



AROUND THE WORLD

WHY INDIA STARVES

FOR months now India has been faced with the scourge of famine. Thousands die of starvation every day. The countryside is being turned into a desert through the forced migration of the hungry into the towns. And in the towns thousands roam the streets—destitute, without food and without hope of getting any. The figures of the numbers dying vary. In Bengal alone the *Hindustan Times* estimates the number to be many thousands each week. And Bengal, continues the *Times*, “is just one of the stricken provinces. The situation is just as acute, if not more so in Madras, Orissa, Bihar, Travancore, and Bombay provinces. So ghastly is the situation in Calcutta that it has already been given the name of ‘the city of slow death.’” Famine in the districts of Burdwan and Midnapore is indescribably horrible. One dispatch pictures Bengal as an area where “Husbands have driven away their wives for lack of food. . . . Brothers have turned deaf ears to the pleas of hungry sisters. . . . Parents and children share food with beasts in the gutters. . . . Babies if not stillborn survive only a few minutes.”

This is the ghastly picture of the “brightest jewel” of the British Empire and one of the most important bases of United Nations military operations against Japan. For Americans this crisis has special meaning, for it is in Bengal, Assam, and Bihar that many American soldiers are stationed. Death stalks around their camps with corpses of children lying in the streets and in the fields. Epidemics threaten and the lives of our own men are at stake.

Of course the government of India has enormous numbers of excuses for the existing famine. Famine is considered a natural and normal feature of Indian life which must take place every few years. In certain places famine is attributed to floods, cyclone, and drought. One area is said to be trying to starve another and vice versa. Everything and everybody is to blame except the government bureaucrats themselves.

THE food crisis is part of the political crisis which developed after August 1942. Other contributing wartime factors are extensive and unchecked hoarding; profiteering and speculation by landlords and merchants; the failure of crops in some areas; the refusal of the administration to enlist popular support of the peasantry to increase food production; the export of food from India to the Middle East; inadequate transportation of grain from one area

to another due to military priority on the railways; and the failure of the government to introduce an efficient democratic system of rationing and price control.

Even in normal times more than sixty percent of the Indian people live on a semi-starvation level. India's poverty can hardly be conceived by the western mind. The cause rests in the country's unbalanced economic structure and in the frightful exploitation of workers and peasants by feudal landlords and unscrupulous employers. Seventy-five percent of the people live off the land. Less than two percent are employed in modern industrial enterprises. Despite the huge potentialities of industrial expansion the development of Indian industry is deliberately retarded by the state for fear of competition with British manufactured goods.

Another reason for the food crisis is the outworn, overburdened agrarian system. Of all the usable land in India there is less than one acre and a quarter per head for that portion of the population which is directly supported by agriculture. The landlords makes it even worse. More than seventy-five percent of this land is owned by a handful of men while the seventy million peasant families are left with the remaining twenty-five percent. Even these small peasant holdings do not constitute compact units but are scattered all over the village area in tiny fragments. The tilling of these tiny plots by primitive methods is utterly uneconomic and contributes to the country's impoverishment. Nothing but the barest necessities of life are left to the peasant even in prosperous years after the exorbitant government taxes are paid and the moneylenders exact their pound of flesh.

The war has heightened the old crises. The overburdened economy is now even more hard pressed. And the political turmoil has intensified the whole state of affairs. The British have tried to defend India without the cooperation of the Indian people. So, too, the authorities attempt to

alleviate the famine without enlisting popular support. The policy of the British government in India has been to align itself with the reactionary, privileged elements in Indian society. And today when the landlords have hoarded tremendous stocks of food and grain to sell later at higher prices, the British administration does not take decisive action against them, because these are the elements upon which the existence of British rule depends. To combat hoarding and profiteering, the government must command the support of the people. This the government in India does not have. Professor Gangulee, ex-member of the Royal Commission on Indian agriculture, has observed that: “Only a national government of the people of India can solve the food problem because the government will have the confidence of the people. The present government is an alien government and its administrative machinery is absolutely incapable of dealing with the present crisis.”

THE government of India introduced a price control system early this year which led to extensive hoarding. The police, while dealing strictly with the small shopkeeper, did not act against the landlords and the wholesale dealers. Even in areas where there is no famine, prices have leaped. Landlords and merchants reap huge profits at the expense of the entire nation. Even money has ceased to be a guarantee against starvation. This past summer the price of rice in Bombay increased 1,200 percent; flour, part of the staple diet, rose by more than 300 percent; coal by 200 percent; cloth by 400 percent. Tea went up from 100 in 1941 to 504 in December 1942. The price of foreign drugs has increased by 1,600 percent. It is estimated that all commodities have increased five to eight times in price. Some essential grains, salt, kerosene, oil, sugar, etc., are virtually unobtainable. Wages and income have not kept pace with inflated prices.

With the administration unable to solve the food crisis, and the national leaders still in prison, Japanese agents are busily instigating food riots among the starving. The Japanese radio asks the people to revolt. They also tell Indians that while the British are having their sumptuous eight-course meals, Indian subjects are dying by the thousands. Ba Maw, the Japanese puppet and premier of the so-called free Burma government, has broadcast that a million tons of surplus rice are lying in Burma. According to a United Press re-



port from London, the Japanese have dropped bags of rice by parachute over Bengal and Assam. Subhas Chandra Bose, who heads the Japanese "provisional government of India" is sending propagandists into the country to sabotage Indian morale and spread distrust of the United Nations war effort.

Naturally these emissaries make headway, and some Indians have been misled into aiding these activities. This will continue as long as India's patriotic leaders remain behind bars. The political crisis has merged with the food crisis into an explosive situation. All this threatens victory over Japan and Lord Louis Mountbatten cannot hope to launch a successful offensive until the scene is relieved of famine and stupid politics.

THE famine did not develop overnight. Food shortages and riots have been common for over a year now. Patriotic people's organizations warned the government against the impending crisis again and again. As far back as May 1943, the All India Peasant League (Kisan Sabha) adopted a popular program to "grow more food" to speed victory. Since then steps have been taken to implement the decision. The peasantry has in many cases enthusiastically responded to the call of its organization. In some cases even the cooperation of patriotic landlords has been enlisted to aid the peasants.

In order to combat hoarding the Peasant League has opened up its own grain shops to distribute food at fair prices. The League has appealed to the peasants to sell their grain not to the hoarders but to the Peasant League. In Bengal, the Peasant League has negotiated with the government to buy the surplus grain and distribute it to the starving.

To increase food production on a grand scale, state assistance is essential because the impoverished peasants do not own the means to prosecute the campaign successfully. For instance, the government must provide seed as well as land for cultivation. So far this aid has not been forthcoming; instead peasant leaders have been prosecuted when pressing these campaigns. Despite obstructions the Peasant League has achieved substantial success in this field. And the battle still goes on.

Contrast this magnificent work of the people's organizations with that of the bureaucracy. Fazal Haq, who recently resigned as Premier of Bengal stated that "during his absence in New Delhi the Governor of Bengal ordered the removal of certain 'surplus' stocks of rice amounting to 246,840,000 pounds from certain districts of Bengal, and advanced 2,000,000 rupees (without documents) to a certain firm to cover purchase and removal of rice." This is done while the people of Bengal are starving. This story of Mr. Haq has not been denied by the Governor. Since

then the Governor resigned his office.

Most outstanding in alleviating the famine is the work of the Communist Party of India. The Party, in cooperation with the trade unions and Peasant League, is leading the workers and peasants to increase war goods and food production. The Communists are fighting tooth and nail to combat Japanese subversive activities. The Party resolution on food production reads: "Patriotism demands of the *kisan* (peasant) that he unite to grow more food, to solve the food crisis, to feed the army that defends his land, to feed the worker who makes goods for the army and for the people." Led by the Communists, workers of fifty Bombay textile mills volunteered to work on Sundays in order to relieve severe cloth shortage. The Party has also organized hundreds of food committees in towns and countryside. Through these food committees, food is acquired for the people and many food riots and much bloodshed is averted. On these committees work representatives of all groups and parties. Congress-Moslem League unity is in this practical way forged by the Communist Party. In the city of Chittagong, mainly through the initiative of the Communists, 400 relief kitchens were opened to feed the hungry. For this, half of the funds are solicited from the well-to-do citizens and the rest obtained from the state. Some of the most outstanding Congressmen and Moslem League leaders have paid tribute to the ac-

complishments of the Communist Party in this field.

THE Communist Party, together with the trade unions, Peasant League and the student movement, has put forward a practical program to end the famine and has demanded (1) that government control of all stocks, stores in public warehouses be under the supervision of people's food committees, which would help in the control of supplies and the regulation of prices; (2) guarantees of fair prices to the peasants for their grain products; (3) that the prices should be brought within the purchasing capacity of the ordinary consumer; (4) since it is clear that only a national government can solve the food problem, the need for national unity leading to a national government become imperative.

Despite this magnificent work of the labor organizations, the all-round situation has become worse and the crisis has deepened. Immediate relief must be sent to India before millions more die. America has the means to extend this aid. Let the people's organizations urge their government to send food and press the British government to reopen negotiations with the Indian national leaders to end the political crisis. For it is only the establishment of a national government that can effectively adjust the national economy to war needs and solve the food problem.

DARSHAN S. SANGHA.



"Now, Alfred, you really didn't mean to throw that spitball, did you?"