

by reshuffling his cabinet. While the Shah Azizur group retained its control in the new cabinet, there are reports that Sattar promised the dissidents that they would receive concessions later on. In meeting the demands of the military it is generally believed that President Sattar has bought some time; however, he has also exposed his government's weakness, and it remains to be seen how long the armed forces will be willing to stay behind the scenes.

The Awami League

Any moves by the armed forces will have to take into consideration the growing popular strength of the Awami League, the party founded by independence leader and first Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. After languishing under repression following the military coup against Mujib in 1975, the Awami emerged as the sole major opposition party in the November 1981 elections, and some of its leaders claim that, had it not been for vote fraud, it might have won. In a discussion with this correspondent the Awami's presidential candidate in the November elections, Kamal Hossain, noted that despite all of the Awami League's handicaps during the elections and the fact that they were pitted against state power, "we have been overwhelmed by the response of the population."

However, the Awami League has also suffered from factionalization between the right- and left-wing sections of the party. In an effort to keep the party together, Sheikh Mujib's daughter, Hasina Wajed, was prevailed upon to return from self-imposed exile in India to assume the Presidentship of the Awami a few months before the assassination of Ziaur Rahman. However, Mrs. Wajed has apparently been unable to stay above the various factions, and there are new reports of strife within the party.

Several members of the Awami League also expressed to me their concern over the growing strength of Islamic fundamentalism, inside the military as well as outside. The fundamentalists are primarily grouped in the Jamaate Islami, the equivalent on the Indian sub-continent of the Muslim Brotherhood which brought Khomeini to power in Iran. Although Bangladesh was established as a secular nation, the Jamaate is reported to have the support of approximately 20 percent of the population. In an effort to obtain financial assistance from Arab countries, Ziaur Rahman promoted greater "Islamization" of the country—a move which allowed the Jamaate to increase its strength. At present the Jamaate is training its young cadre, recruited from colleges with lavish gifts, along paramilitary lines. The Jamaate has reportedly built up its strength with extensive financial support from Saudi Arabian sources and is considered one of the best organized, most homogeneous forces in the country.

Interview



Farm Minister: 'We can quadruple agricultural output'

In the following interview Agriculture Minister Dr. Fasihuddin Mahtab discusses the short- and long-term outlook for food production in Bangladesh as well as some of the overall difficulties the economy is facing. The 46-year-old Dr. Mahtab, who holds a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering, was the founder-director of a private engineering and consulting firm before he joined the government. In 1977 he was appointed Deputy Adviser to President Ziaur Rahman in charge of Agriculture and in April 1979 became Minister for Planning. He returned to the Agriculture Ministry in November 1981.

In late February, soon after this interview was conducted by EIR correspondent Paul Zykofsky in Dacca, Dr. Mahtab was shifted to head up the Finance Ministry.

At the time this interview took place, appeals for emergency grains had gone out to traditional aid donors; even the World Bank urged speeded-up shipments of at least a half million tons of grains. As of early February, government officials expected the donors to come through, although they had few firm commitments.

Zykofsky: What is the outlook for food production this year?

Mahtab: As you know we have three main seasons. Within the financial year (which starts in July) the first season is *aus* (harvested in July and August) and this year there were some pest attacks which resulted in a shortfall of 200,000 tons. Because of drought the second season, *aman* (the main crop harvested from October to January), also fell short of our target and wheat production was also affected. But *boro* (harvested in May and June), which is the last crop, so far looks quite promising.

Our original target for production was 16.2 million tons. At present estimate, we will reach about 14.3 to 14.5 metric tons this year, as against last year's production of 14.6 metric tons. So basically, due to the drought, we are losing the extra production we wanted. The target for 1984-85 set in our mid-term food production plan is 20 million tons. Assuming that in abnormal conditions we will lose about 2 metric tons, as occurred this year, for example, we will still get a minimum of 18 metric tons—which will make us self-sufficient in food production.

Our greatest problem in the medium term is the almost total dependence on the weather due to lack of irrigation facilities. In the past, most of our irrigation effort was on the flood control side rather than on the irrigation side, so we took up major projects, big projects and these have got a long gestation period and are very highly capital-intensive. Though ultimately that is the solution—because the recurring cost is less—in the short and medium term we have had to change our strategy.

Now we are concentrating on more minor irrigation projects using pumps and tube wells of two types: deep tube wells where the groundwater is too deep, and shallow tube wells with small centrifugal pumps and also some hand tube wells. These projects are basically using surface and groundwater and will contribute about 80 percent of the additional land we are bringing under irrigation.

But there are other projects being carried out by the Ministry of Flood Control and Irrigation which are large projects. Some are already underway and we have to complete them, although at this moment we are forced to move more slowly due to resource constraints. But nevertheless, by 1984-85 we hope to increase total irrigated land from the current 3.6 million acres to 7.2 million.

We could do more if we could overcome the resource constraints we face. We have tremendous resource constraints. But we are trying to protect some of these programs; although at times it is very, very difficult.

For example, we need to have a very big program next year—which should be bigger than this year's—and for that we have to invest now. But I am finding it difficult to mobilize the funds. This year, for example, our development funds were cut substantially.

Zykofsky: Is there any way to overcome these resource constraints?

Mahtab: There is a certain scope for improving our own resource mobilization, like reducing subsidies. That also has its limitations. For example, we are reducing subsidies on fertilizer and other inputs for agriculture. But at the same time you have to look at the capabilities of the farmer. And there is a limit after which you have to go slowly, otherwise this will create disincentives. It is not enough to produce more, it also has to be at levels where it is within the purchasing power of the people. So there is a limit to the reduction of subsidies as far as agriculture is concerned.

Another thing which is hurting us very much is our trade situation. You see, this year, in spite of increased exports, the money we've earned from exports is reduced because of the fall in the price of jute and of other commodities, most of them agricultural products. As a result our exports in dollar terms will be less than last year. Our exports last year were about \$725 million; this year they will be about \$650 million.

At the same time, our import requirements are about \$2.7 billion; because of the shortage of funds we have cut them down to \$2.4 billion. And that is naturally going to affect not only our various projects, but also industry and productivity of certain industries.

Zykofsky: What is your estimate of Bangladesh's food production potential?

Mahtab: As far as the potential of this country is concerned, one estimate made in the early 1970s by the World Bank—a famous, nine-volume report in which they did the land-use planning, water availability, irrigation potential, and all that—was that this country could produce, with proper irrigation and drainage, four times what we were producing at that time [approximately 10 million tons]. But at that time there were not many high-yield varieties. Now the technology has developed, and I think it is still valid to say that we can produce four times the present level of production of 15 million tons, that is to say some 60 million tons.

Our land needs irrigation. If you can provide irrigation you can grow three crops instead of just one in many areas. There are certain areas where there are two crops, but in many areas we are producing only one crop. As soon as farmers get irrigation they can go for high-yield varieties which will increase the yields tremendously. In addition to that, as the cropping intensity increases, employment increases.

I did a study a few years back. In this study, we found that when yields increased due to irrigation, employment also increased from 90 man-days per acre to 360. The interesting part is that while the increase in family labor is nearly double, the increase in hired labor goes up by about eight times. Given that 40 to 50 percent of our rural population consists of landless labor, this is also very important.