

From poverty to economic stability

The project engages poor farmers from hard to reach areas of the remote districts to innovate and adapt appropriate technical solutions to their farming problems; explore and adapt suitable marketing practices to reap higher margins from their marketable produce; diversify income options of their families; and form self-help groups to address socio-political and economic issues that affect food security as well as livelihood security.

Z.A.M. KHAIRUZZAMAN

POOR farmers of Khulna and Satkhira districts are now making an amazing journey from poverty to economic stability, self-reliance and respect among their communities.

The farmers started their journey following the launch of the Food Security for Sustainable Household Livelihoods - Action Aid Bangladesh Project (FoSHoL) two years ago. The four-year project, funded by the European Commission (EC), works for improving food security and livelihoods of agriculture dependent resource-poor households, mainly small and marginal farmers.

The poor people's efforts to improve their standard of living earned appreciation of a five-member delegation of the European Commission headed by First Counsellor and Head of Operations Françoise Collet. The team concluded a field visit to FoSHoL-Action Aid project areas in the two districts on January 21 and 22.

"I'm impressed by the commitment expressed by all towards the issue of food security of farmer households," said delegation leader Françoise Collet in this correspondent at Noihati Union Parishad (UP) Complex in Rupsha upazila,

Khulna. She expressed her satisfaction during the visit.

The first secretary of the delegation of the European Commission to Bangladesh Dr. Klaus-Dieter Gautsch, Program Manager-Food Security Stephane David, Food Security Expert Massimo La Rosa, Food Security Advisor Manjural Alam and International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) representative for Bangladesh and Team Leader, FoSHoL Coordination Project, Dr. Mohammad Zainul Abedin were also with her.

Action Aid Bangladesh Country Director, Farah Kabir, accompanied them. The project activities have been implemented by FoSHoL - Action Aid Bangladesh partner organisations Jagrata Jubo Sangha (JJS) and Uttarar.

The main objective of the visit was to find out how FoSHoL contributes to food security for households, as well as its activities at the grassroots level.

FoSHoL-Action Aid Project Manager, Masud Alam Khan, ATM Zakir Hossain, Executive Director of Jagrata Jubo Sangha (JJS) and Shahidur Rahman of Uttarar, two development partners of Action Aid joined the visiting delegation. Masud Alam Khan accompanied the team during the entire period to explain the project objectives and reply to

queries of the delegates.

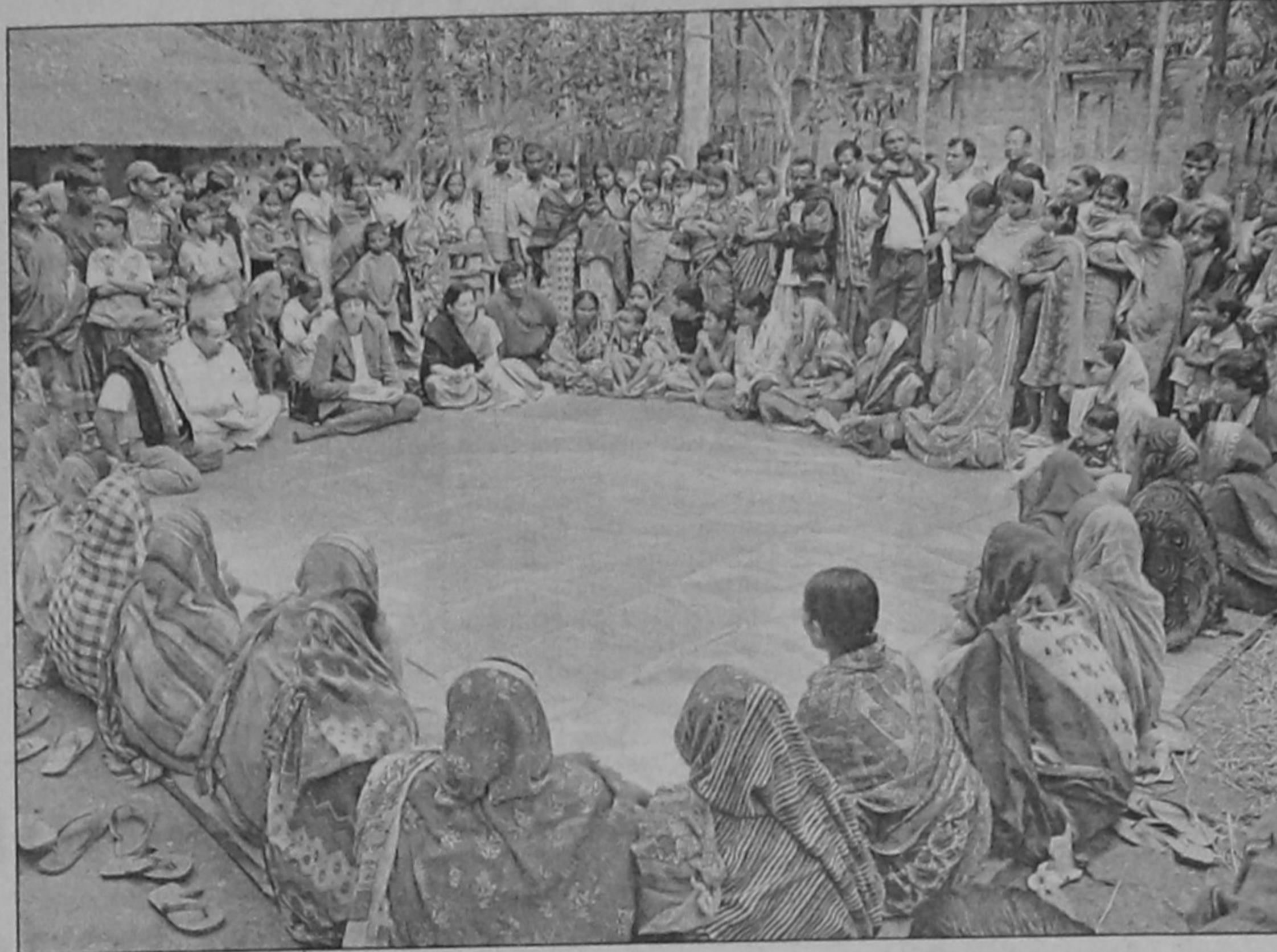
IRRI M&E specialist Abutaher M. Ziauddin, Mizanur Rahman Choudhury, Project Coordinator, FoSHoL, Care Bangladesh, and Mahammad Ali, Team Leader, Practical Action were also present. The visiting team observed, shared, and participated in the ongoing farm and field activities at Rupsha on January 21.

In the morning, the EC delegation visited a FoSHoL farmers' organisation at Pathorghata Tilok Salpo Bahirdia (TSB) union in Rupsha. They interacted with farmers during a routine courtyard session and learnt about their activities.

The team members talked to them about food security, rights, access to government facilities, gender discrimination, restriction on participation in economic activities of women, polygamy, gambling, early marriage, dowry, and social exclusion that affect their food security.

They visited Noihati Union livestock service centre to see a vaccination drive and attend a triennial meeting of Moitree, an alliance of farmers, at Noihati UP Complex.

A group of farmers consisting of Khaja Mohiuddin, Samad Sheikh, Saifur, Mainuddin Sheikh and Moteleb Sheikh disclosed that JJS motivated them to get united under the umbrella of Padma Krishok



Sangathan. They underwent a training course on integrated rice-fish-vegetables culture. This helped increase their production as well as income.

They visited Doba village in Ghatog union to interact with the Sidr-affected participants and attended a meeting of Moitree, an alliance of farmers. In Tala upazila, Satkhira, the EC team attended two meetings of female farmers' organisations at Baro Moddhyha Para Kishani Dal.

As members, they undertook training on improved livestock rearing and homestead gardening. Utilising the training, they produced abundant vegetables and raised greater number of cows,

resulting in rise in income and change in lifestyle.

The visitors also saw floating agriculture being practiced by woman farmers at Sharsha. They talked about their struggle against stagnant water hindering livelihood options. They participated at an opinion exchange meeting at Satkhira District Officers' Club, where representatives from district administration, agriculture, livestock and fisheries department, government of Bangladesh, and chairmen and members of local government institutions took part.

Female farmers like Bilquis Begum, Hajera Begum, Parul Begum, Hasina Khatun, Asma Khatun and Lutfunnesa talked about their welfare. They said they had struggled to feed their children twice a day even two years ago.

FoSHoL-Action Aid-Uttaran motivated them to become members of Baro Moddhyha Para Kishani Dal.

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Finally, the delegates saw a grand Farmers' Field Day at Padma Rani field at Par Kumari village in Patkelghata. Farmers, especially women, thronged in large numbers in the areas where FoSHoL is being implemented. They discussed and displayed their activities in the exhibition stalls through various types of models.

The EC delegation's First Secretary Dr. Klaus-Dieter Gautsch was especially pleased to see the participation of so many women. He appreciated the enthusiasm and mobilisation amongst the farmers, active contribution of women farmers and presence of school children.

Earlier, the team was accorded a reception by Action Aid Bangladesh and FoSHoL team at a city hotel in Khulna. The delegates met the entire team of FoSHoL Project coordination and management as well as their implementing partners, coordination team, government and private sector high officials, academicians, researchers, journalists and civil society members and local government leaders. They learnt about the chain of activities and management of the projects.

FoSHoL works with nine Action Aid partners in Khulna, Satkhira, Kurigram, Patuakhali, Noakhali and Sunamganj. They are Zibika, Kurigram; Uttarar, Satkhira-Jessore; Jagroto Jubo Sangtha (JJS), Khulna; Speed Trust, Patuakhali; Noakhali Rural Development Society (NRDS), Noakhali, and Voluntary Association for Rural Development (VARD), Sunamganj.

It covers nine upazilas of the districts. These are: Satkhira (Satkhira Sadar and Tala), Khulna

(Koira and Rupsha), Patuakhali (Kolapara), Noakhali (Noakhali Sadar), Kurigram (Kurigram Sadar and Ulipur) and Sunamganj (Bishwamberpur).

The project engages poor farmers from hard to reach areas of the remote districts to innovate and adapt appropriate technical solutions to their farming problems; explore and adapt suitable marketing practices to reap higher margins from their marketable produce; diversify income options of their families; and form self-help groups to address socio-political and economic issues that affect food security as well as livelihood security.

Participants are being facilitated to establish network-linkages with various extension service providers, local institutes and civil society organisations to access and control over services and resources, establish and maintain community initiatives like crop banking and crop insurance to prevent income erosion, and overcome vulnerability to shocks and stresses arising out of natural or other disasters.

The project also encourages in situ conservation of bio-diversity, leading to a better world for all. The project uses "whole family" and "whole farm" approach which entails critical engagement of all members to holistic advancement of the households.

The project will impact on the lives of 20,000 households directly participating with the project, while another 6,000 poor households are expected to benefit from innovation, and learning from direct participants.

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Anniversary anxieties

The most important thing is whether the two major political alliances will take part in the polls without their leaders, and with some of their members disqualified through conviction. This is casting a long and threatening shadow on the prospect of roadmap rolling in to an auspicious start. The grim memories of pre-1/11 days stalk the nation, and the anniversary anxieties are indeed real, and cannot be brushed aside.

SYED MAQSUD JAMIL

THESE days we are hearing much of the catchword roadmap. I mean the roadmap for holding the national polls. Last year on January 11 the nation was going nowhere, and it was on the brink of disaster. It has been one year now and the CTG is on course for holding the election.

It is heartening for the nation to see the nature and the quality of efforts the CTG is putting into the preparation of the voter list and voter identity card. This will understandably have lasting benefit for the nation.

The roadmap is to lead to the national polls within this year. It is more or less settled that the road

ends there. But what is very important is that the road should be free of impediments or barriers. Who can travel the road should now be settled. What would be the criterion by which they would be permitted, or barred? What would be the rules to be followed on the road? And, most importantly, whether the travelers would be willing to take the road. These are the things that will decide when the journey to the national polls is to resume, and when will it conclude.

It is a settled fact that it is going to be a party based national polls. Accordingly, the Election Commission under the leadership of the Chief Election Commissioner Dr. A.T.M. Shamsul

Huda has started talking with the major political parties. However, the process is far from being complete. It can better be said that it has stalled. The party in power during the last term, the BNP could not yet be consulted. Factional feud within it has put the EC in a dilemma.

All the three major political combines -- the BNP, the AL and the JP -- are saddled on one hand with two populist leaders in Khaleda Zia, and Sheikh Hasina and, on the other, by H.M. Ershad. All the three political parties are beholden to their chiefs on grounds of inheritance and shared spoils. The firm hold of the BNP and AL chiefs has not slackened a bit even months after their incar-

ceration, and even though corruption cases are proceeding against them.

As for the general, he will be too happy to jump on any bandwagon that offers a lease of life at the top.

Of the two factions in BNP, the one led by Saifur Rahman is in decline sans the blessing of Khaleda Zia. The stars of Delwar are on the rise and there are unmistakable signs that he is the chosen one of the chief. It has made things difficult for the EC on deciding which one represents the main body. So the dialogue with BNP is going nowhere. It has in fact taken the steam out of the entire dialogue process.

The AL has an apparently united front about the continued primacy of Sheikh Hasina. In spite of that, thinks appear when it comes to the cantankerous issue of reform. There, even Suranjit Sengupta treads with care, pragmatically pleading for a more gradual leadership in Sheikh Hasina. A state of emergency is in force.

There are two ways of looking at it. It is all about the glass being half full and half empty. For the CTG, it is half full and that it is a means to an end. They want this incubation period for things to take a positive shape out of the chaos of who is in command and who is not, furthermore, whether their chiefs can and should step aside or be sidelined for reform.

There is a general unanimity in the country that the undertaking of the CTG should not fail or run into frustrating snags. That will invite calamity. As for the political parties, the political scenario is in a state of flux, and far from being accepted as an enabling stage where the emergency can be lifted.

The politicians are, however, chafing under the restrictive nature of the state of emergency, and citing this as a major impediment in the way of political activities to settle things. This is a stressful situation.

The quality of the outcome of

the next polls depends largely on who takes part in it. Many politicians are behind bars on a number of charges. The charges are either in the process of investigation or legal procedures are already underway. There are also some against whom charges are to be framed. The task will take time since the catch is heavy.

Our political landscape is like an "unweeded garden." The weeding has to be completed expeditiously for the polls schedule to be realistic. Weeding can most naturally and conveniently take place with conviction awarded on the charges brought against the politicians. But the appeal process has to be admitted to make the trial credible. Isn't it fair to say that the time for that is short?

The EC can also have its set of standards for the participants to qualify for the polls. Fiscal transparency is at the top of it. It was there all along, but was applied in a lackadaisical manner in the past because of the pervading environ-

ment of connivance. It is believed that this time the standard will be applied the way it should be. Two other propositions are being talked about. One will effectively bar new recruits for the political parties from among those coming from the government service.

There will be a waiting period of at least one term for the new recruits from the government service. The politicians are not likely to demur because it is not a tactical issue. For the Awami League led 14-party alliance, the bee in the bonnet is the demand for the trial of the war criminals and collaborators, and their exclusion from the polls. It is a tactical issue for them, by which they can outmaneuver the BNP led 4-party alliance. This can be an extremely vexing issue for the CTG, and may even deteriorate to the extent of putting great strain on smooth holding of polls.

It appears that the polls schedule is also going to be a contentious issue. The EC expressed its

plans of holding local bodies elections before the national polls. This has not found favour with the two major political parties. It is a tactical issue for them. They want the national polls result to hand them a windfall gain in local body polls result. But this will defeat the very spirit of the undertaking, and can prove to be a test of will for the CTG.

The most important thing is whether the two major political alliances will take part in the polls without their leaders, and with some of their members disqualified through conviction. This is casting a long and threatening shadow on the prospect of roadmap rolling in to an auspicious start. The grim memories of pre-1/11 days stalk the nation, and the anniversary anxieties are indeed real, and cannot be brushed aside.

Syed Maqsud Jamil is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Gaza crisis -- what next?

It is obvious that if the Israelis do not cease their collective punishment of 1.5 million people, further stampedes are inevitable. Shopkeepers in Egyptian Rafah will quickly run out of stock. Whatever little the Palestinians managed to buy and take back to their families is hardly likely to last more than a few days.

ZULFIQUER AHMED AMIN

THE situation in Gaza has grown increasingly dire as Israel has tightened its economic blockade. It stopped delivery of all goods and cut off fuel for power plants, throwing large parts of the region into darkness.

The closure came amid peak winter demand for fuel and with Gaza already reeling from previous restrictions that Israel imposed after Islamist Hamas won the elections two years ago. Pushed against the wall, the desperate Palestinians set off explosions that demolished about 200 meters of the now rusting, 6-meter-high dividing wall erected by Israel in 2004.

Through the breach in the border, Palestinians crossed from Rafah in Gaza to Rafah in Egypt -- a city divided by the border after Israel returned Sinai to Egypt in 1979 and President Anwar Sadat refused an offer by Menachem Begin to take back Gaza. Starved as a result of seven months of living under a cruel, crippling, and inhumane Israeli blockade, thousands of Palestinians are pouring into Egypt to stock up on food and goods.

In the recent blockade, the UN

agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) was forced to stop food distribution to 860,000 starved Palestinians. Gaza's main power plant had to be shut down completely when it ran out of fuel. Hospitals had to close down for depletion of reserves. Indiscriminate killing in Gaza by the Israeli troops made the crisis worse. All these developments

have led to a desperate humanitarian situation, and the United Nations and aid groups have condemned the blockade and called it illegal under international law.

While global opinion slammed what it termed as "collective punishment" of impoverished Gaza's 1.5 million residents, Israel vowed to maintain such a

punishing blockade. The UN Security Council, after a heated emergency session, failed to ease the situation as the United States, a staunch ally of Israel, denied acceptance of any criticism against Israel, which considers the blockade of Gaza as an act of self-defense.

It was absolutely rational that the Egyptian authorities did not try to stop this desperate tidal wave of humanity. No decent neighbour could stand by and let it worsen. Had the Palestinians not taken action themselves, it seems highly likely that the Egyptian authorities, backed overwhelmingly by their own and

the world's public opinion, would have had to intervene to head off catastrophe.

Washington's refusal to endorse a draft United Nations Security Council statement condemning Israel's siege of Gaza effectively advocated the action against millions of Palestinian men, women and children.

Therefore, the Americans, who are trying to portray themselves as honest brokers in a renewed peace process, are in fact in perfect sync with their Israeli allies in promoting the starvation and killing of Palestinian civilians on the basis that the Jewish state has a right to defend its citizens in towns like Sderot (formerly known as Najd, before the village was ethnically cleansed of all its Palestinian residents in 1948) by any and every means possible.

The US's unquestionable lenience to Israel is dismal. These ties create a durable context, which absorbs many of the vagaries of current politics. In the worst case, an American administration may seek to pressurise the Israelis and might even reduce the level of cooperation (for example, by suspending arms deliveries or reducing strategic cooperation), but the ties today are so broad and deep that the alliance is unlikely to crack.

Unlike Dwight Eisenhower in 1956-57, no president today can credibly threaten a cutoff of aid, for Congress would not support such an action. Economic, academic, and personal relations

between citizens of the two countries are largely immune to political vagaries.

Today, total US aid to Israel is approximately one-third of the American foreign-aid budget, despite the fact that Israel comprises just .001 percent of the world's population and Israel's GNP is higher than the combined GNPs of Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza.

With a per capita income of about \$31,561, Israel ranks as the sixteenth wealthiest country in the world, above Germany (\$31,390), Italy (\$31,051), Spain (\$27,914) and Kuwait (\$20,886), but remains the top US aid receiver.

For many years the American media said that Israel receives \$1.8 billion in military aid and \$1.2 billion in economic aid. Most US loans to Israel are waived, and many were made with the explicit understanding that they would be waived before Israel was required to repay them. By disguising as loans what in fact were grants, cooperating members of Congress exempted Israel from the US oversight that would have accompanied grants.

Vietnam War.

In addition to the financial outlay, U.S. aid to Israel costs some 275,000 American jobs each year. The trade-aid imbalance with Israel, of between \$6-10 billion, costs about 125,000 American jobs every year.

The rationale for Washington's enduring commitment to Israel has long been a puzzle. During the Cold War it was argued that democratic Israel was a natural ally amidst a world of semi-authoritarian and often pro-Soviet states. But, many years after the Cold War has been over, the ever-rising American commitment to Israel remains a paradox.

A popular belief is that the US commitment is underwritten by the Jewish lobby, which exercises a disproportionate influence on American policy. Even when combined with the influence of Protestant fundamentalists who, for largely religious reasons, increasingly support Israel, it is still questionable whether interest group politics could determine American foreign policy to such an extent.

Despite transitions between Republican and Democratic presidents, bureaucratic support for Israel remains relatively constant, indicating that support for Israel is not a product of partisan politics but a given, firmly ingrained in political discourse.

Even if one were to accept the logic that allows for Israelis (but not Palestinians) to ignore basic



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