

Paying high, knowing little why  
Climate havoc looms, but mitigation eludes Bangladesh

Khawaza Main Uddin

Four years ago, Rehana Begum and her husband Tayeb Ali, after living in their ancestral village for three decades, moved to a completely unknown Dhaka city. When they lost their home at Betua of Charfassion in Bhola due to erosion of river Meghna at its estuary, they failed to find any shelter in the coastal hamlet. They ended up in a slum in Shekhertek in the capital.

“I wish to visit my birthplace but there is no place to stay there. We don’t know where our co-villagers are staying now,” she said at her rented slum house. The elderly couple live on earnings from hard labour by their children, who are not, however, covered by official social safety net in case of job-loss or income erosion.

Rehana’s neighbour Kamala, a 55-year-old widow, could not narrate her story as she burst into tears. A young mother Salma went on saying that Kamala had none to look after her after her son deserted her. “If she herself can earn, she eats; otherwise she has to starve,” added Salma, wife of a rickshawpuller. “Silently we have become refugees in our motherland. We have no land, no permanent shelter,” she said, but could not go into detail why all of them had to embrace a ‘rootless’ life in the mega-city of 15 million population. Some people get back their lands, devoured by rivers in the upstream, in course of time but these families from Bhola have no hope to see a ‘new found land’ on the seabed.

Unknown to many so far, the wrath of nature is manifesting itself in various forms, inflicting blows to the life and livelihoods of people all over Bangladesh – an ominous sign of climate change impacts on the deltaic land.

The unusually hot summer in the country this year is seemingly scorching the living atmosphere. The recent drought caused widespread disease to banana trees in the north, a delayed winter damaged mustard plants in the Brahmaputra basin and the alarming fall in underground water level hampered rice farming in north-western Barind Tract, finds an investigation by this author exploring evidence of the global warming effects.

Yet another cyclone Aila of late has left a trail of devastation in its wake along the coastal belt. Saline intrusion into south-western rivers is disturbing biodiversity of Sunderban, the world's largest mangrove forest and a heritage site. And the encroaching Bay of Bengal is downsizing offshore island of Kutubdia in Cox's Bazar.

Raj Kumar, a 30-year-old fisherman of Jelepara of Ali Akbar Deil in Kutubdia, has apparently resigned to his fate. With his wife and son, he wants to stay there although many residents have already migrated. "My parents told us the story of how a large island had been shrinking over decades leaving many homeless. We are living with uncertainty," he observed at his Aila-damaged home in the first week of June 2009.

"Eighty per cent people here are very poor. It is difficult to do business because of dwindling purchasing power of consumers," said Azizul Huq, a 40-year-old grocer, in Toblar Char village. He, too, lost his home, two kilometres away from his present house, to erosion.

Today, Kutubdia has been shrunk to about 30-square-kilometre island from its size of 250 square kilometres a century back. Its population density stands at 4,000 per square kilometre, as against national average of 1,100 people in each sq km.

At least 30 million people in coastal Bangladesh are living under visible threats of climate change-induced disasters. This country, located between the Bay of Bengal and the Himalayas, will lose 17 per cent of its land by 2050 because of rising sea levels due to global warming, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has predicted, describing Bangladesh as one of the most climate vulnerable countries in the world.

#### ADAPTATION BY VICTIMS THEMSELVES

Abdul Latif Sana, a mowali [honey collector] of Sunderban, aged about 50 years, from Bagali village in Koyra, Khulna, has to accept the reality of his declining income. "When I go there on a 15-day tour, I get 30 kilograms of honey maximum whereas earlier I used to collect honey up to 80 kg during a tour of Sunderban," he described his experience. Asked why he saw scarcity of honey, Sana blamed depleting flora and frequent storms affecting fauna for the phenomenon but could not say what climate change was all about.

Mazid Sarkar, a bawali [woodcutter] of Harinagar, Koyra, in his late 50s, had somehow adapted to the changing situation. “Trees like golpata which abounded here in my boyhood are not easily available now. But I have to survive ...,” he said hinting he often felled trees which he knew was not fair. The forest department’s ranger in Kotka, Bagerhat, Abdur Razzak Akhand, cited another example of ecological degradation saying that salinity has also made difficult the life of ‘the unique’ Royal Bengal tigers in the Sunderban.

Away in Rajshahi, Muntaj Ali of Harin Bishka village in Gadagari upazila, could not cultivate almost 50 per cent of his five acres of land for lack of irrigation facilities. “Again water-logging during the rainy season affects our cultivation,” he informed this author during a field trip in late April. Another farmer, Shafiqul Islam of Dharampur, grew Boro [dry season] rice and vegetables on three and a half acres but faced ‘crop loss by at least one-fourth’. Rajshahi is a major concentration of poor masses.

Experts have attributed the lean season water crisis in Barind Tract, an arid topography of red earth, largely to drying up of the Ganges and its tributaries due to upstream withdrawal of waters by India and melting of Himalayan glaciers. According to a World Bank information note, the ecosystems of Ganges-dependent areas altogether accommodate 40 million people in Bangladesh alone.

Imdadul Huq, Nurul Huq and some other farmers of Mitthapukur, Rangpur, have changed crop pattern after many banana trees had perished in the area. In Dhaka where banana are supplied from areas where it grows, small trader Noor Alam said supply of the fruit had been scarce in recent times. Dhaka has also to experience influx of massive unemployed labourers who are forced to leave homes in the north to escape seasonal famine-like situation called monga.

Again, in Sudampara village of Nagarpur, Tangail, pest attacks and plant diseases caused massive damage to mustard plants, grown in winter. “We don’t really understand why it happened. Usually, cultivation of this crop is safer than some others,” Abdus Sattar told this author in December 2008, showing his field of 33 decimals where there were hardly any plants left standing. Farmers like Sattar in their area draw some cash by selling surplus mustard oil seed to invest the money in costly cultivation of rice, the staple food.

“Absence or delay of winter hampers fruiting of the winter crops such as mustard. Warm weather causes pest attacks and a disease called alternaria leaf blight, even resulting in sterility,” explained MG Neogi, an agriculturist at Rangpur-Danajpur Rural Service.

## POLICY DISCREPANCY & GLOBAL NEGLECT COINCIDE

The government has over the past 35 years invested more than \$10 billion to lessen the country’s vulnerability to natural disasters but losses in calamities are still high despite people’s resilience.

“The combination of frequent natural disasters, high population density, poor infrastructure and low resilience to economic shocks, makes Bangladesh especially vulnerable to climatic risks,” acknowledged the draft Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan, which has not yet been finalised.

Moreover, the government has not been able to utilise a single taka from the Tk 300-crore climate change fund earmarked in the outgoing fiscal year’s budget.

The draft action plan has estimated urgent investment requirement of \$5 billion in the first five years to cope with changing circumstances whereas only about \$100 million has been pledged in external assistance so far for operating the proposed Multi-Donor Trust Fund.

“The climate change impacts exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. Addressing current climatic risks is a suitable operational entry point to launch climate change adaptation,” recommended Ad Spijkers, country representative of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, laying emphasis on sustainable agricultural development alongside other measures.

Agriculture, considered the most critical sector for Bangladesh, is yet to be put on the agenda of the international climate change negotiations leading up to the 15th Conference of Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in Copenhagen in December 2009. If it is not included, Washington-based International Food Policy Research Institute warned, “Resulting climate change policies could threaten poor farming communities and smallholders in many developing countries.”

Asked if ‘Bangladesh is ready’, the state minister for environment, Mustafizur Rahman, said, “It should not be a question of Bangladesh’s readiness. Are those who created this problem for Bangladesh ready to compensate?” He

mentioned that Dhaka would launch a campaign seeking international assistance for investments in both adaptation and mitigation projects.

However, the draft of a UN conference scheduled to be held in New York in late June recognised the vulnerability and probable forced migration. “An Environmental Refugees Programme should be established for environmental refugees affected by climate change and rising sea levels. They should receive humanitarian and development support from all relevant United Nations agencies. Financing should be derived from the Carbon Tax,” reads the draft.

For Bangladesh, the climate change scenario is bleaker as a recent report prepared by German Advisory Council on Global Change forecasts: “The instability in the east of the subcontinent is likely to increase and relationships between the countries [Bangladesh and India] will come under additional strain.” In 2020, the report said, Bangladesh could be one of the countries in which the “effects of anthropogenically-induced climate change, floods, drought and coastal erosion are already very clearly visible.”

COAST, a development organisation, demanded that the UN should frame a charter on climate change refugees in the light of Geneva Convention on refugees to rehabilitate the newly affected people. One in every five people in Bangladesh is at risk of being such refugee, COAST’s executive director Rezaul Karim Chowdhury insisted that the issue of free movement of natural persons being negotiated in the World Trade Organisation forum “must be a part of climate change mitigation.”

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