

Bangladesh Raises Food Output, Halving Its Imports Over 5 Years

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DACCA, Bangladesh, Feb. 23 — Despite marginal success in controlling its population growth, Bangladesh has cut its foreign food-aid requirements in half during the last five years, and Government leaders are talking optimistically about achieving self-sufficiency in food by 1985.

Most experts on foreign aid have been skeptical about whether Bangladesh would ever be able to grow enough grain to feed its population, which has increased to about 85 million and has an annual growth rate of 2.4 million.

Many of the aid experts have also said, however, that huge production gains are possible as the use of fertilizer increases.

President Ziaur Rahman, in an explanation of why the governing Bangladesh Nationalist Party won a two-thirds majority in last weekend's parliamentary elections, said: "Our people are better fed and happier than they have been before.

'What Is Needed Is Organization'

"A few years ago, people doubted that we could ever double food production," President Zia said. "It's not something impossible. What is needed is organization."

Some foreign food experts have said that large donations of grain from developed nations, mostly the United States, Canada, and Australia, have become major deterrents to increases in domestic production. If these grain donations were replaced by roughly the same amounts of fertilizer, local farmers could produce nearly four times the amount of grain donated, the foreign experts have argued.

Under agriculture policies instituted in 1975, domestic grain production has steadily increased and imports have de-

creased. The record crop of last year, estimated at 13.4 million tons of rice and a few other crops, amounted to an increase of 13 percent over 1977.

But even the record 1978 crop amounted to only 88 percent of Bangladesh's food needs. About 1.85 million tons of food, particularly wheat, was imported.

Because of generally favorable weather for the fourth straight year, food imports this year were expected to be reduced further, to 1.4 million tons.

Because of unchecked population growth, however, half the nation's families are still malnourished, according to American estimates. Still, starvation and its accompanying social unrest have diminished considerably.

Less than 15 percent of the nearly 70 million Bengali who live in rural areas have received the grain rations that the Government has supplied from foreign food donations. The bulk of the imported food has been sold well below market prices to urban dwellers, including civil servants and soldiers who are relatively well-off.

One result of these urban rations has been a depression of the price of domestically grown grain, which has in turn caused a reduction of incentives for farmers to grow more grain.

Meanwhile, neither domestic production nor imports have kept pace with the demands of local farmers for fertilizer. Nearly two-thirds of Bengali farmers use chemical fertilizers, but the amount of fertilizers used has been lower here than anywhere else in Asia. Grain yields for Bangladesh have been among Asia's lowest. Fertilizer application has been estimated at about one-sixth the amount required for optimum yields.

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