

Economic Hope for Bangladesh

By KEVIN RAFFERTY

DACCA, Bangladesh—Which Asian country last year achieved double-digit economic growth? It was certainly not Japan, which is still staggering out of recession and was thankful to turn in a positive 2 percent growth after a 1.2 percent shrinkage in 1974. Nor was it Singapore or Malaysia or any of the other traditional high-flyers which were also blown off course by adverse world conditions. Nor was it India, with its much-vaunted improved discipline.

No, the champion Asian country in terms of growth was Bangladesh, the so-called "bottomless basketcase," whose economy grew by almost 12 percent in the year ending in June, according to official figures.

A good monsoon was the main factor helping to produce the record growth. But, a new regime is also claiming its share of the credit.

The kingpin of the Government is Maj. Gen. Ziaur Rahman who is Chief of Staff of the Army, deputy chief administrator of martial law and head of the Ministries of Finance, Home Affairs and Information. The 40-year-old soldier is an impressive man, if only because he has a disciplined flat stomach rather than the wellrounded

pot bellies that many Bengalis acquire when they achieve the privileges of the middle class.

General Ziaur is also trying hard to put new discipline into the economy. Under the late Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, economic decision making had become a higgledy-piggledy obstacle course, with corruption, political favors and nepotism abounding. Sheikh Mujib, who was assassinated last year, had a team of economic planners unmatched anywhere in the world in terms of brainpower but they could never find a coherent way through the political and bureaucratic maze which faced them under the label of socialism. Now, General Ziaur has organized a National Economic Council to make the most important decisions and encouraged the middle- and lower-ranking civil servants to make the less important decisions without referring them to the top.

In his office in Army general headquarters at Dacca recently, he returned time and again to the need to change attitudes in Bangladesh. "We must not be beggars," he said. "Why should we beg? We have something to offer." In past weeks, delegations have gone to various countries in the Middle East, particularly to Saudi Arabia, offering

the services of skilled Bengali manpower in return for money for projects in Bangladesh.

General Ziaur is determined that the country's salvation must lie in the rural areas. He has directed that civil servants must spend time getting their feet dirty in the villages. "I have directed that the most senior officials must spend five days a month, and junior ones up to 15 days, in the villages," he said. The general has also lent his weight to a full-fledged birth control campaign.

So much for the good news. Both the general and his country still face enormous problems. Reality in Bangladesh is harsh indeed. Singapore's gross national product, for example, amounts to more than \$2,200 a head, compared to a paltry \$70 in Bangladesh. In spite of its improved performance, Bangladesh has not yet managed in real per capita terms to catch up with the performance of the 1969-70 year, the last effective year of the old rule from Pakistan.

Even with the good monsoon, food imports of more than a million tons were needed. And Bangladesh's underlying economic data are too wretchedly well known to need much lingering over. A population of 80 million people

is packed into a land about the size of England and Wales—55,000 square miles of which a third is flooded every year. More than half of the Bengalis suffer from calorie and vitamin deficiencies. The nation depends for 85 percent of its exports on jute, which is declining in world markets, yet it has an insatiable demand for the products of other countries including even basics like food, clothing, industrial products and medicines.

Last year, even as the Bangladesh economy grew, its imports amounted to the equivalent of about \$1.2 billion whereas exports were less than \$370 million. In the 1969-1970 year, exports were 21 percent higher and imports 94 percent lower. Last year consumer prices fell by 15 percent but essential goods cost two to four times more than in 1971.

And over the economic gloom lies the threat of population explosion. By the turn of the century, Bangladesh's population will have doubled—to 160 million or about 3,000 people per square mile, including the rivers.

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