



United Nations Development Programme

Communications Office

PRESS RELEASE

SOUTH ASIA WILL BE HIGHLIGHTED AT 2004 UNDP HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AWARDS

***Bangladesh's Fazle Hasan Abed to Receive Top Human Development Prize;
West Bengal to Receive Award for Excellence in Quality of Analysis***

NEW YORK – 15 December, 2004 -- **Fazle Hasan Abed**, founder of BRAC (formerly the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), and the State of **West Bengal, India**, will be among seven awardees of the United Nations Development Programme at a special ceremony in New York City on 15 December, 2004. Mr. Abed is being recognised for his extraordinary achievements in helping the rural poor to combat hunger, disease and literacy on a massive scale. Meanwhile, **West Bengal, India Report 2004: Land Reform and Decentralisation**, will receive the “**Excellence in Quality of Analysis**” Award. **Ashok Gupta**, Chief Secretary of West Bengal, will receive this prestigious award.

At the ceremony, Mr. Abed will be presented with the **2004 Mahbub ul Haq Award for Outstanding Contribution to Human Development**. Mr. Abed was selected by an esteemed panel of judges for his achievements in helping some of the most destitute people in one of the world's poorest countries. BRAC's work in health care has made a significant contribution to Bangladesh's achievement of the fastest decline in infant mortality rates in Asia. Its educational efforts have helped Bangladesh increase primary schooling from 55% to 85% within two decades.

Mr. Abed, a former Shell Oil executive, founded BRAC in 1972 to assist refugees returning from India after Bangladesh's Liberation War. The relief work was soon finished, but poverty and vulnerability remained. He then expanded the organisation to provide services to people affected by extreme poverty, discrimination and exploitation. BRAC, now the world's largest non-governmental organisation, is recognised internationally for these pioneering efforts.

Health Care: BRAC provides care to some 30 million people, almost a quarter of Bangladesh's population, at 90 health clinics and 2,200 prenatal clinics, as well as through the 52,000 volunteers mobilised to provide home health care assistance.

Micro credit: BRAC works with destitute women, disbursing over \$2 billion, with a 98% repayment rate. One effort that has attracted considerable attention is to provide food assistance and savings and credit services to nearly a million participants. Two-thirds of these women have “graduated” from absolute poverty to become microfinance clients, without returning to government handouts.

Education: BRAC has established over 42,000 primary schools, working increasingly in collaboration with the government of Bangladesh, with a special emphasis on girls' education and involving families in their children's school life.

Also at the Ceremony, the Human Development Report from **West Bengal** will receive the award for **Quality of Analysis**. The state, with a population of 82 million, ranks in the middle in per-

capita income in India. Yet, due to several public initiatives over the last three decades, it has life expectancies far above the national average, and infant mortality rates among the lowest in India.

This Report documents how far-reaching land reform has resulted in a dramatic expansion of agricultural output, and how members of the lowest caste in Hindu society now have their own land to till for the first time. The Report also hails a sweeping experiment with decentralisation, in which mobilisation and local elections have brought the poorest and most marginalised people into the decision making process of the nation. Meanwhile, land reform has clearly helped to unleash new productive forces, yielding a dramatic expansion in agricultural output and making West Bengal the most agriculturally dynamic state in India over the last two decades.

Still, many challenges persist: 27% of the population lives below the poverty line, and discrimination against women and girls is pervasive in jobs, education and health care. The Report lays out a broad plan for policies that promote human development for all, placing greatest emphasis on employment creation and a focused drive to increase literacy, especially among females and members of the lowest castes.

The Report was completed in May, 2004, and it is early to measure its impact. “However, given the Bengali ethos of intellectual discussion and debate,” said Professor Jayati Ghosh of Jawaharlal Nehru University, a lead author, “we expect our forthcoming seminars on the Report will be instrumental in catalysing greater public debate on human development.”

Meanwhile, two of the issues detailed in the Report -- rural landlessness and malnutrition among women and children – are to be considered for action by the Cabinet. And in order to follow up on the report, a Human Development Research and Coordination Unit has been established.

The other UNDP Human Development Awards this year are: **Latvia 2002/2003**: “Human Security;” **Zambia 2003**: “Eradication of Extreme Poverty and Hunger;” **Colombia 2003**: “The Conflict, A Way Out;” **Argentina Report 2002**: “Contributions to Human Development;” and **The Roma in Central and Eastern Europe 2002**: “Avoiding the Dependency Trap.”

Final selections were made by eminent scholars including Mahnaz Afkhami, President, Women's Learning Partnership and former Minister of State for Women's Affairs in Iran; Princess Basma Bint Talal of Jordan; Kwesi Botchwey, Executive Chairman, African Development Policy Ownership Initiative, and former Minister of Finance in Ghana; and Moisés Naím, Editor, *Foreign Policy*.

“The goal of human development is to put people back at the centre of the development process,” said **UNDP Administrator Mark Malloch Brown**, who will host the proceedings on 15 December, along with **Juju Chang**, the Emmy Award-winning correspondent for ABC News and “20/20” reporter. “It is about expanding choices for people, to enable them to enjoy long and healthy lives, knowledge, fair access to the resources and the ability to participate in the life of the community.”

UNDP is the global development network of the United Nations. UNDP advocates for change and connects countries to knowledge, experience and resources to help people build a better life. It is on the ground in 166 countries, working with people on their own solutions to global and national development challenges.

Additional information on the Awards is available at <http://hdr.undp.org/aboutus/nhdr/awards/>
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