

## **The politics of starvation in Bangladesh**

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The problems of poverty and starvation in Bangladesh are well known to the rest of the world. The Center for Policy Dialogue, a Dhaka-based nongovernmental organization, recently released a report naming the country the 18th hungriest nation in the world. Quoting this NGO, local media have reported that 28.2 million people are still considered “ultra poor”, while 40 per cent of the country’s 150 million people are below the poverty level.

Another report claims that around 77 per cent of the population living in coastal, submerged and island areas are still ultra poor. The International Food Policy Research Institute based in Washington, in its “Global Hunger Index: The Challenge of Hunger 2008,” also lists Bangladesh as the 18th hungriest nation among 88 countries.

The government of Bangladesh has initiated a few programs to combat the challenge of food security in the country. To improve the socioeconomic situation of people living below the poverty level, the authorities operate various programs providing food for work, food for vulnerable groups and allowances for the elderly and widows.

A large number of NGOs under the direct supervision of local government institutions are involved in implementing these programs. There are controversial claims as to the success and failure of these programs from the government and the civil society groups respectively.

For example, the elected representatives of a union council, the smallest grassroots-level unit of local government, are officially responsible for preparing lists of eligible candidates for the vulnerable group feeding program. After assessing their possessions and income, the authorities give eligible people a card entitling them to 15 kilograms of free rice per month.

All these programs have given the government a way to show the world how concerned it is for the welfare of the people. On the other hand, the abuse of bureaucratic and political power, as well as corruption—an integral part of the Bangladeshi system—have seriously narrowed the avenues for deserving people to benefit from the ongoing socioeconomic protection programs.

The Bangladeshi media have been publishing reports on the manipulation of the system, the abuse of political power and corruption; however, the authorities have little interest in stopping these ongoing practices.

One recent example described in a daily newspaper exposes the level of manipulation that is taking place. Two sons of ruling party politician Azizul Islam, Sujan and Mamun, were given vulnerable group feeding cards in Atgharia Upazilla in Pabna district. The family owns farmland in the area, along with farming and husking machines, a huge village home, an electronics business and various other establishments in the locality. The family of Azizul Islam, who is president of the Awami League’s local Ward Committee, is known as a rich family in the area.

Responding to journalists’ questions regarding his eligibility for the vulnerable group feeding card, Sujan said, “We have contributed a lot to the party; we deserve it!”

In contrast, Sakhina Begum, an elderly widow who has lost her eyesight and has been living in another poor man’s house as a homeless person in the neighborhood of Azizul Islam, did not qualify for any of the government programs. The media reports claim there are many such incidents in the area.

The chairman of the Debottor union council expressed his helplessness by saying, “We have to sign the papers prepared by leaders of the Awami League and approved by the member of Parliament of the local constituency.” However, the leaders who were involved in making up the lists for the feeding program refused to comment on their controversial role. Local member of Parliament, Shasur Rahman Sharif, reportedly claimed that the representatives of the local government did the original job and he just signed the paper as a formality.

In the midst of this ‘blame game’, newspapers are reporting the manipulation and corruption of elected representatives and ruling party leaders across the country. According to the reports, people who require government aid have to pay the ruling party leaders to ensure they are not dropped from the list. The truly needy, who cannot afford to pay bribes, are caught in this circle of abuse of power and corruption.

This situation provides the answer to the question as to why Bangladesh is included among the 20 hungriest nations of the world. The poor literally starve to death, losing their share to the politically hungry people, who never realize they are starving to death morally. The poverty and starvation of the poor end with their individual deaths, while the politicians voraciously eat up more than their share of all that is available in Bangladesh. Why?

The government remains deaf and dumb to the situation. No authority is considering the rationality or fairness of the system. The ruling party leaders, including the prime minister, remain silent, thus sending a clear message that they are in power only to allow their ‘own people’ to get all the benefits from the state. The ruling party politicians feel they deserve their big meals, while the starving poor do not. Nobody is ashamed of stealing the food of the dying people. In fact, the politicians might prefer to maintain the level of starvation in the country to keep up the flow of foreign aid, and the subsequent corruption it engenders.

In the face of this continuing political consumption, the leadership needs to explain just what the Awami League meant by ‘change’ in its election manifesto, “Charter for Change”. So far there is no evidence of any attempt to stop these ongoing practices.

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