

FEBRUARY, 1966

DELTA MINISTRY reports...

Commission on the Delta Ministry, National Council of Churches, Greenville, Mississippi 38702



Homeless again

Greenville air base: what happened, and why

At 6:45 a.m. on January 31, about 50 persons entered the long-dormant Air Force base at Greenville, Mississippi, and occupied an empty barracks building.

Thirty hours later, after confusion, ultimatums, interviews and threats, their number now grown to more than 70, they were carried out by 150 air police. A major general was in command.

To understand their action, and the involvement of Delta Ministry in it, you must know some geography, history, and politics:

THE DELTA

The northwest corner of Mississippi, a flat flood plain 200 miles long and 65 miles wide, contains some of the richest land in the world. It is all bottom land, 35 feet deep in many places.

The land is divided into large cotton plantations and a few smaller farms; 5% of the farmers own 50% of the land.

But the people who work the land -- Negro people living rent-free in shacks that sometimes date back to slave days -- don't share in the wealth this rich land produces.

Their median annual income, according to the Agriculture department, is \$456.

Ninety per cent of their houses have neither an indoor toilet nor bathing facilities, and the chances that their babies will live to be a year old are less than half that of white babies in Mississippi.

And next year, many of them won't even be making \$456. Because of mechanization and a one-third reduction in crop allotments, the state employment service estimates that 6,500 of the 26,000 tractor drivers living with their families on plantations in the Delta will not be needed to work next year.

That's approximately 30,000 people, jobless and homeless. But the threatened displacement of so many men, women and children has hardly made a ripple in government circles.

Congressman Joseph Resnick of New York visited the state in November, and wrote the Attorney General about the mass evictions:

"In spite of the fact that this potential human disaster is well known in Mississippi, not one single state or federal employee or agency has made plans

to cope with the extremely unfortunate situation."

THE COMMODITIES

Congressman Resnick told the Attorney General about something that made the situation worse:

"These people will need temporary housing immediately to withstand a cold winter, with agricultural surplus foods delivered by federal authorities -- as state authorities will not distribute them through the normal welfare department procedures or permit other agencies to do it for them."

The Congressman had learned -- as those who live in Mississippi had long known -- that for people who are out of work six months each year, free federal surplus commodities may mean life instead of death.

Delta Ministry, early in its life, had seen how commodities were used to keep the people docile, to reward the "good" Negroes, or to encourage prospective voters to leave the state.

DM knew that only half of the 600,000 people who needed the food were getting it, and began in December of 1964, with the National Student Association, to negotiate with the Department of Agriculture to increase the availability of commodities.

Meetings went on through winter, spring, and summer, with little visible result. (Some counties with no food plan at all, fearful that Delta Ministry would be permitted to distribute surplus food, rushed into their own plans.)

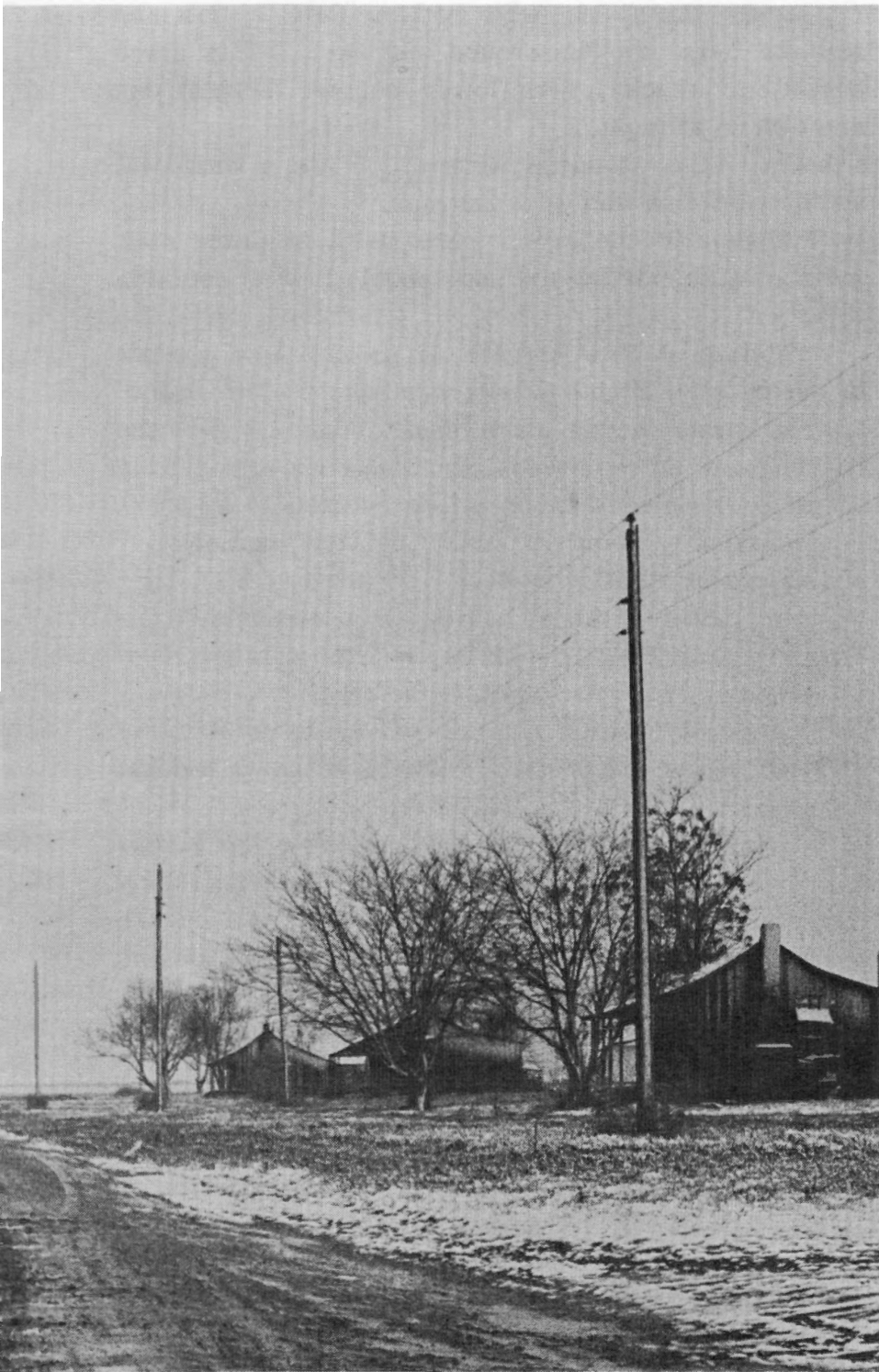
On September 15, in answer to a query from DM, Kenneth M. Birkhead, assistant to Agriculture Secretary Freeman, wrote: "The OEO assistance which will soon become available will help to get foods to an additional 500,000 needy in the state, and on a year-round basis."

But three weeks later, nothing had moved. Office of Economic Opportunity spokesman Richard Hausler denied DM charges of discrimination in distribution: "I've never heard of any charges of Negroes not getting food," he told a Washington Post reporter.

Here is a partial chronology of events in the following weeks:

November 18 -- New York Times reports the expected eviction of 6,500 families in the Delta.

November 19 -- Dr. Henry McCanna of the Na-



tional Council of Churches reminds Secretary Orville Freeman of 11 months of negotiations, and says: "We are very much concerned that now another winter is already upon us and we still see no evidence that the food will be forthcoming."

Late November -- Striking farm families from Tent City, who received commodities the previous year while working on a plantation, are told by Washington county welfare agents that they are no longer eligible.

November 23 -- State officials sign a contract with OEO and Department of Agriculture (USDA) for a six-month "Operation Help" -- the experimental commodities program promised "soon" by Mr. Birkhead in September -- and agree to implement it within 60 days. The plan includes hiring nearly 500 poor people to help give out the food.

December 9 -- Secretary Freeman assures Delta

**They make \$456 a year,
and more than 6,500 families
will lose even these humble jobs
before the winter ends**

Ministry that money will be available "soon" for Operation Help, and states: "The Mississippi welfare agency estimates that as many as 500,000 more needy persons will be added to the regular winter case load of about 300,000."

January 4 -- The Washington County welfare agent brings the proposal before the county board, pointing out that roughly 1/3 of the people in the county live on the commodities in the winter. The newspaper says: "The supervisors were generally receptive to the idea with the understanding that there would be no additional cost to the county" -- and delayed any action on the proposal.

January 15 -- The Lee County welfare agent tells supervisors that Operation Help would allow quicker response to need: "Currently there is a six-month waiting period in effect after the application is made."

January 20 -- Negro people go to the Clarke County welfare office in Quitman to ask about the new program. The agent says she doesn't know anything about it. She finally admits she does know, but doesn't intend to hire any Negroes.

January 22 -- It snows for the third time in a week; temperature drops to 18 degrees.

January 24 -- Freedom Democratic Party, the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union, and Delta Ministry issue a call to "all the poor people in the state" to come to a planning conference to figure out how to get food, jobs, and homes.

January 29 -- Seven hundred people meet at Mount Beulah, the DM conference grounds. They decide to call themselves the "Poor Peoples Conference," and they send a telegram to President Johnson, expressing disillusionment with federal programs.

January 30 -- Word comes to the meeting that two elderly Negroes have frozen to death in a Delta plantation shack. Discussion continues on ways to buy land on which to build a "New City" -- a place which provides not only jobs and shelter, but a chance for dignity and self-determination. Plans also include a way to dramatize to the nation the plight of Mississippi's poor.

THE "LIVE-IN"

Greenville Air Force Base, closed for more than a year, is 2000 acres of well-manicured lawn, run-

ways used as the municipal airport, and more than 300 carefully tended empty buildings.

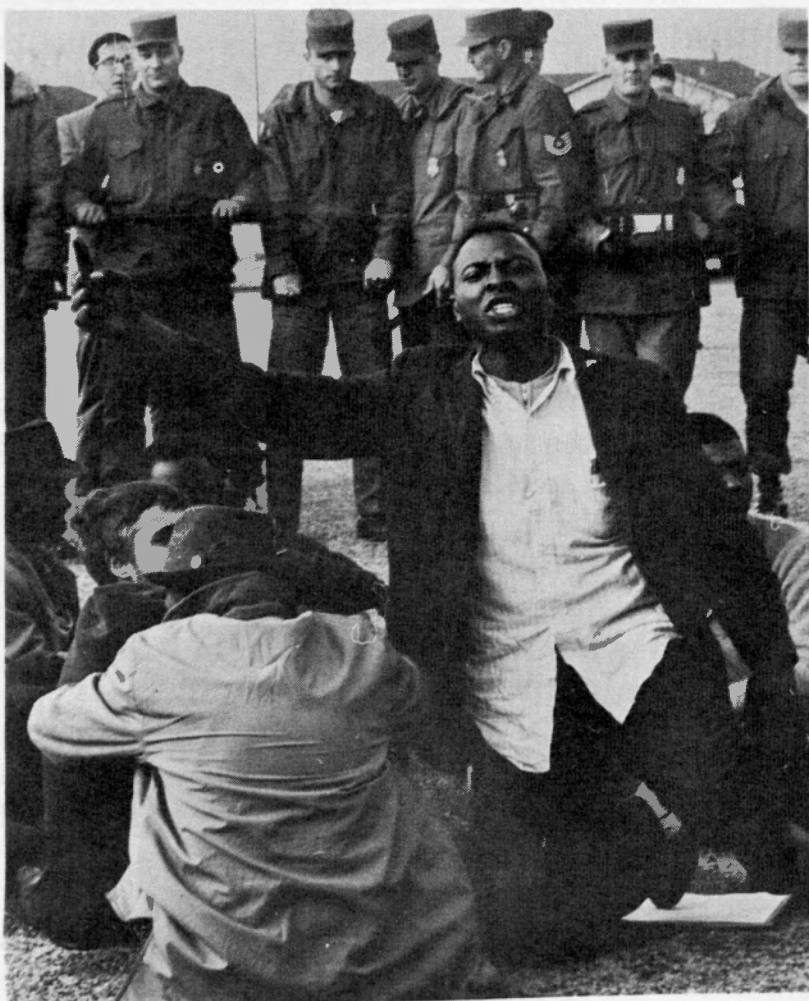
A few of the buildings will soon be used for a Manpower Training School; the rest sit empty, as they have since the day the base closed.

It was a surprised guard who waved the caravan of four cars past the entry gate at 6:45 a.m. on January 31, and then watched the people jump from the cars and run into the first building -- a former officers' club.

The action was described as a civil rights demonstration by the press, but in the minds of the people involved it was something more. It was an attempt by the poor and dispossessed people to make use of living facilities sitting empty.

A typical "invader" was Mrs. Viola Wall, from Wall, Miss. She later told a reporter she had survived the winter so far only by "cutting and selling firewood like a man."

**"That can't be your reason,"
said Isaac Foster,
"because all over Mississippi
our homes don't have any water..."**



James Hartfield, who had neither a job nor welfare help, looked around and said, "This place beats our shack in Sunflower county; there it can snow on us at night."

Mrs. Ella Williams agreed: "It's a whole lot warmer here, a whole lot warmer."

Included in the group were Delta Ministry staff members, supporting the poor people in their decision to act.

Officials of FDP and MFLU, as well as a number of young civil rights workers, chose to join in too.

The group moved mattresses and quilts into the building, set up two stoves, and hung out a sign, "This is our home; please knock before entering."

Meanwhile, local officials showed considerable confusion about what to do -- or not to do. Nobody was stopped because no one knew who should do the stopping; the base is owned by the federal government but sections of it are leased to the city.

The county sheriff and the Greenville police chief soon withdrew their men, claiming it was a federal problem.

All day long people came through the gates, bringing food, stoves, blankets, and mattresses. Many came to stay, including some who had heard about the action over the radio. When the gates were locked, they went over or under the fence.

Inside the building, the people were organizing for a long stay. Custodian, food, clean-up and supply committees were formed, and Isaac Foster of Strike City, Mrs. Unita Blackwell of Issaquena county, and Mrs. Ida Mae Lawrence of Bolivar county were elected as co-chairmen of the group.

At midnight, after depleting the boxes of sandwiches and canned goods brought out from Greenville, the group turned out their kerosene lanterns and settled down for the night.

And while they slept, 150 air police were flown in from bases as far away as Denver.

THE EVICTION

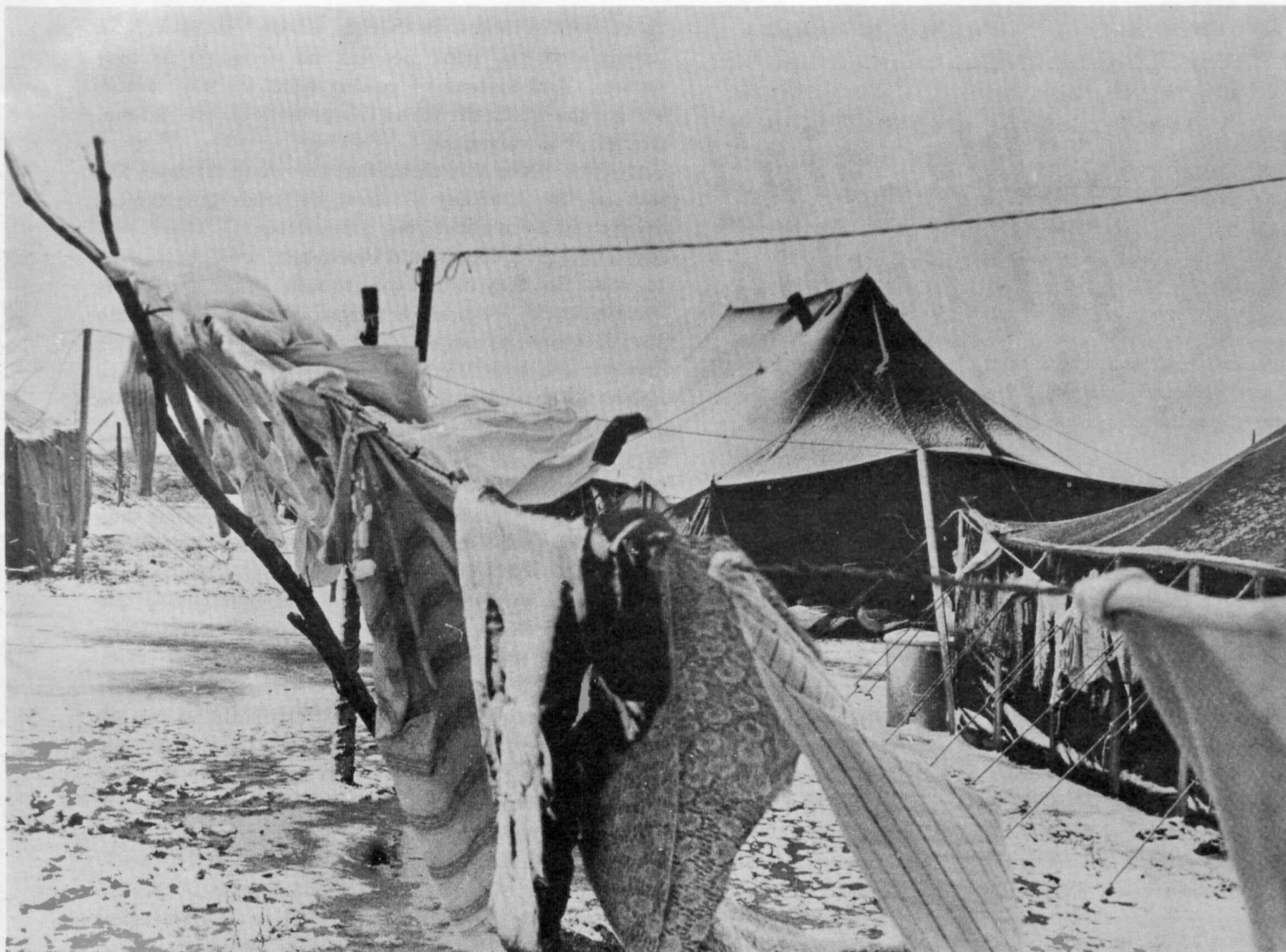
Shortly after 11 a.m. Tuesday morning the troops lined up outside the barracks. Major General R. W. Puryear spoke to the group in what many felt to be a patronizing manner, urging them to leave voluntarily.

"You have become a source of danger to government property," he said, "and -- I might add -- to yourselves."

He pointed out that the building, without proper sanitation or water, was a fire and health hazard.

"This can't be your reason for wanting us out," said Isaac Foster, "because all over Mississippi homes don't have water or fire protection."

Gen. Puryear said Secretary of Agriculture Freeman realized that Operation Help had been delayed in the state and would move to speed up the program. He promised that the Justice and Agriculture depart-



Strike City

ments would hear the group's grievances, and gave them 20 minutes within which to come out voluntarily.

The group, many of whom had filed "pieces of paper" with various federal agencies over the last three years without apparent result, voted to stay.

The twenty minutes ended with a shower of glass on the room's occupants as an airman shattered the small window in a door and reached through to unlock it.

Then the air police began carrying men, women and little children out of the building.

The group walked down the muddy side of the highway five miles back to town, thirty hours after they had arrived.

THE FUTURE

The people of Strike City, near Tribbett, had listened to the broadcasts from the air base, and had sent food out to the squatters. When the troops moved in, the Strike City residents -- who themselves were evicted last May when they asked their planta-

tion boss for better pay -- made their five acres available as a temporary refuge.

The air base "veterans" were bedded down that night in the new community center built for Strike City during Christmas vacation by students from the University of Pennsylvania.

And the next day, more homeless plantation people began arriving.

By the time you read this, they will have moved out of the community center and the large circus-type tent which Delta Ministry provided for the growing numbers of people.

They will have moved to an area of farm land large enough to hold them -- and the many more who want to join them.

They will have moved, to a place where they can build together -- with a helpful push from friends in the North -- the kind of town where every man counts, and has a say in his own destiny.

They will have moved, hopefully, for the last time.

"We ain't got nothin' but needs"

Mr. Foster: The people are going to set up at Tent City out at Tribbett and work on getting poor peoples to come and build a new city. Because of the fact that we was refused by the federal government and evicted, it's important that we start planning our own government.

Mrs. Blackwell: I feel that the federal government have proven that it don't care about poor people. Everything that we have asked for through these years has been handed down on paper. It's never been a reality.

We the poor people of Mississippi is tired. We're tired of it so we're going to build for ourselves, because we don't have a government that represents us.

Mrs. Lawrence: See, you can only accept poor peoples by being poor and really know what being poor is like. And all this stuff about poverty programs and federal funds, that's out for poor peoples.

We were looked upon as just a civil rights demonstration. But really we were there demanding and waiting and asking that these things be brought

there to fill some desperate needs. And we was asking that the poor peoples be accepted as they stood. And instead of getting what we was asking, we got the whole air force troopers in on us. To me, that's our government.

Reporter: Does this mean that you won't sit down and talk to the Attorney General or other government representatives about your grievances?

Mr. Foster: If they would like to talk, we'll be willing to talk. But they didn't want to talk. They sent some Mississippian -- chief or sergeant or something. He said give me the names of people who need relocation and I'll see what can be done about it. How can we leave the base when peoples don't have a house to stay in?

Mrs. Lawrence: The base is more thought of than the poor peoples was. The buildings weren't doing anything but just sitting there. The building was more respectable than poor hungry peoples with nothing and nowhere to go. If the peoples was satisfied and willing to sit there to find ways for themselves, the government should have let them stay there. The building was more important than poor folks.

Mr. Foster: The only reason that Colonel Jones could give for eviction was that the building that we was in didn't have running water and didn't have any type of fire protection. And see I know that the federal government can't tell me that was the reason we was put out, because all over Mississippi houses don't have running water or fire protection.

Rev. Thomas: It was cruel and inhuman of Orville Freeman and Nicholas Katzenbach to send the kind of message to us at the air base they sent today. They said nothing to us that hasn't been said for months and years. We were tired of waiting around for these people to live up to their words.

Reporter: Mr. Thomas, could you go a little more into Operation HELP?

Rev. Thomas: Over a year ago the Delta Ministry, in cooperation with the National Students Association, pointed out the need for a commodity program for Mississippi poor people. And we gave as an example of what local people could do, what was happening in Forrest County, where the people had set up their own distribution system for contributed food and clothing. It works very well.

We offered to make Forrest County a trial case for food distribution if the Department would release the commodities to us.

Instead, the Department of Agriculture notified the state Department of Welfare that volunteer groups were willing and able to distribute commodities in Forrest County. In the face of that kind of possibility, the county Board of Supervisors voted for the first time in years and years to participate in a commodity program. Immediately, the Department

This is an edited transcription of a press conference held in the Greenville office of the Delta Ministry Tuesday evening, February 1, 1966. The participants include the three spokesmen for the over 70 poor Negroes who occupied the barracks of the Greenville Air Force Base. They were Mr. Isaac Foster of Tribbett, a leader in last spring's strike of plantation workers; Mrs. Urita Blackwell of Mayersville, a member of the Freedom Democratic Party executive committee; Mrs. Ida Mae Lawrence of Rosedale, chairman of her Mississippi Freedom Labor Union local; and Rev. Arthur Thomas of Greenville, director of the Delta Ministry of the National Council of Churches.

of Agriculture found it necessary to send an investigator in there to investigate charges of discrimination in that program.

We then made the same offer in regard to Madison County. Again Washington called the state welfare people, who notified the county Board of Supervisors. They came up with a Food Stamp program. Of course poor people can't afford to be in a food stamp program because it costs money and they don't have any income.

We then offered to set up distribution in any county that didn't have a program. In the face of this possibility the state Welfare Department came up with the proposal called Operation HELP -- and keep in mind this was in August. All over the state people had gone without food through the winter while the welfare department and the Agriculture Department played politics with each other.

Under this plan, the Welfare Department will get 24 million dollars worth of surplus commodities from the Department of Agriculture and 1.6 million dollars from the Office of Economic Opportunity to distribute the food to 500,000 people for six months.

In view of the criticism of the program -- which is based on the untenable assumption that welfare agencies and county boards of supervisors will act in a nondiscriminatory manner -- OEO put certain conditions on the grant: one, that a biracial committee supervise the program and, two, that hiring and distribution be done on a nondiscriminatory basis.

Our information has it that no such committee has been set up, although the proposal was submitted in August and granted in November. Dr. Aaron Henry, head of the state NAACP, was asked to nominate the Negroes for the committee. Why weren't poor people asked to nominate people?

In regard to the second condition, the food was supposed to be ready for distribution by January 23. When that day came we could not find one poor person employed in the program and no food being given out. And now it's February.

Mrs. Lawrence: I'd like to add to that. To live, we got to go out and chop cotton for \$3 a day, maybe two or three days a week. At the end of cotton picking, we gets the same for picking the scrap the machines leave. Then in November when they start qualifying you for the commodities, they say you got to find out how many people you worked for and get them to sign for you as being poor. If they don't feel like signing, like maybe they don't like you for civil rights activities, you don't get commodities. But you still poor, whether the white boss says so or not.

Mrs. Blackwell: See, if you belong to any civil rights group or participate, they tell you you can't get a job with the poverty program, because that's political

"People had gone without food through the winter while the welfare department and USDA played politics"

and you know, you can't have that. And that's what's happening with the poverty program: it's political -- that's the reason it's not doing anything for the poor.

Reporter: Mr. Thomas, why do you think the federal government is afraid to let poor Negroes go ahead and run the program?

Rev. Thomas: I could try to avoid that question and say that it is their problem. These people have the problem of not being fed. I will not avoid it and say nobody is unaware of the power of Congressman Whitten in the House Subcommittee on Agriculture. Nobody is unaware of the critical power of John Stennis in the Senate and its Finance Appropriations Committee. And those are the kinds of people who are supposed to represent the poor people in Congress.

Reporter: Are you saying that the people who run the poverty programs are kowtowing to the white power structure from here?

Rev. Thomas: That's what I'm saying. The poverty program and the Department of Agriculture.

Also, poor people in this state last year organized themselves into a Headstart program through the Child Development Group of Mississippi. Shriver and others said it was one of the best Headstarts anywhere in the country. In September they were told they would be funded in October; in October the money was coming in November; in November the money was coming in December and so on and so on each month. Over 1100 local Mississippi poor people who have been promised money have been cheated by OEO.

Mrs. Lawrence: You know, we ain't dumb, even if we are poor. We need jobs. We need food. We need houses. But even with the poverty program we ain't got nothin but needs. That's why we was pulled off that building that wasn't being used for anything. We is ignored by the government. The thing about property upset them, but the thing about poor people don't. So there's no way out but to begin your own beginning, whatever way you can. So far as I'm concerned, that's all I got to say about the past. We're beginning a new future.

PLEASE HELP

Many displaced families, including those who sought shelter at the air base, are staying temporarily at Strike City. More are arriving every day.

SEND MONEY NOW for food, tents and land to:

POOR PEOPLES FUND, DELTA MINISTRY, GREENVILLE, MISS.



Photos on pages 1, 4,
and 8 by Mary Varela

Operation Greenville: A Tragic 'Victory'

"'Twas a famous victory" the Air Force won against the hundred civil rights squatters in the deactivated barracks in Greenville, Miss. Or was it?

One major general, three colonels; two lieutenant colonels and two majors in command of 140 air policemen flown in from air bases all over the country carried through the eviction with the precision and dispatch of a long-studied War College war plan. There were no serious casualties . . . except the injury inflicted on the nation.

The interests of the U.S. would have been far better served had someone in authority paid more attention to the plight of the suffering souls who had been obliged to vacate plantation shacks. Surely housing for the cold and homeless and food for the hungry would have been a far more impressive response than this degrading display of strategic air power.

The spectacle of so much brass leading this assault on the defenseless was peculiarly grotesque. Do generals and colonels have no more urgent business?