



The New York Times/William Borders

A family-planning clinic in Dacca, Bangladesh. Men and women wait for advice, medical treatment or sterilization operations.

Thousands in Bangladesh Begin Drive to Encourage Birth Control

By WILLIAM BORDERS

Special to The New York Times

DACCA, Bangladesh, Sept. 28—Under the direction of the stern military Government that has been in control for the last 10 months, Bangladesh has just drawn up its first comprehensive national population policy and is sending thousands of workers into the marshy countryside to carry it out.

Among Dacca's sizable community of foreign-aid experts, who have been frustrated by the inaction of the past, there is hope about what one of them called "a genuine new sense of commitment." And government planners claim they have already begun to bring down the soaring birth rate.

"We must mobilize all our resources to solve this critical population problem," said Maj. Gen. Ziaur Rahman, who has ruled this country since last November, in a recent interview. "If we cannot do something about population, nothing else that we accomplish will matter much."

To the people who care about population planning, both Bangladeshis and foreign, that kind of talk is a welcome change from the approach of Sheik Mujibur Rahman, the founder of the country who was assassinated a year ago. When pressed on the subject, Sheik Mujib reportedly used to respond with some comment like, "We Bengalis love our children."

Always Must Import Grain

Nevertheless, the problem is dizzying in its scope. With 80 million people living in an area smaller than Wisconsin, Bangladesh is as crowded as the continental United States would be if the whole world's population lived there. Even in the best of years, like this one, when the harvest has been very good, Bangladesh must import grain to feed its people.

At the present birth rate of 46 per thousand (compared with 35 in India and 14 in the United States), the population of Bangladesh will double by the time a baby born today reaches the age of 21. Moreover, in the words of Prof. Marcus F. Franda an American political scientist who specializes in this area, "Since half the people in Bangladesh are now less than 16 years of age, the population boom has barely started."

The population policy published last week includes incentives to encourage sterilization operations and better planning and training for workers who deliver condoms and birth-control pills door to door.

"But basically it's just a question of commitment, which we didn't have before and now we do," said Mohammed Abdus Sattar, a Harvard-trained economist who became family planning secretary early this year.

Sterilizations Increasing

Sterilizations have risen to 8,000 a month, as many as there were in all of 1975, and the percentage of fertile couples practicing that or some other form of birth control has gone up from 4 percent to 7 percent. But that still means that 93 percent of all the couples in the country—32 million people—are doing nothing at all to prevent conception, which is why seven babies are born in Bangladesh every minute of every day.

Virtually every cent that this impoverished country spends on population control comes as aid from abroad. But that is no problem. The donor countries freely concede that they consider it so essential that they are happy to give as much for family planning as Bangladesh is prepared to spend.

"My only restraint as far as money is concerned is the absorptive capacity of our program," Mr. Sattar said.

And yet the problems remain enormous in this traditional Moslem society in which medical people are widely suspect and only one person in five can read. In one area, a birth-control canvasser found that, when asked how many children they wanted, women invariably replied with the number that their mothers had had—six on average. The reason, one of them explained, was that "to say you want fewer than your mother had is insulting to your younger brothers and sisters, as if you wish they had not been born."

Even here in the capital, a well-educated government economist, asked why he had 11 children, replied with a hearty laugh: "Allah gave us the children. Allah will watch out for them."

The New York Times

Published: September 30, 1976

Copyright © The New York Times