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‘The worst flood in the region in the last 122 years’

Shadhan Kumar Das on the devastating impacts of the historical floods in Bangladesh — and how the country can adapt to climate change

While Bangladesh is used to severe downpours during the monsoon season, the floods that have hit the north of the country have been the most extreme in more than a century. Can you walk us through what exactly happened?

Flooding is normal during the monsoon season in Bangladesh. Each year, the northwestern part of the country experiences floods. But 2022 was unprecedented. Two floods within a month in the region of Sylhet have caused severe suffering for more than 7.2 million people. Their houses, paddy fields, fish ponds, and livestock washed away. Sylhet city and district and the neighbouring Sunamganj and Netrokona districts have been most affected. As of today, nearly 70 people have died in different parts of the country. The neighbouring regions in India were also severely affected.

The first round of flooding occurred on 10 May 2022. It was a massive and unprecedented pre-monsoon flood. When flood waters began to recede on 22 May, a second round of flooding occurred on 16 June because of heavy rains in the upstream Indian region of Assam and Meghalaya. The runoff rainwater flowed down the Himalayan hills into Bangladesh’s northeastern plains. With 2.5 metres above normal tidal surge, it was the highest amount of rain recorded in the region in the last 122 years. It is estimated that more than 90 per cent of the northeastern regional was inundated.

Why was this flood so severe compared to previous ones?

According to the World Weather Attribution, a network of scientists tracing the impacts of climate change, global warming has made extreme rainfall more common and more intense across most of the world. It is predicted that climate change, together with urbanisation

and housing patterns, will further aggravate the risks of flooding in the coming years.

In addition, Bangladeshi environmentalists say that the flood was worse because the high volume of rainfall has remained stuck in the Haor region of Sylhet and Netrokona in northeastern Bangladesh. Human intervention has destroyed the 124km passage for discharging stormwater from Cherrapunji in India to Bhairab in Bangladesh. The huge amount of silt brought along by the downpours flows down not only the tributaries and distributaries, but also the flood plains. The recent development of a road network — the 'All Weather Road', connecting the three Haor regions Itna, Mithamoin, and Ashtagram — has blocked the drainage passage.

Experts have also spoken about poor waste management as another reason for severe flooding. Municipal waste generated in Sunamganj and Sylhet are all dumped in the Surma river, blocking the discharge system of the floodwater in the cities.

How does the international response to the disaster look like?

Right now, the situation in the northwestern region of Bangladesh is improving. Flood water is receding, and people are returning home from their shelters. But they suffered for quite a long time – they were not only captured in the floodwater but are still encountering post-flood emergencies in terms of rehabilitation, health, and employment.

International development partners and aid agencies have come forward to support this humanitarian cause. Within a very short time, they have allocated funds and provided daily essentials to feed flood victims. For instance, the European Union has allocated €2 million to provide emergency humanitarian assistance to families affected by the flash floods. The EU funding has supported the Bangladesh Red Cross Society in delivering immediate assistance, providing drinking water, emergency sanitation, health services, hygiene parcels, and cash assistance in the Sylhet and Sunamganj districts. Moreover, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies has launched an emergency appeal of $7.8 million to support the Bangladesh Red Crescent to scale up and expand the reach of its localised response and recovery efforts.

Other than those, international and donor-funded national development agencies including UNICEF have been working around the clock to provide relief and rehabilitate the flood victims. The total amount of international support in cash and kind has yet to be calculated, but their contribution has helped the government to enhanced its relief and rehabilitation works.

However, most likely the amount of humanitarian aid from rich countries is less than expected and needed because the economies of many developed countries are facing challenges from the fallout of the recent Russia-Ukraine war, abrupt global inflation including rising food prices, and the negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The impression remains that there are too many crises to solve, too many catastrophes to be tackled.

These severe floods are a result of climate change. So it's crucial that action is taken sooner rather than later and before flooding becomes even more severe in the years to come.

What does the country need to rebuild the northeastern region?

First and foremost, the government has to prioritise the rehabilitation works as well as infrastructural and environmental recovery works to rebuild the northeastern region of Bangladesh. It has to set a short-term and a long-term agenda while developing policies and implementing development projects.

However, there is lack of trust between the two major political parties. They have the support of most of the people in Bangladesh to implement their agenda. But they don't work together. The oppositional Bangladesh Nationalist Party's Secretary-General said that 'the government is busy with a festival during this difficult time. They are so busy with the inauguration of the Padma Bridge that they have no time to look at the welfare of people and public sufferings.' At the same time, the ruling Awami League's party leaders have heavily criticised the BNP leaders for their lacklustre response to support the flood victims. Thus, the relief and rehabilitation work suffers. If they work together during this national emergency, it would help the country as well as the people living in the flood areas.

The government has to find out a sustainable and permanent solution to the flash floods in the Haor region. An expert group comprising environmentalists, climate change expert, engineers, political leaders, bureaucrats, and journalists has to be formed to investigate the underlying reasons for such devastating flash floods. The recommendations of such a committee have to be implemented in full.

River dredging has to be made a priority task. In addition, unplanned embankment and link roads have to be stopped because human intervention to the ecological and natural system has a severe negative impact. Long-term, the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100 – the country's far-reaching plan to spend 2.5 per cent of GDP to secure the future of water resources and mitigate the likely effects of climate change and natural disasters – needs to be implement if the Haor areas are to be

preserved.

Since Bangladesh is one of the most climate vulnerable countries in the world, how can the country prepare for a future with an even more unstable climate? What needs to be done in terms of infrastructure and environmental management to avert future catastrophes?

Bangladesh is prone to natural calamities including floods, cyclones, and droughts. A World Bank report published earlier this month said that salinity, rising sea levels, and other adverse climate impacts could displace as many as 13.3 million people in the coastal areas of Bangladesh by 2050. According to the International Institute for Environment and Development, families in rural Bangladesh spend as much as $2bn a year to prevent climate-related disasters or repairing damages — twelve times the amount the country receives in aid to mitigate climate change effects. Thus, the country has to prepare for a future with an even more unstable climate.

Experts suggest to adopt indigenous knowledge to protect the lives and properties of flooding victims. One environmental expert said that 'we have to change and update the housing pattern in the disaster-prone regions. And, to build physical infrastructures in a way so that those can protect lives and property, including cyclones in coastal regions, floods in plain land, and landslides in hilly areas.'

The government has a plan for dredging rivers, a very costly endeavour. At the same time, the government has to reclaim grabbed rivers and wetlands and update the drainage system in the cities.

The interview was conducted by Valentina Berndt.



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