

Hundreds of thousands hit by Bangladesh floods

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Serious flooding, although not as severe as in 1998, has swept through Bangladesh over the last three and a half months affecting hundreds of thousands of people throughout the country.

In the first week of October more than 700,000 people were hit by acute flooding. In Rayshani district alone, 480,000 people were seriously affected when thousands of homes—most of them wattle and daub huts—were completely or partially damaged by floodwaters and some 10,000 hectares of cultivated land completely submerged and destroyed.

According to the *Bangladesh News Forum*, many of those made homeless by the flooding and unable to find shelter in government offices, schools or under roads and bridges were sleeping in the open with no food. Other northern districts inundated by the rising floodwaters include Joypurhat, Naogaon, and Chapainawabganj. Bangladesh newspapers reported that tens of thousands of people, mindful of last year's devastating floods abandoned their rudimentary shelters for the “safer” highlands during this year's monsoon season.

In early September, ten people, including six children, were killed, 5,332 houses destroyed, and 50,000 families hit by flooding in Manjkganj district. According to official statistics more than 10,325 hectares of crop were damaged and 350 fish projects obliterated. In July, three people were killed and thousands rendered homeless when the Gumit River breached an embankment.

As usual the government voiced its “concerns,” dispatched some food items and clothing to the victims and closed another chapter of the annual flooding season in Bangladesh.

Last year's monsoon season produced the worst flooding in Bangladesh's 27-year history with 70

percent of the country submerged in floodwaters, and one million hectares of cropland destroyed. Between 30 to 40 million of the population of 126 million were affected. Floodwaters inundated most of the country for more than two months, destroying schools, government offices, countless homes and bringing diseases like diarrhea and hepatitis. Over 1,000 people were killed and millions left homeless without food or shelter.

Bangladesh is a low-lying delta region in the north-east of the Indian sub-continent and more than 200 rivers, including the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna, pass through the country. According to the United Nation's *Human Development Report—1999*, an average of 10,928 are killed in Bangladesh by so-called natural disasters each year. The flood disasters are not natural but caused by deforestation in the Himalayas and cultivation methods, in Bangladesh and those countries bordering it, that increase sedimentation and the silting up of riverbeds.

Every year flooding particularly affects the poor in Bangladesh. According to *Human Development in South Asia—1999* report, 51.1 percent of rural Bangladesh is poor and 26.3 percent in urban areas. The report reveals that since 1985, “the absolute number of poor rose by 1.2 percent annually... faster than any historically observed rate.”

Little has been done to prevent the annual flooding in the country. In 1989, a Flood Action Plan (FAP) was formulated at a cost of \$US150 million, which aimed at constructing 3,500 kilometres of embankments, some as high as 7.5 metres, for an estimated \$10-15 billion. But major donors scaled down the project to \$5 billion, before abandoning it altogether citing various engineering, ecological and social complexities. No alternative plan to control floods has been developed by the government or aid agencies.

In September 1998, an article in *Asian* FAO-UNDP sponsored newsletter, admitted: “To date we do not have a comprehensive watershed management in Bangladesh, nor do we have effective coordination among various agencies sporadically involved in resource management.”

According to the same newsletter, a seminar in Dhaka urged the Bangladesh government to propose a sub-regional committee with representatives from China, India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan. The committee, the seminar said, should coordinate efforts so that “flood disasters... presently felt in almost all the countries of the Indogangetic river basin can be jointly handled through upland watershed management.”

Like the other proposals to alleviate the annual flooding in Bangladesh, nothing has come from this appeal for a “joint effort”. Despite the obvious need, the government of the region do not have the resources and are incapable of co-operating in drawing up an overall plan to halt the floods. The countries and international corporations that have the resources will not provide them because there is no way of making a profitable return on protecting poverty stricken workers and villagers in a country like Bangladesh.

See also:

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