

Floods threaten 20 million lives in Bangladesh

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15 September 1998

Over the last two months, Bangladesh has been hit by the worst flooding in its 27-year history. Tens of millions of people have been made homeless. Around 70 percent of the country and two-thirds of the capital Dhaka have been inundated.

Last week soldiers, police and residents desperately battled to plug more than 100 breaches in the major Dhaka-Narayanganj-Demra dyke protecting the fringes of the capital, where more than one million people live. If it had collapsed, water levels in Dhaka would have risen by up to 2.5 metres in eight hours.

Michael Elmquist from the UN Disaster Assistance underscored the immense scale of the disaster last week. He warned that between 10 and 20 million Bangladeshis faced death from disease and starvation without a massive influx of international aid. If floodwaters remained for five more days, about 10 million would be at risk, and should waters not recede in 20 days, 20 million people may not survive, he said.

UN Resident Coordinator in Dhaka, David Lockwood, said: 'In both food and health, the real crisis is still to come. The crunch will come in three to four months time, and both the government and the international community will have to keep an eye on the food situation in order to avert a famine.'

The International Red Cross stated that it was already fighting a losing battle to get relief supplies and safe drinking water to stricken villages across the country.

Yet the fact that millions of Bangladeshis could perish in the next weeks and months has received scant attention in the international media and from governments in the major industrialised countries. An obvious double standard applies. One only has to consider for a moment what the response would be if a calamity threatening 20 million people was about to take place in Western Europe or Northern America.

Already the floods have killed more than 950 people and left between 30 and 40 million homeless out of a

total population of 124 million. Hospitals throughout the country report 175,000 cases of serious diarrhea--a disease that can be fatal, particularly to young children, unless treated. At least 140 people have died already after eating rotten food or drinking contaminated water.

The Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief reported on September 7 that more than 430,000 houses, 660,000 acres of crops and 11,000 kilometres of roads have been damaged so far. Millions of people are living in precarious conditions, cut off by floodwaters, without food, clean water or medicines. Only 900 flood shelters are available to house 350,000 people and even these provide limited protection.

One relief worker described the desperate conditions in Dhaka. 'On some rooftops in the flooded eastern suburbs of the capital you will often see parents tie up their small children with ropes or chains so they do not slip into the floodwater and drown. This happens especially when the child's father and mother are both away seeking relief goods, leaving their babies in the care of their minor brothers and sisters.'

The Bangladeshi government has made an urgent appeal for \$US889 million in international emergency aid. At this stage only \$102 million, or around \$3 per homeless person, has been pledged and much less has actually arrived in the country.

Heavy monsoonal rains caused major rivers--the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Megna--to rise simultaneously in early September, eroding protective embankments and flooding vast areas of the country. These devastating impact of the floods are not simply the result of 'natural causes,' however, but decades of neglect and the lack of adequate flood prevention.

Bangladesh is well known as one of the most flood-prone countries in the world. Fifty-four rivers flow into the country, which has the largest system of deltas and flat lands in the world. Virtually every year areas of the country are hit by floods as the melting of the snows in

the Himalayas combines with monsoonal rains and cyclones, and unusual tides in the Bay of Bengal.

According to some scientists, deforestation and mountainside cultivation in the Himalayas has increased the amount of sediment carried by the rivers to three billion tonnes annually, raising the rivers beds and increasing the likelihood of flooding.

In 1988, the country was ravished by one of its worst monsoon floods. A quarter of the population was made homeless, an estimated 2,000 people died and more than 160,000 were affected by water-borne diseases, snake bites and other ills.

In 1991, a cyclone and accompanying storm surge killed an estimated 139,000 people and left another 10 million homeless. The worst affected were some of the most impoverished Bangladeshis who live on the *char* or shifting mudflats in the river delta near the Bay of Bengal. Most of these temporary islands are little more than a foot or so above the water and disappear within a decade.

Yet despite the obvious need for comprehensive flood control and emergency measures, limited piecemeal steps have been taken. Some embankments have been built to protect major cities and to expand agricultural areas. But for tens of millions of Bangladeshis, there is little protection from the ravages of floods and storms.

Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries in the world. Eighty percent of the population is rural and 60 percent is landless. Per capita income in the early 1990s was just \$200 a year. Only 30 percent of men and 19 percent of women are literate, and a staggering 60 percent of children suffer from malnourishment. The country is dependent on international aid for flood relief as well as other emergencies.

After the 1988 floods, the government, the World Bank and other international agencies launched a Flood Action Plan involving 26 study proposals and pilot projects at a cost of \$150 million. But what began as a project with projected spending of \$10-15 billion from major donors was scaled down to \$5 billion and then cut back even further.

The original French plan to build 3,500 kilometres of embankments up to 7.4 metres high, to 'tame the waters of Bangladesh like those of the Netherlands,' was abandoned. Critics of the Flood Action Plan pointed to the many engineering, ecological and social complexities involved in building large embankments

to prevent flooding, including the constant shifting of the river courses, the dependence of farmers on the flooding, the risk to downstream populations and the impact on fisheries. In the end, little has been done and once again the masses of Bangladesh have suffered the consequences.

Clearly a comprehensive plan to manage the rivers systems of the Indian sub-continent presents complex problems. But these are not beyond the bounds of human ingenuity. The real difficulties lie in the lack of capital to tackle works necessary to put an end to such disasters. The limited international aid to countries such as Bangladesh is dwarfed by the money flowing out to international banks and major corporations in the form of loan repayments and repatriated profits.

See Also:

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[21 August 1998]



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