

Feature

Pottery on the wane

Pottery is disappearing in Bangladesh, so are the artisans. Even worse, no one cares to stop the downslide.

By Fateh Osmani

MALOY Pal's fingers work fast on the revolving disc that shapes a heap of wet clay into a cooking pot. The 40-year-old potter's wife brings him drinking water in a tin glass. These days, Maloy looks a weather-beaten man whose skills and hard work do not earn his five-member family three meals a day.

He cannot afford to send his children to school. "The use of hand-made clay pots, dishes and cooking wares is declining fast. We are losing our markets to ceramics, tin and glass wares," says Maloy at his Kumarkapan village in Kamalganj thana in Sylhet district. Maloy, who has never gone to school, has inherited the profession from his father, who died as a potter. Today, he regrets his choice. But had he any other choice?

"I guess I had no choice but to take up my family's profession. We have no land to cultivate and we have no skills for an alternative job," he says, his voice tinged with sadness.

Pottery is disappearing in Bangladesh, so are the artisans. Even worse, no one cares to stop the downslide. Maloy and other potters in this region also face shortage of clay that is used as the main raw material.

"Once potter's clay was available everywhere, now it's a rare item and we have to buy it these days. Besides, demand for clayware is falling day by day," Maloy points out.

Pottery that has developed in the coastal villages is a family-oriented enterprise. But this potential industry could not keep up its pace when the modern life has geared up with the advancement of science and technology.

There was a time when all kitchen appliances like drinking container, mug, cup, flagon, stein, tumbler, goblet, jigger and children's toys were made of clay.

In those days, potters, most of whom were from low-caste Hindu families, had good business and they used to earn a lot. But the golden days are now

gone.

Although emotionally devastating, many potters want to change the profession because it does not pay as it did before.

According to the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC), there are 680 potters' villages in 19 districts of the country. Apart from these districts, potters also live in coastal areas of the country, where quality earth is available.

Many potters are so poor that they cannot even support their families despite putting in tremendous labour every day.

Potters in the country are known as Pal.

Maloti Pal married a man of her caste, Narayan Pal. They have trained two sons — Niranjana Pal and Hiralal Pal — and only daughter, Rita Pal, as potters as they have no croplands for farming.

"Although it could not change my lot, I have been doing this job since my childhood as my forefathers were also potters," says Maloti.

About the growing expenses and labour in making earthenware, Maloti says, "After buying quality earth we have to prepare it by frequent polishing before sending it to stereotypes. Then those are dried in sun before baking. The disc in which the clay-ware is baked is locally called as Pujan and this name varies from place to place."

"It takes nearly one month in building a workable Pujan," she says listing the other necessary materials like firewood, paint and hays they need for making clay-ware.

Another potter of the village Ashwini Pal says these days the market for clay-ware is shrinking instead of expanding. He attributes the fall of clay-ware market to the change in the taste of middle-class people, typical designs, lack of marketing facilities and running capital.

"Had I any scope to switch over to any other profession, I would have done it much earlier," says a helpless Ashwini.

"Once we had a big market," he continues. "We need not

worry about selling our earthenware, as there were always fairs and festivals in rural areas round the year, where our items had a great demand. Fair is also held nowadays in villages but our items hardly attract buyers."

Those days, fairs, which used to be held along the rivers, included Baruni Mela, Madhukrishna Baruni in Madhav Kunda, Rathjatra Mela at Kanupatti in Brahmanabazar, Radhakrishna Jhulanjatra in Alinagar, Dhaliar Baruni Mela, Chakra Puja Mela, Ramchaler Baruni Mela, Chaitra Mela and Baishakhi Mela.

"In those fairs clay-ware would dominate any other goods and items," recalls Ashwini.

Experts say that modernisation of designs of earthenware is a must to revive its lost market because the society has undergone many changes. There is no reason to think that people would buy anything available. They have now choices.

"But our potters could not develop their designs over the years," says a craftsman of Sylhet town.

He points out the poor and illiterate people like potters, who live from hand to mouth, have no scope to think about improving the designs because it involves many things apart from expenses.

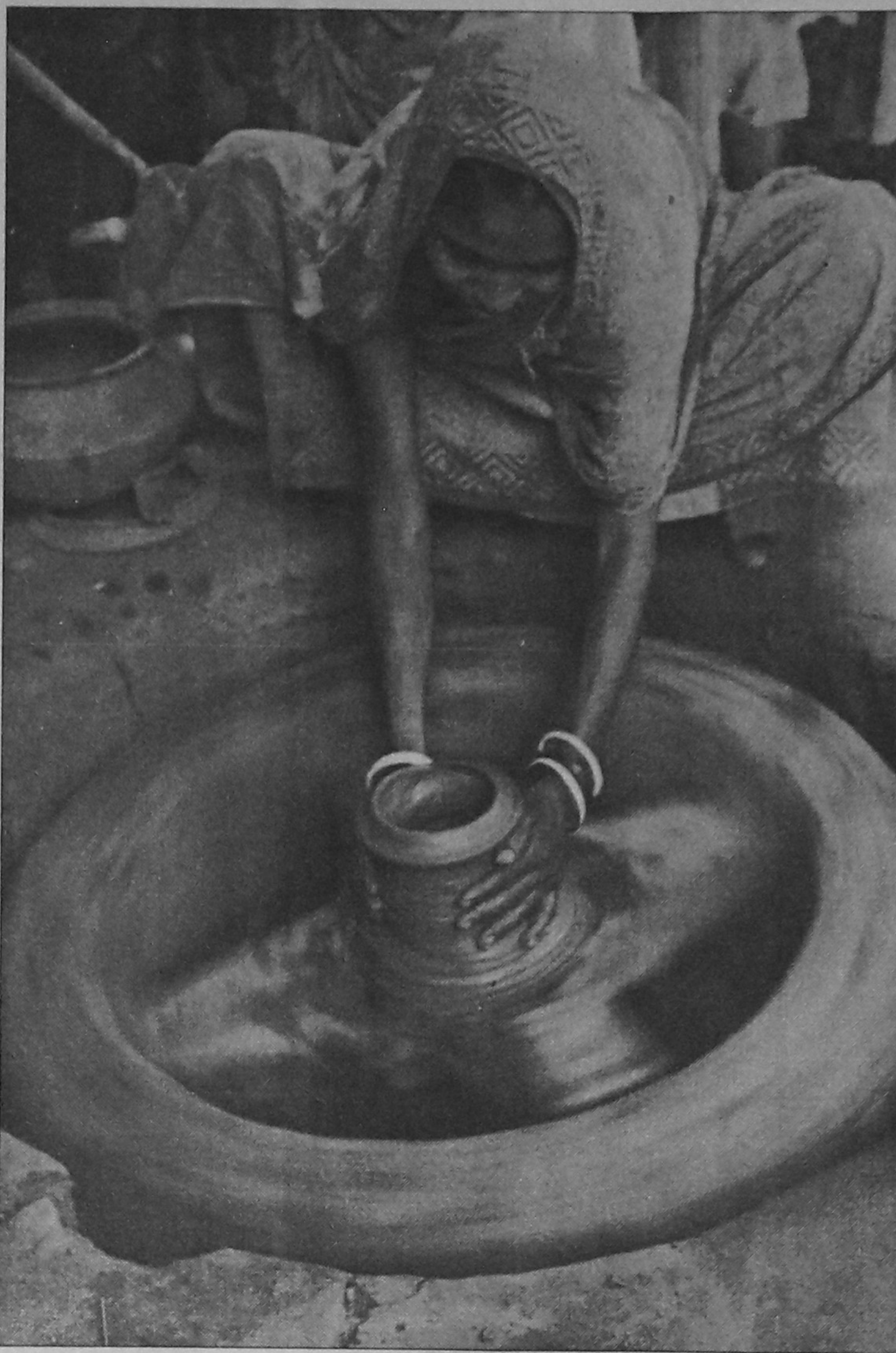
A BSCIC official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said that BSCIC provides loan to potters but they hardly avail of the government opportunity due to procedural complexities.

Asked whether he is aware about BSCIC loan, Ashwini Pal said, "Yes, I know about it but who bothers to face hazards for a small amount of loan?"

A teacher of Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, who also preferred not to be named, said NGOs could save the potters in addition to help from the government.

"This sector has potential, the government can earn huge foreign currencies by exploring its markets in foreign countries," he said.

—News Network



Withered wildlife

by Aziz Amirul

ONCE again illegal trading of wildlife has come in the headlines of the local print media. On May 19, 2000, Friday, members of the Detective Branch nabbed three poachers from the capital and managed to recover a leopard cub alive from their possession. Barely within another 24 hours, around 300 small colourful birds, mostly Finches and Munias, were recovered from a bird-trader at Gabtali Bus Terminal, whose destination was supposed to be the pet shops at Katabon in the capital.

From the confession of the three leopard poachers, it is more or less clear that the smuggled cub was brought from India through the border for being sold to the Katabon pet market. Had it not been recovered, the two and a half-month-old female cub would ultimately have been the property of some circus team or some wealthy businessman of the country. According to the arrested traders, another cub died due to negligence and malnourishment. The recovered cub has been handed over to the Mirpur zoo authorities, but unfortunately this one too fell seriously ill, suffering from dysentery and partial paralysis of the rear legs, when last reports came in on May 22 evening. After all, it

vided he is ready to pay the exorbitant price! It is also alleged that whenever there is any future plan of raids in the market, the traders somehow get the information in advance through their "special channel of friends" and when the inspectors arrive, the shops are found clean of any prohibited species! This issue must immediately be inquired by the highest authorities and since now after some "big catches" through the recovery of the above leopard cub and 300 birds, this is the best time for the initiation of such an inquiry and necessary actions by the Ministry concerned.

As days are passing, the "green-conscious" mentality of a majority of the common mass is lessening. It seems. Most unfortunately, Sundarbans forest, the only World Heritage Site in this country is now the safe haven of local pirates. Under the banner of fishermen, thousands of these merciless gang members have established a reign of terror in the regions of Sundarbans. But even knowing, the whereabouts and perilous activities of these outlawed groups, the government is quite helpless to take any punitive measure to oust them. It is a great pity that the priceless mangrove forest of this region, which could be a great tourist attraction of this country, is now instead a rehabilitation centre of crime and criminals.

As days are passing, the "green-conscious" mentality of a majority of the common mass is lessening, it seems. Most unfortunately, Sundarbans forest, the only World Heritage Site in this country is now the safe haven of local pirates. Under the banner of fishermen, thousands of these merciless gang members have established a reign of terror in the regions of Sundarbans. But even knowing the whereabouts and perilous activities of these outlawed groups, the government is quite helpless to take any punitive measure to oust them.

is quite natural for such a little cub to fall sick when it is snatched away from its mother's protection and care by some inhuman ruthless poachers.

Out of the 300 birds, more than two-thirds perished inside their small, congested cage while the rest have been moved to the Mirpur zoo. It is quite obvious that probably at the end none will survive due to the trauma of the painfully long and rough transportation from their natural habitat to Dhaka city. A similar case happened in the past when some 5000 Munias were caught at Zia while they were being smuggled out of the country and only a handful could survive at the end.

Illegal poaching and trapping of wild creatures is gradually increasing with new methods and routes being invented now and then. It is quite clear, that no rules, whether declared by the Prime Minister or Ministry of Forest & Environment, are obeyed and hence, we are fast losing our once-rich flora and fauna.

Supposed to be a protector, the Environment Ministry as well as other organisations concerned, hardly have any headache about the rising crimes involving the endangered wild species of Bangladesh, as alleged by many. Katabon, the lone pet market of the country has literally turned out to be the den of the criminals—destroying our wildlife. It is said and often true in most cases that one can get any kind of wild animal, bird or reptile ranging from a water monitor up to a Royal Bengal cub, from the pet market, pro-

Until the forest can be "cleaned-up" of all ill doings including the pirates and poachers, things will surely not improve. In recent times, large organised black market rackets have developed for tiger skins and ivory of the elephants of Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Hardly any new conservation society is coming up, practically none to help motivate the people about preserving the remaining green property of Bangladesh. A world-renowned organisation like IUCN has its Country Office in Dhaka but the general mass know little about it. All should be encouraged to support such organisations to enhance the movement of green revolution in our country. Revised subjects should be introduced in all school syllabi to promote the purpose of saving our natural environment. Moreover every school can be instructed by the Education Ministry, to set up their own nature club and actively take part in "green movements".

Strong and successful motivation by the concerned authorities and an overall transformation of attitude in favour of nature conservation from all walks of life is now the only way left for us to protect the natural environment from further man-made ruination. The strong influential bases of the poachers and illegal animal traders in the name of so-called pet business should be uprooted from basic foundations. Through our unity, honesty and resistance against illegal wildlife trade, may that day arrive when our descendants will be proud to explore the richly revived wild of Bengal. #

Demining dilemma

Mine removal in war-ravaged Bosnia appears to have got snared in conflicting interests, corruption and mismanagement. About 80 million dollars has been spent on removing landmines in Bosnia. Yet a half decade after the war stopped, millions of mines are still scattered across a country roughly the size of Ireland.

By Melissa Eddy, AP

Sarajevo

An old man returns home after five years as a refugee but cannot cross the threshold because of the two land mines on his doorstep. Three children decide to play in a field — and three hours later they're dead, killed by an exploding mine.

About 80 million dollars has been spent on removing landmines in Bosnia. Yet a half decade after the war stopped, millions of mines are still scattered across a country roughly the size of Ireland.

Hundreds of people have been killed or maimed by mines since the three-and-a-half-year war ended in 1995.

On paper, Bosnia's demining programme seems one of the most organised and best financed in the world. But less than four per cent of all designated minefields have been cleared, and Bosnia's Mine Action Centre — the organisational backbone of the effort — hasn't been allocated funds for after the end of May.

International donations, the lifeblood of the programme, are drying up as attention shifts to other trouble spots in the world. Allegations of mismanagement of funds and rigging of contracts have scared other donors away.

Demining is in trouble at a time it may be most needed. More than 7,000 refugees returned on their own to pre-war homes in the first quarter of the year — nearly four times last year's rate — according to the UN refugee agency. They are coming back to destroyed villages in minefields.

Efforts to establish an efficient demining programme have clashed with different strategies of donors and a business climate burdened with allegations of nepotism and corruption.

An example: In 1997, the US government donated three million dollars worth of mine detectors, vehicles, mine-sniffing dogs and other items to the Bosnian Demining Commission, the political body of the demining programme. The equipment was to be lent to companies for contract work and then returned after a job was finished.

But a US-based commercial company working in conjunction with three Bosnian subcontractors who won the next contract after the donation didn't return the equipment. That has given the three Bosnian subcontractors an advantage over other Bosnian deminers in competing for contracts.

According to a confidential 1999 report by an international observer made available to *The Associated Press*, the three Bosnian companies at one time have been linked to officials in government demining institutions.

The report also cites several other examples of conflicts of interest and hints at corruption and mismanagement.

But Bosnia's legal system is still ineffective. And without solid proof, even Bosnian High



Researchers trying out a deminer

Simplifying search for buried bane

Ex-Soviet scientist hopes vibrations will uncover buried landmines

AROUND the world every day, hundreds of people walk into minefields with metal detectors, then lie on the ground and gently poke the earth with a thin rod to determine whether the device located an explosive — or a soda can.

Often, the metal detector finds a can or shrapnel, according to those who have done it. As a result, it might take a day for a de-miner working in an area with a high concentration of mines to cover a swath a yard (metre) wide and 15 yards (14 metres) long.

Work being done in a sand-box in northern New Jersey might one day help mine eradicator do a more efficient job by letting them see underground.

The sand-box occupies half of a soundproof closet at Stevens Institute of Technology, where Professor Dimitri M. Donskov has developed a method he believes can detect buried land mines using vibrations.

Three years of research funded with 770,000 dollars from the US Army has led to a system that will be tested this summer at Fort A. P. Hill in Virginia, he said.

Donskov's technique has many potential advantages over existing detectors in many situations, said Dr James F. Harvey, a senior research pro-

gramme manager at the Army Research Lab-Army Research Office.

Its best use, however, may be as part of a combination of sensors whose picture of the immediate subsurface distinguishes between clutter and landmines, he said.

"There's a lot of technological challenges ahead of us," Donskov cautioned in a recent interview at Stevens' Davidson Laboratory, where he is associate director.

If the system works, researchers must then determine how its sensitive components can be packaged to withstand harsh conditions in minefields, which are often far from roads and electrical service.

About 60 million to 70 million anti-personnel mines are planted around the globe in 70 nations, according to the latest US State Department estimates. Humanitarian groups often use an earlier figure, 110 million, which the State Department says was based on incomplete information.

An average of about 2,000 people — nearly all civilians — are killed or maimed each month by landmines, which can remain dangerous for decades, according to the Red Cross.

Donskov's work is encourag-

ing to Dave McCracken, a former Canadian military engineer who is training Thai crews on how to clear mines along the Cambodian border.

"I'm very interested in any technology that takes us away from the labour-intensive technology that we have now," McCracken said last week from Thailand.

"Minefields are normally in battlefields, and in battlefields, there is a lot of scrap metal," McCracken said. "So when you take a metal detector into a minefield, it's like looking for a needle in a haystack."

Billions of dollars are being raised for clearance projects and victim assistance. The United States is spending 82 million US dollars this year to help clear mines and help victims in 36 countries, and has allocated nearly 19 million US dollars to research eradication, said Donald "Pat" Paterno, director of the US State Department Office of Humanitarian Demining Programmes.

Among all deminers, he estimates less than 300 have died in the past decade, most in Kuwait around the time of the Gulf War, before techniques were refined.

Among the defused mines Donskov uses to test his system is a "butterfly" plastic mine, thousands of which were sprin-

Commissioner Wolfgang Petritsch, the top international administrator who has the authority to fire local officials, cannot act.

"It's easy enough... to fire politicians on the basis of obstructive behaviour," said Major General John Moore, a Petritsch adviser. "But I think if you are removing someone from a functional post, need to have some proof."

About problems in demining, the US Embassy said the State Department withdrew a grant for financing two demining contracts after the World Bank determined that "regulations had been violated in awarding the contracts and that the contracts were no longer valid."

The State Department eventually paid the money to the contract winners anyway.

Demining efforts also are hindered by differences over how to evaluate success and which of the 18,000 identified minefields should be cleared first.

Initially, locations linked to refugee returns and reconstruction were to be top priority. But that can lead to a minefield being left uncleared in an urban area, such as the one near a primary school in Sarajevo where the three children were killed in April.

Much demining is commercially done. That means much of the effort is focused on farmland and pastures, not built-up

areas, which take longer to rid of mines and are therefore less profitable. Deminers are paid by the size of an area regardless of how long it takes to clear.

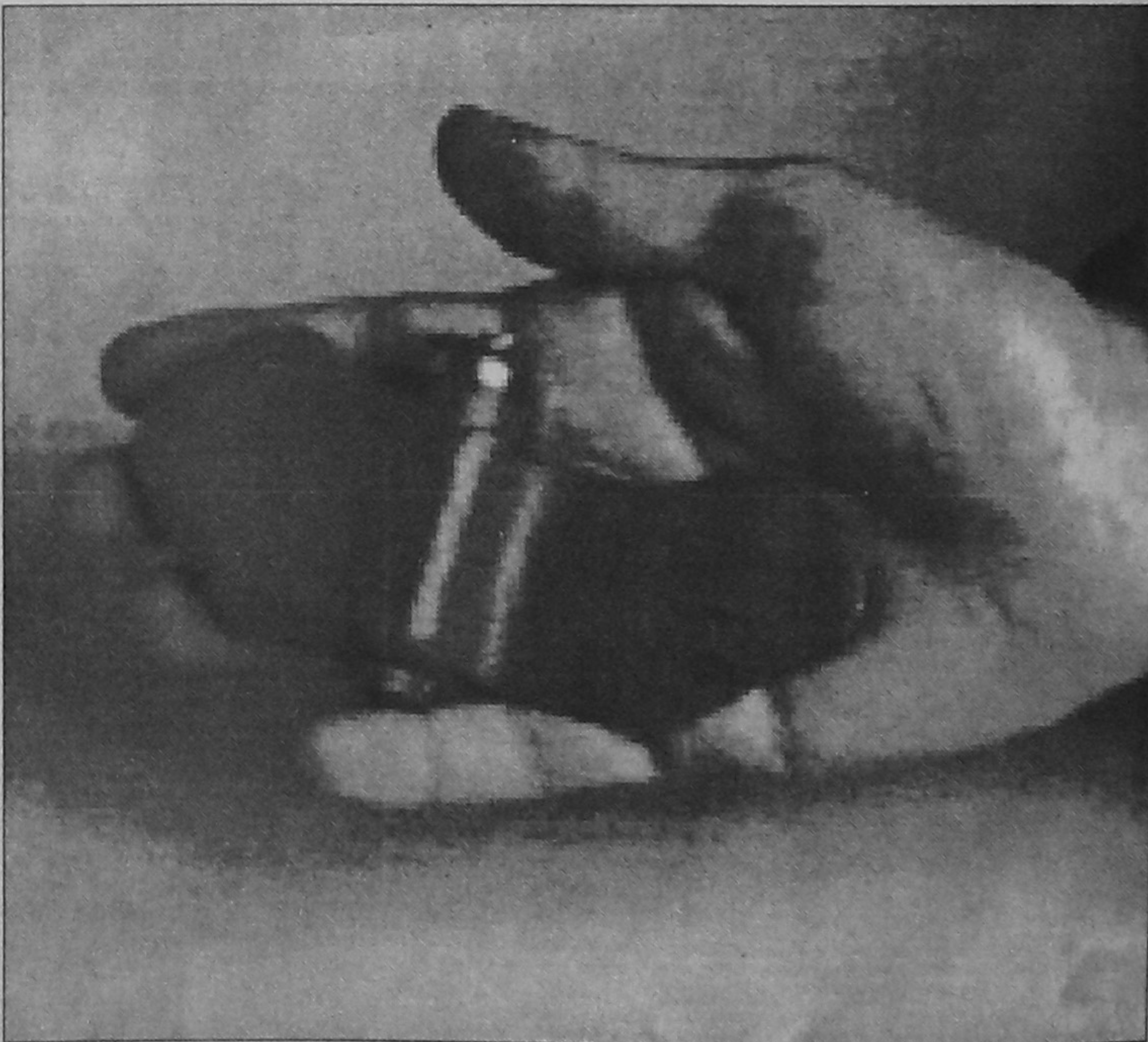
Donors, most of them Western governments, also have sometimes opted to pay for jobs that clear big tracts quickly rather than pay for demining in smaller plots in more urban areas.

The United Nations refugee agency set up its own demining programme two years ago. Last year, it cleared 70 houses at a site near the central Bosnian town of Vitez, where Bosnian government records show a commercial US deminer previously cleared the open land while skipping the houses.

"But if you want people to return home safely, you've got to demine their houses. It's common sense. And it costs money," said Harry Lee at the office of UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

The UNHCR is out of the demining business because of lack of funds, but the need is still there: Mines have killed 11 people and injured 11 already this year, said Enes Cengic of the Demining Commission.

"I have 127 national staff who haven't been paid since January and a couple million German marks (about 1 million dollars) worth of equipment" lying dormant, said Richard Schmidt, who headed the UNHCR programme.



A "butterfly" plastic mine, thousands of which were sprinkled by air over Afghanistan by Soviet Union