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WAITING ON THE GOVERNMENT

by

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One and a half years after an earthquake brought its houses tumbling down, the North Yemeni village of Risaba remains a tangled heap of broken stone.

Picking his way through the rubble of collapsed buildings, a visitor comes upon a man sitting in the doorway of a makeshift stone dwelling.

Do you expect the government to help you? he asks the man.

"We don't expect help from the government," says the villager. "We place our faith in God."

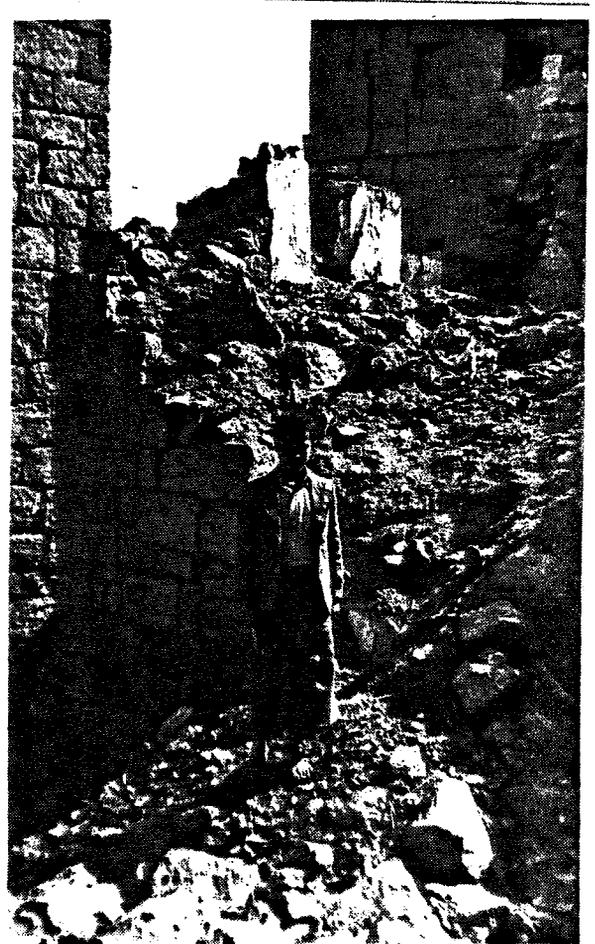
I see a lot of stones lying about here, says the visitor. Why don't you use them to build new houses?

"Because we're waiting on the government," comes the reply.

This man and his 4,500 neighbors in Risaba -- as well as 300,000 people in 1,150 other villages -- have now spent two winters living in tents and corrugated tin shacks. Their houses fell down during a December 1982 earthquake in Dhamar governorate, which is south of the capital of Sana'a.

They probably would have rebuilt their houses a long time ago, except that the government promised them new ones -- at little or no expense to themselves.

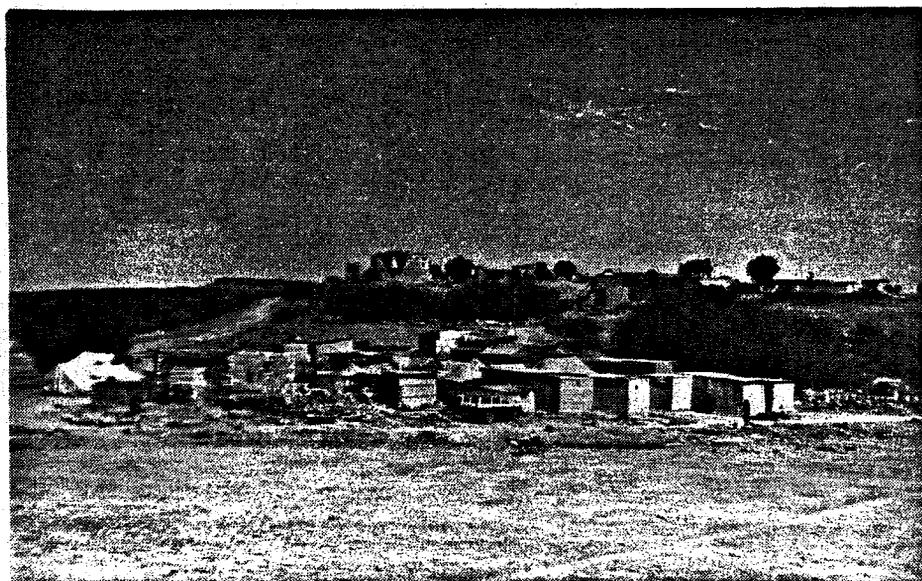
But such is the confused state of the housing



Risaba villager in front of ruined house.

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Above -- Risaba was one of the Dhamar governorate villages most damaged by the earthquake. Below -- one of the shanty towns ringing the old village where the people now live.

reconstruction effort that some observers in North Yemen wonder if these villagers will ever get their government-built homes.

It was during the country's Revolution Day ceremonies last September 26 that President Ali Abdallah Salih announced reconstruction of earthquake-damaged homes would begin on January 26.

That deadline came and went. It now appears work on the approximately \$500 million project will not begin until the



Dhamar city did not sustain as much damage as some of the outlying villages. Also, rebuilding has progressed much more rapidly there. But a few people in Dhamar still live in tents.

end of the summer.

"The villagers are very angry at the government," said a western relief worker who often visits the villages. "They haven't heard anything since Salih's television announcement."

Some knowledgeable western sources doubt much will be accomplished when the contractors do get to work.

"Many promises have been made that will not be fulfilled," said one. "These totally grandiose plans are going to flop."

Except for Dhamar city, which sits astride a major north-south highway, most of Dhamar governorate consists of isolated villages perched atop rocky outcrops. These settlements are inaccessible except by four-wheel-drive vehicles over rock-strewn dirt roads.

The villagers like to put their houses on high ground for defensive purposes. But this proved to be their undoing in December 1982.

On the 13th and 30th of that month, earthquakes registering 6 and 4 respectively on the Richter scale struck the governorate. The tremors damaged Dhamar city, 103 kilometers south of Sana'a, but caused most destruction in the outlying villages, where the houses sat on unstable escarpments.

In the 1,150 destroyed or damaged villages, about 15,000 houses were completely destroyed and another 42,000 rendered uninhabitable. Some 300,000 people found themselves without shelter.

Initial reports claimed 1,500 people killed. But



Yemeni masons learning new earthquake-resistant building techniques at Oxfam's Dhamar training center. The man at right is a Yemeni Oxfam supervisor.

most relief workers now think the death count was closer to a few hundred.

After the emergency relief effort got underway, consultants from the United Nations, World Bank, and various governments flew in to assess the damage and recommend plans for rebuilding the governorate.

The North Yemenis eventually decided on a two-pronged approach.

Several Arab governments, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Libya, have promised loans and grants to rebuild 15,000 houses in 150 completely destroyed villages. The Arab states' Gulf Cooperation Council, for example, will provide a \$43 million grant and \$145 million in loans. Although these countries will administer their own funds, the Yemenis will supervise the foreign contractors doing the work.

Aside from continual delays in getting the funds together, the reconstruction project is mired in difficulties.

American Peace Corps volunteers working with the Yemeni government say that topographical surveys and architectural plans were rushed. Much of the work was faulty. The Yemeni government does not have enough trained personnel to supervise the contractors; massive cost overruns are likely.

Turning the new homes over to the villagers will present problems. Banks did not exist in the country until the early 1960s. Mortgages are still unknown.

"The whole concept of building turnkey houses, whatever the size, is too much for this society to handle," said one western source.

The Americans and Europeans are funding a much smaller self-help program designed to assist the Yemenis in rebuilding

their own houses. The Americans have contributed \$3.6 million and the European Economic Community \$4 million to this program.

Oxfam now operates a training center in Dhamar where Yemeni masons are taught to use steel bars to reinforce the corners of their houses. This technique will make the houses more earthquake-resistant. Since September, the center has trained 350 Yemenis.

As the rebuilding of Dhamar governorate gets into full swing, the massive reconstruction effort will receive the most international attention.

But no matter how much money is finally spent, it is a safe bet that the people of Risaba will be spending a third winter in their tents and shacks.

As the man in Risaba said, "Many people have visited us, but there have been no results."

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