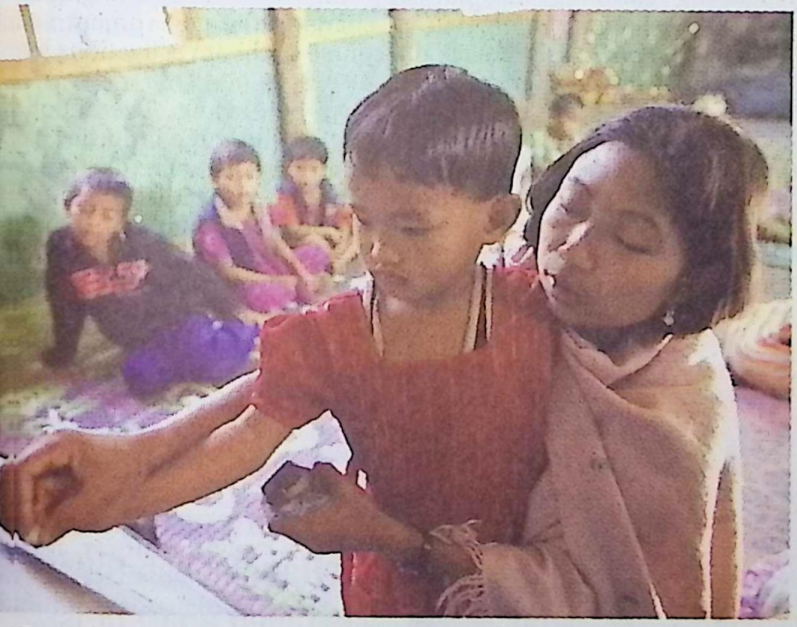
A few hours journey away from Sapchari Boro, high on a hill in Barkal Upazila, lives another former RMP participant named Kalabi Chakma. At 56, Kalabi is a salty old woman who looks decades older. After offering her visitors a plate of sour green fruit from a nearby tree, Kalabi told how she too purchased a calf with the savings she earned building a road. That was back in 2001. She now has six cows and two calves and is able to earn 25-30 taka a day selling their milk. Though she is doing relatively well, Kalabi has also felt the strain of the food prices.

"Oh god, the rice last year was so bad, it was terrible," Kalabi said. "The worst rice was 35 taka per kilo. And cooking oil is so expensive we can only use a few drops."

Some of Kalabi's neighbours gathered around and voiced their concern. Since there are few jobs in the area, many of them survive, barely, by carrying bushels of bananas down a steep hill to sell to traders.

"If this goes on, poor people like us will die," one man said.



Teacher Champa Chakma helps a young girl write on a blackboard in a para centre.

"We eat only half as much as we did before."

The situation was also dire for Ukrema Marma, a woman in her 30s who lives with her mother, father, and two children in Kheyangsa Village in Khagrachari. Ukrema has two other children that she sent to work as servants in a nearby town a few years back because she could no longer afford to feed them. In 2007 and 2008, Ukrema participated in UNWFP's Vulnerable Group Development Programme, which is designed to help ultra-poor women overcome food insecurity, eat healthier, and learn ways to earn money.

During the programme's 24-month cycle, Ukrema received 30 kilos of rice every month, which would feed her family for two weeks. Freed from her daily struggle to provide food during this time, she participated in the VGD life-skills and income-earning trainings. In these classes, women learn about things like malaria prevention, the importance of immunizations, and how to prepare oral re-hydration salts, as well as business skills, such as to how to negotiate, start a business and create savings.

Things were easier then, but the animals Ukrema bought with her savings died and her only way of earning money now is by selling wood she collects in the forest for 35-40 taka a bundle. Ukrema's two daughters gathered at her feet. Their dresses were in tatters.

"We eat twice a day now, " she said, motioning to her girls. "They are hungry, but I cannot provide for them."

Further a field, in Sajek Union, villagers were even worse off. They were suffering not only from high food prices, but from a devastating rat infestation. Every fifty years or so when the local bamboo species flowers at the end of its life cycle, to the local rat population devours the blossom and multiplies at an alarming rate consuming any other bit of food or crop they can sink their teeth into. In a country prone to flooding during intense monsoon rains, the locals gave the rodent phenomenon a fitting name; they call it the "rat flood."

In response to the rat flood and subsequent food crisis, from May to November. of 2008, the United Nations World Food Programme (UNWFP) organised emergency food assistance to some 26,000 affected families throughout Rangamati and Bandarban Districts. Around 130,000 people received food aid consisting of rice, salt and vegetable oil. This spring UNWFP plans to (to distribute additional food and cash to 5,000 affected families through an emergency recovery programme.

When we visited Para # 7 in January, the villagers were still suffering. One older woman, Umundri Tripura, a mother of six and grandmother of one, told me how much she feared the rats, especially when they crawled into her house at night.

"Sometimes they even eat the skin off my feet," said Umundri, a Hindu woman who wore a florescent green top and a tiny gold flower piercing in her nose.

Among the children gathered in Umundri's yard was her youngest son, a quiet boy with round, dark eyes who looked about eight. He busied himself tending to his baby nephew. Normally, Umundri said, he too spent the day foraging for food in the nearby jungle.

"We eat whatever we see that looks tasty," she said, explaining how sometimes what they eat in desperation can have nasty side effects. "If I eat wild bananas on an empty stomach, sometimes I vomit. If I eat bamboo shoots, they make my head spin."

Before we left Para #7, Umundri made a point of pulling me aside and offering a heart-wrenching apology that summed up everything.

"It is in my culture to offer you, a visitor, something to eat," she said. "I'm sorry, but I have nothing."

Emily Brady is a New York City-based writer. This was her first trip to Bangladesh. Photographer Shehzad Noorani has been documenting life in Bangladesh for more than 20 years. He lives in Vancouver.