

Thousands die in devastating cyclone in Bangladesh

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Thousands have died and millions rendered homeless by a major cyclone which devastated southern and central Bangladesh on November 15. By yesterday evening, the official death toll had risen to 3,300. The Bangladesh Red Crescent has warned that the figure may reach 10,000 as emergency workers pick through the rubble and reach remote areas, including outlying islands.

Cyclone Sidr swept across 16 coastal districts with wind speeds of 240 kilometres per hour, which whipped up three to five metre waves. Much of the affected region is low-lying with poor fishermen and farmers living in flimsy houses made of straw and mud. The cyclone flattened homes, uprooted trees, electricity and telephone poles, washed away roads and bridges, destroyed crops and killed livestock. On Sunday, the navy rescued 110 fishermen from the sea, but 150 trawlers and their crews are still unaccounted for.

The death toll would have been far worse if limited emergency plans had not been in place. In 1991, Cyclone Gorky claimed at least 138,000 lives and in 1970, Cyclone Bhola killed about half a million people. An early warning system enabled the evacuation of an estimated 3.2 million people to higher ground. Officials began sending food, tents and blankets shortly after the storm had passed. More than 700 medical teams were dispatched to the worst affected areas.

However, the scale of the disaster has completely dwarfed these relief efforts that rely heavily on volunteers. According to the Bangladesh Red Crescent, an estimated 900,000 families or 7 million people have been made homeless. Half a million houses have been seriously damaged, of which more than 200,000 have been completely destroyed. More than 3,400 schools and training centres have been damaged along with 485 kilometres of roads.

According to media reports, emergency workers are continually finding more bodies in rivers, paddy fields and under piles of debris. The stench of rotting human and animal carcasses is unbearable in some areas. In many cases, survivors lack the means to give their dead relatives a proper burial. In some areas, corpses have been buried in mass graves.

Four days after the cyclone, many areas have yet to be reached by relief workers. Harisprasad Pal, an official from the Barguna District, told the British-based *Telegraph* that he has not seen such a catastrophe in 20 years as a government administrator. "Village after village has been shattered. Millions of people are living out in the open and relief is reaching less than one percent of the people," he said.

Many survivors have not received food, medicine and other essential supplies, including clean water. Thousands of people are stranded on islands in the Bay of Bengal. Helicopter sorties to the devastated areas to provide food, drinking water and medicine are clearly inadequate.

Sattar Gazi, 55, told the media: "I lost six of my family members in the cyclone. I am afraid that the rest of us will die of hunger. We are without food and water for the last few days."

Local official Rafiqul Islam complained about the lack of aid, saying: "We do not have enough food, our houses and shops have been wiped out and there is no one to help us." The poor were the worst affected, he explained. They do not have anything "to cook on, nowhere to sleep and hardly anything to eat".

On the small island of Majher near the mouth of the Bishkhali river, only a handful of young people survived. Of 500 villagers, 100 are dead or missing. There was no emergency shelter on the island. Villagers said that they received no warning of the

impending disaster. Every home has been flattened, there is no food and the only well is contaminated with salt water.

Bakul Begum said: “We climbed into the trees and some of us tied ourselves to the trees to try to survive”. She complained though they had previously asked for a cyclone shelter, “no one heeded our call.”

The BBC reported that in some areas soldiers had used batons to disperse people desperate for food. Sayeed Rahman, a telecom consultant, told the BBC: “The reason why these people are not receiving enough help is because there is no coordination between the government and aid agencies.” He warned that unless people receive more help there would be outbreaks of cholera and other water-borne diseases.

Government ministers and top officials have patted themselves on the back over the cyclone warning system. Fakhruddin Ahmed, chief advisor to military-backed regime, declared on Sunday that the country’s disaster management committee was “performing admirably in very difficult circumstances.”

While the death toll would have been much higher without the cyclone alert, the early warning system remains limited. According to CNN, the storm hit the coast earlier than predicted by meteorologists. Volunteers reached many people urging them to leave their home, but others were dependent on radio warnings. There are only 2,000 purpose-built cyclone shelters in coastal districts in which millions live.

An editorial in the *New Age* on Saturday questioned the effectiveness of the warning system, commenting that “disaster warning generally means that the people are just warned and left to their own devices to move and find a shelter.”

The short-term relief and long-term reconstruction aid are both inadequate. One of the reasons for the widespread devastation is that homes and businesses have not been rebuilt after previous disasters to withstand a new cyclone. As of Sunday, the government had allocated just \$US5.2 million towards the reconstruction of homes. Many of the poor have been left without any livelihood or any means of support, not knowing how they will feed themselves over the coming weeks and months.

Oxfam country manager Heather Blackwell told *Bloomberg.com*: “Six months ago, flood ravaged Bangladesh. One of the devastating factors of two

disasters striking in the same year is that the floods reduced the crops in northern and central districts. The cyclone has now potentially destroyed up to 75 percent of crops in the coastal zones. For the country as a whole, food availability and security is an immediate need and we hope it will not have a long-term impact.”

More than 23,000 acres of agricultural land has been damaged by wind and flooding, destroying an estimated harvest of 600,000 tonnes of rice. Hundreds of shrimp farms were also destroyed and 242,000 livestock killed. Agricultural workers of whom 70 percent are landless depend on fishing, sharecropping or working as day labourers in shrimp or salt farms.

The governments of the major powers have again demonstrated their contempt for the impoverished masses of countries like Bangladesh. To date, international aid totals a pitiful \$US25 million. The US administration formally extended its “sympathy” to the victims of Cyclone Sidr and has offered just \$2.1 million in initial aid along with 35 tonnes of non-food items such as plastic sheeting and hygiene kits. The UN has promised \$7 million, Germany \$731,000, the European Union \$2.2 million, Britain \$5 million, France \$730,000 and Australia \$3 million.

While cyclones are the product of unpredictable natural forces, the resulting devastation could largely be avoided if the vast developments in technology were employed to minimise the impact. If an up-to-date warning system, proper emergency shelters, storm barriers and cyclone-proof shelters were constructed in vulnerable areas in Bangladesh, most of the deaths last Thursday could undoubtedly have been prevented. However, as the trickle of international aid demonstrates, the most that any of the survivors can hope for under capitalism is a small hand-out to patch up their destroyed lives.



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