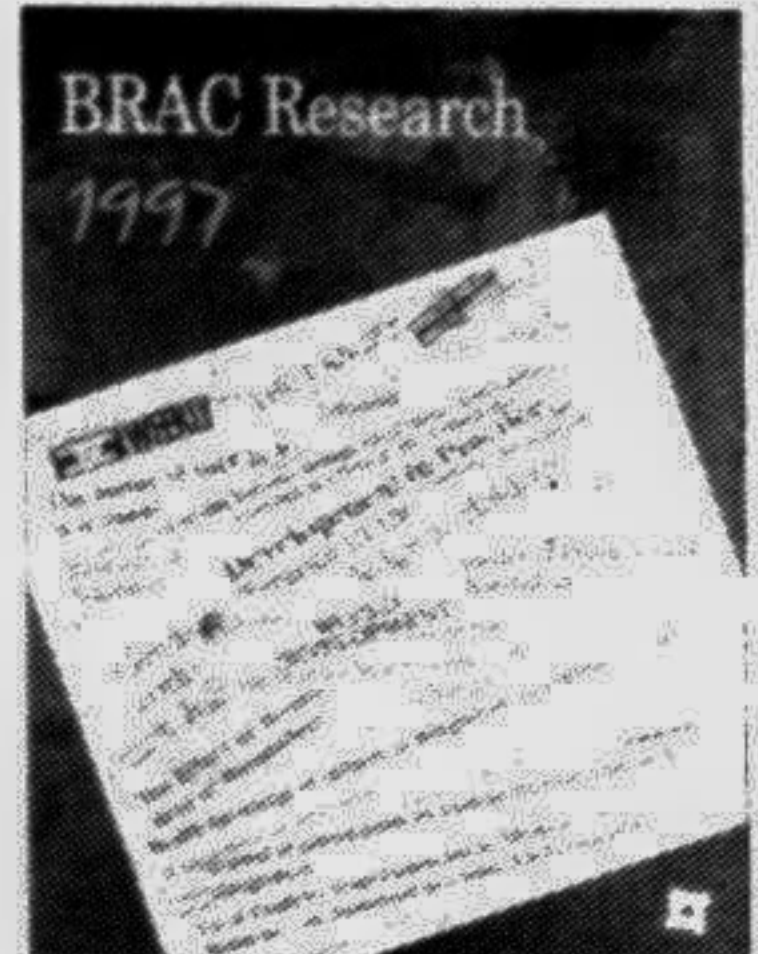
RED research finding show BRAC limitations in covering all the ultra poor living in villages. Its micro-credit system discouraged them in self-employment. What was needed for them was wage employment. So, BRAC has been creating new sources of wage employment.

Over the past decade it has employed 14,000 poor rural women as caretaker for roadside mulberry plantations and 25,000 to produce crafts marketed through Aarong.

RED studies on the health programme show that 54 per cent of the pregnant women in the rural location were anaemic. Another study shows an overall intestinal parasite infestation prevalence of 33 per cent among healthy adults and adolescents. Arsenic contamination of underground water in Bangladesh has recently created great concern among people. Tubewell water of 96 BRAC field offices, out of 794, was tested and found contaminated with arsenic beyond the acceptance limit of 0.05 mg/L. These were subsequently suspended.

Although the impact of BRAC efforts had been less than expected its poverty alleviation efforts had shown positive effect in particular on income poverty which had unknown, if not limited, effect on the overall economy of the nation. However, the poor are yet to be firmly in the market. Efforts were, in many cases, restricted to addressing only the income poverty group, thus giving little attention to other dimensions. BRAC's emphasis on creating backward-forward linkages may go a long way in sustainable poverty reduction.

RED also gave consulting services to several others, such as the All Institute of Education in Lahore, Pakistan, to review some of its new components of in-service training for government primary teachers, and UNICEF Bangladesh to implement its concept of the Accelerated District Approach (ADA) and empower the community and enhance their participation in ADA strategy. In 1992, BRAC and the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR,B), jointly studied BRAC's socioeconomic interventions on health and well-being of the rural poor. In two phases 15,600 households were studied that showed positive ef-



fect on nutritional status of children and mortality level, calorie intake and birth postponement for BRAC household members.

The 92-page book, in a word, is a research compendium of BRAC's 25 years of existence in social service. Although I myself worked for some time, I knew not so much of it until I read this informative book. Printed on white offset paper the book illustrated with suitable attractive pictures at appropriate places, a beautiful setup in royal size, and a charming cover gives a modern outlook. Its 2-column text has further enhanced its beauty. But why its editor justified some pages and some not is not understood; while marshalling of facts needed a little more care, major headings specially RED highlights and the synthesis report could be grouped together into a more appropriate heading which would have helped in avoiding repetition.

Moreover, since enough work was done, national and international collaborative research could receive separate treatment to give them due importance.

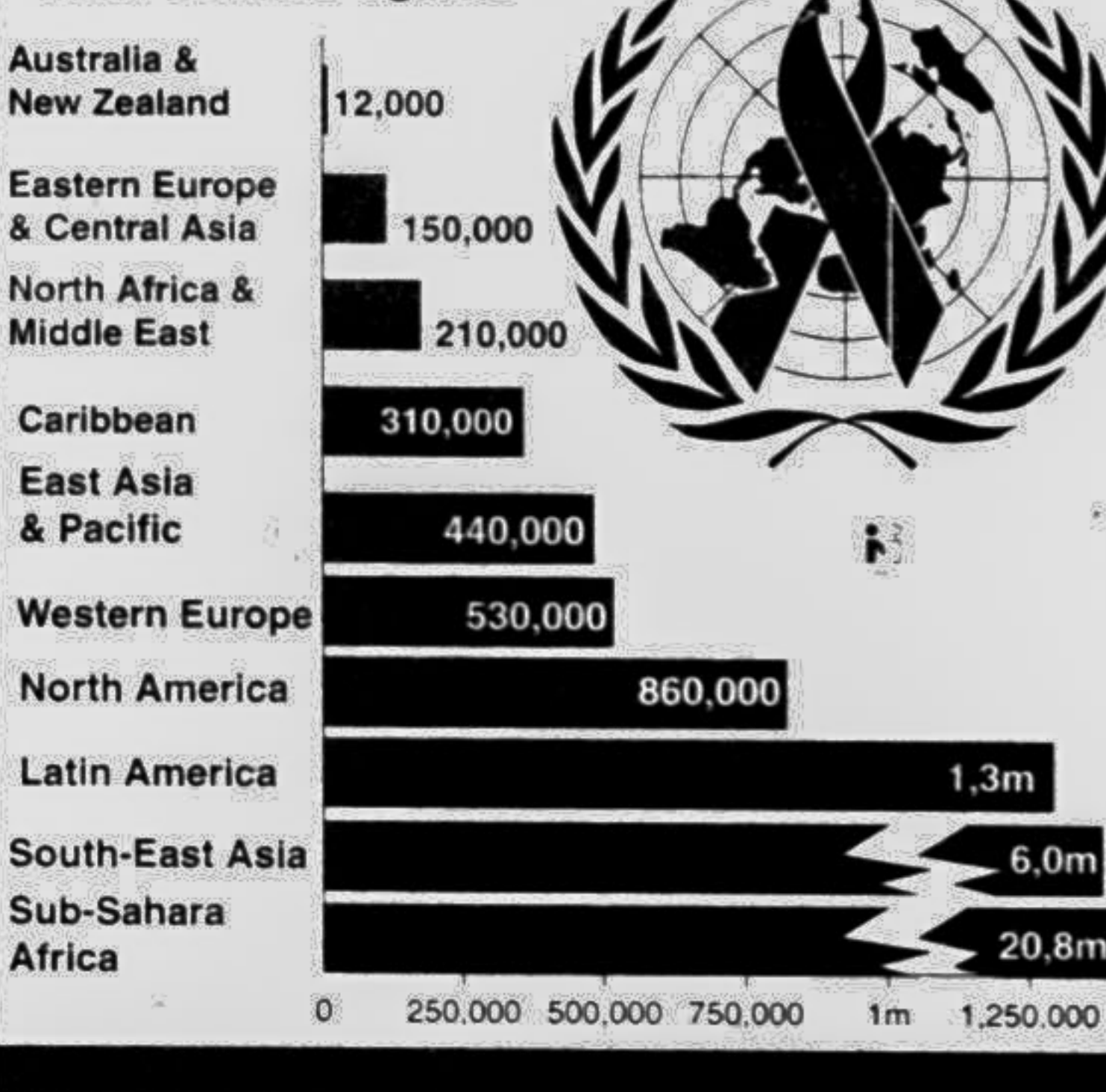
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Where the Media is Failing on AIDS

The number of AIDS cases in Pacific countries is relatively low, but the danger of rapid growth is real. Yet the media has done little to warn and educate people in places like Papua New Guinea. A Gemini News Service correspondent who was saw how Aids hit Malawi, says the Pacific should learn the lesson of Africa. Trevor Cullen writes from Brisbane

AIDS across the world

Number of cases region by region, according to latest UNAIDS figures



THE possibility of being infected with the HIV virus that leads to AIDS has been a serious public health risk in many Pacific countries for a decade.

Yet newspaper editors in the region readily admit that they lack enough knowledge of the disease and have no editorial policy.

As a result HIV/AIDS stories they publish are either from other continents, promoting the myth that AIDS is a foreign disease, or coverage is restricted to superficial snippets about local seminars.

No attempt is made to do any in-depth reporting and expose the extent of the problem as was graphically outlined by the United Nations at an International AIDS conference in Manila a year ago.

Then Dr Peter Piot, head of UNAIDS, told the conference that up to seven million people were infected with HIV in the Asia-Pacific region — double the number there a year earlier.

He warned that the region could overtake Africa as the world's worst-hit region. Yet the trend, he said, could be reversed if governments sloshed off their complacency.

His warnings received scant media coverage. In Papua New Guinea (PNG) only one of the three major newspapers bothered to cover the story, allocating it just a few lines. And this was not an isolated example.

In December PNG Health Minister Ludger Mond said HIV/AIDS could devastate PNG unless drastic action was taken to reduce its spread in the country. If control measures were not firmly established now, he said, between 15,000-20,000 persons could be infected by the year 2000.

Mond referred to what happened in Uganda, pointing out that AIDS had crippled produc-

tivity and the economy in that country. The same pattern was likely to be repeated in PNG.

The urgency of his remarks received immediate coverage. But it was not sustained coverage. Weeks passed before the next story on HIV/AIDS appeared.

Then at the launch of the PNG National HIV/AIDS Medium term Plan (1998-2000) last June Prime Minister Bill Skate repeated the need for a determined response. "No leader can pretend that HIV/AIDS is not a problem in Papua New Guinea."

Press coverage reached saturation point with a continuous string of public awareness campaigns. Yet once again coverage has dramatically dropped and in this third stage complacency has set in.

Many Pacific countries like PNG have missed the first two stages and are stuck at the level of denial and indifference. This is worrying. A clear message is needed.

I worked in Malawi in southern Africa from 1981-91. When I arrived no one had HIV. By the time I left, 22 per cent of the 10 million population were infected.

The Press, the government, the churches all failed to respond until it was too late. Thousands of people, especially the young, died unnecessarily of ignorance.

HIV/AIDS came late to the Pacific. It is possible to learn from the mistakes made in other parts of the world. As yet, this has not happened. The Malawian situation could occur in slow motion throughout the Pacific.

The South Pacific Commission (SPC) warned in its 1997 report on Sexually Transmitted Disease/AIDS in Pacific island countries and territories: "It is widely acknowledged that HIV

infections and AIDS cases in Pacific island countries are under-reported. "Nevertheless, the HIV epidemic in the Pacific is considerably more serious than the available data suggest. The epidemic is also undoubtedly worsening in the region overall, and particularly so in some countries."

The figures for HIV/AIDS in the South Pacific are relatively low at present. But testing is poor or non-existent; peoples' knowledge of the disease is woefully inadequate; stigma and prejudice are rampant. The invisibility of the virus means you can carry and transmit it for up to ten years without even knowing.

Add to this the continuing increase in STDs, casual and unprotected sex, unwanted pregnancies and the picture becomes much sharper. The issue is not the figures, but the huge potential risk of infection.

In defence of the editors, it must be said that it is not the sole responsibility of press to inform the public. The govern-

ment, health departments, non-government organisations and the churches all have a part to play.

But the press has a strong influence in informing the public and embarrassing politicians and decision-makers to act. As one editor remarked: "When governments are weak and corrupt, the press is often the last line of defence."

Two years ago, Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka of Fiji talked of "a clear enough signal that there is a storm gathering force: a storm that can become a devastating hurricane such as we have never experienced before and a storm which, if we do not take the necessary precautions, we will not live through or live to regret forever."

Hopefully, it is not too late for newspaper editors to hear and embrace this advice.

The writer is a Journalism lecturer at Queensland University, Brisbane. His PhD research is on media coverage of AIDS.

Clinton Under Fire over Nuclear Waste

Danielle Knight writes from Washington

Outraged environmentalists protested Clinton's action last weekend in quietly signing into law the Texas/Maine/Vermont Radioactive Waste Dump Compact, effectively giving the nod to Texan officials to start up the bulldozers if they chose to do so.

US President Bill Clinton is in more trouble — nothing to do with White House interns but for approving a bill that allows two states to dump radioactive waste at a proposed site in Texas near the Mexican border.

Outraged environmentalists protested Clinton's action last weekend in quietly signing into law the Texas/Maine/Vermont Radioactive Waste Dump Compact, effectively giving the nod to Texan officials to start up the bulldozers if they chose to do so.

Congress earlier passed the bill, under which Texas would accept radioactive waste from the northeastern states of Vermont and Maine in exchange for 25 million dollars each. In January, the Texas legislature will vote on funding the proposed dump site — which will also store nuclear waste from Texas.

"The radioactive waste gun was pointed, loaded and the trigger cocked and Clinton's signature effectively pulls the federal trigger," said Diane D'Arrigo, an activist with the Washington-based Nuclear Information and Resource Service. "This makes it harder for local residents to fight it but fight it they will, with growing local, national and international support and concern."

The controversy surrounding the Compact project revolved around the site chosen by Texan officials to receive the waste — the town of Sierra Blanca, just 30 kms from the Mexican border, set in one of the economically poorest regions of the country.

Supporters of the Compact said that the proposed site will bring money to the state and only hold low-level radioactive waste. But environmentalists declared "low level does not mean low risk" and pointed out that plutonium and other radioactive elements are considered "low-level."

Environmental groups maintain that the area around the site is a safe place to store radioactive waste because it is prone to earthquakes and is situated on an aquifer — a scarce resource in Sierra Blanca's arid desert climate.

Civil rights groups and Mexican-American organisations have accused Clinton and Congress with racism because two-thirds of the residents of the town are of Mexican origin. "Clinton is now an accomplice to the racist government

of Texas," charged Richard Boren, coordinator of Southwest Toxic Watch, an advocacy group that monitors hazardous waste along the Mexico-US border.

"Now the United States government has given the green light to send nuclear waste from primarily white states like Maine and Vermont to the Texas Border region that is over 70 per cent Mexican-American," he said.

Environmentalists were concerned that Clinton's signature approval of the Compact would open the door to Texas becoming the nation's next national nuclear power dump.

The bill signed by the president omitted amendments originally passed by Congress which would have protected Texas from allowing other states to join the Compact project. The amendments, pushed by Senator Paul Wellstone, a Democrat of Minnesota, also

would have given the local community the right to challenge discrimination.

Groups said Clinton's approval of the bill contradicted his own 1994 Executive Order to Address Environmental Justice in Minority and Low Income Populations. This required the government to ensure that minority and low-income communities were not disproportionately burdened by environmental hazards.

Bill Addington, a local store owner in Sierra Blanca called approval of the Compact an "environmental injustice" — a reference to Clinton's 1984 Executive Order on Environmental Justice which "isn't worth the paper it's printed on." Addington and others said they would continue to pressure Texas politicians to abandon plans for a dump.

"All hope is not lost," said Erin Rogers, director of the Sierra Blanca Legal Defense

Fund. "The Texas legislature still has to vote on this, we think we still have a chance." Mexican officials also have joined the fight against the proposed dump. The Mexican Congress's Permanent Commission voted unanimously against the dump saying it violates the 1983 La Paz Agreement between the two countries. The treaty prohibits the construction of such projects within 100 kilometers from the neighbouring country's border.

"We cannot permit the United States to build up garbage dumps on our border," said Sen. Norberto Corella of Baja California. "Is there any sense in entering any international agreements if they are going to be violated? We will go to whatever means required in order to stop this project."

Mexican officials said they probably would fight the proposed deal within the context of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) or an international court such as the Organisation on American States or the United Nations.

"Who's going to guarantee 100 years from now there is not going to be a leak," asked Mexican Senator Hector Murguía of Ciudad Juarez. "The border does not distinguish between the water in the wells between the United States and Mexico."

Environmentalists and US senators opposing the Compact blamed the large utility industries for using political campaign contribution to influence policies. They said the nuclear power industry are using the law to shift liability from private industry to the taxpayers of Texas.

"It's crystal clear what money can buy and money is one thing Sierra Blancans do not have," said D'Arrigo. "It can buy hundreds of hours of expensive professional lobbying time and clout."

More than 100,000 dollars went from the state of Vermont toward getting the Compact approved by Congress, she said. The Texas Utilities Service Inc. reportedly spent up to 420,000 dollars on lobbying politicians to get the bill passed.

Houston Industries Incorporated spent up to 400,000 last year on lobbying on energy, environment and utility issues. In the industry group's annual report, the Compact was listed as their sole energy issue.

CSE/Down To Earth Features

— IPS/APB

Garfield



James Bond

