

ENVIRONMENTAL REFUGEES: A WORLD ON THE MOVE?

PETER SUMMERS LOOKS AT THE DEVASTATING EFFECT OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON BANGLADESH'S COASTAL DWELLERS



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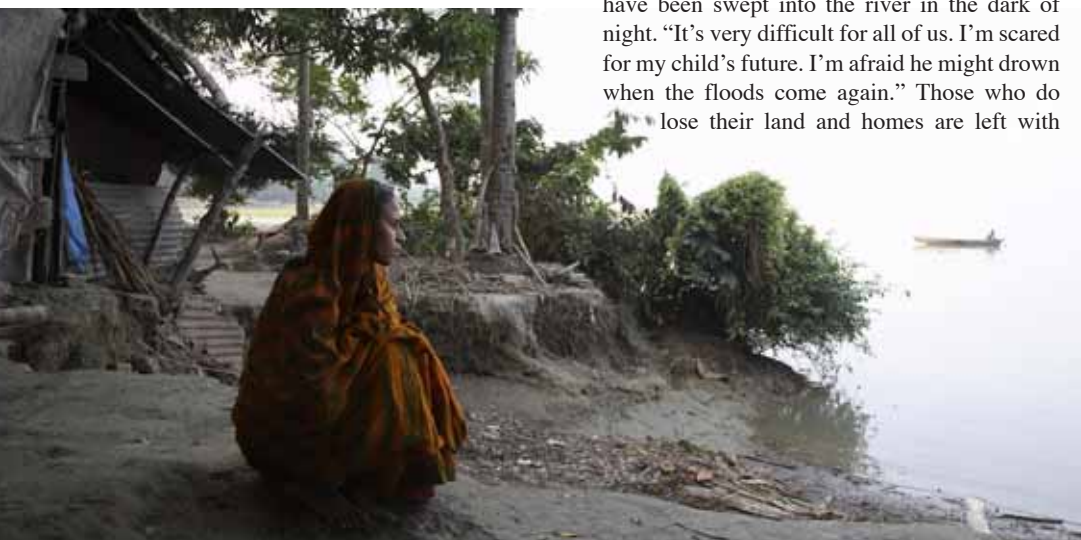


Having already lost land, 2007 will be the year in which Aklima loses her home to the river

“We used to have trees, flowers and a vegetable patch,” says Aklima Shorder, as she stares down at the river bank littered with tree roots, plastic bags and coconut shells left by the high tides of the Tetulia that now flows past her patched-up home. “Now there’s nothing. It’s all gone. This year the river will take our house. What will we do then? People will call us refugees.” As she says these words, she speaks with a real sense of shame and despondency. In Bangladeshi culture the family home is passed down through the generations, to allow a home to deteriorate, even if through no fault of your own, is heavily frowned upon. Aklima, 25, is a young woman desperately trying to hold on as increasing tides and worsening erosion eat away at her existence, washing away her home, her family land, her way of life and her dignity. She is not alone.

Climate Change On The Rise

Experts estimate that if climate change continues to grow unchecked, by the year 2050



around 15 million people in Bangladesh alone will be landless and migrating. The numbers are staggering, incomprehensible; the equivalent of the entire population of London being forced to relocate to Birmingham, or Manchester. Aklima starts her day by taking Shaon, her five-year-old son, to wash in the river. The water is dirty, used by many other communities further upstream. By the time it reaches Aklima’s home it is polluted by human and animal waste. It is, nevertheless, the only source of water available to her for cooking, washing and drinking. With no land to grow vegetables the family now eats only what it can afford, and as a consequence, Shaon suffers from skin disorders resulting from malnutrition. Aklima is the youngest of the daughters-in-law and therefore lowest in the social hierarchy. She does everything for the family; collects the water, cooks the rice,

sweeps the house and tidies the homes of her neighbours to earn a little extra. It’s a tough existence at the best of times, now with the added pressure that they may lose their home and land at any time to river erosion. The rest of the family, especially Alum, her father in-law, appear dazed, bewildered, sitting in the house motionless for hours on end. Many of the men who have lost land to river erosion suffer deep depression and despair. Many commit suicide.

“When it rains it comes into the house. When the storms come the house breaks apart. Then we have to leave and stay with other people in the village. They treat us badly because we are losing our home,” says Aklima. Aklima’s husband works as a day labourer in the fields or on fishing boats, hiring himself out to the highest bidder. He doesn’t earn much, certainly not enough to feed them all. The family usually eat once a day and the meal consists of rice eaten with dried chilli paste, sometimes a watery dhal. The garden provided essential supplements to their diet, mostly vegetables and fruit, but not any longer. Aklima lives in a near-constant state of fear, waiting for the day when the river takes her home. But it can do more than that. Many people have lost family members when homes have been swept into the river in the dark of night. “It’s very difficult for all of us. I’m scared for my child’s future. I’m afraid he might drown when the floods come again.” Those who do lose their land and homes are left with

very few options. Either stay with extended family, putting even greater pressure on meagre resources, or migrate to one of the larger cities to look for work. For now, Aklima waits. She stands, watching the river ferries pass a lot closer than they used to. Soon the ground beneath her feet will be gone and with it her home. “If we had help we could stay here. If we leave, we’ll be immigrants,” she says. The prospects do not look good.

Emergency On Planet Earth

The Earth’s climate is changing. Of that there is no doubt. An overwhelming majority of scientists agree that global warming is a reality and that it is the result of our activities and not a natural occurrence. Ice caps and glaciers are

melting, sea levels are rising and droughts are intensifying. We are witnessing environmental changes throughout the world. But these events are not merely indicators proving scientific theory or pieces of info-tainment flashing across our TV screens; they impact on the lives of men, women and children all over the world.

While debates persist and reports continue to be written, the people of Bangladesh are experiencing first-hand the consequences of human-induced climate change. Bangladesh, a low-lying country slightly larger than England in size, is renowned as the most densely populated country in the world. Home to an estimated 150 million people, Bangladesh is also one of the countries most vulnerable to climate change, particularly increases in sea



Trapped in the slum, 7-year-old Afsana’s prospects are not good. She inhabits a vulnerable and lawless world

level. About 80 percent of the country consists of floodplain with an elevation from less than one metre to three metres above sea level. Approximately 21 percent of the population (31.5 million people) live in the coastal regions. These extremely vulnerable people are already noticing changes in the environment around them. High tides now regularly inundate homes and the land is becoming salty. Fresh water is also becoming scarce and the intensity of land erosion is increasing. Desperately trying to hang on to homes, possessions and livelihoods, these people have not heard of the term ‘climate change’. Unaware of the causes behind their changing environment and oblivious to the predicted consequences, the impact of what we understand as climate change is already affecting lives. Fearing the worst, people are beginning to move away.

'Slum-isation'

Dhaka is the fastest-growing city on the planet, home to 12.5 million people. But a further 3.4 million live, unregistered and unrecognised, in the slums which dominate the cityscape. This is not urbanisation. It is slum-isation – on a massive scale. And it is increasing daily. Nuranahar, 35, now looks far older than her years. She and her husband moved to the city six months ago, on the advice of a family friend. They went looking for work and found Dhaka to be a city bursting at the seams with people in the same predicament as themselves. They found a small empty shack at No. 8 Road Slum, Dhaka. "We used to have our own land. We had mango and coconut trees, cows, goats and chickens. Everything was washed away," she recalls.



The IPCC calculate that 15 million people in Bangladesh will be displaced by a one-metre rise in sea levels

The family had no choice; they had to move to the city. Nuranahar collects rubbish from the streets, which are drowning in detritus and the cast-offs of the modern world. She makes 70 taka, about 50p, per day. It is not enough. Her husband suffers from depression, occasionally managing to help her sift through the huge bags of litter that they must sort and sell. Their home is a shack built of cardboard and rescued timber, placed next to an open sewer. "We lived a little way from the riverbank, so normally the heavy rains and floods didn't affect us. But one night the bank just collapsed and washed everything away. We escaped with just our lives. Everything else was gone."

The slums are brutal places to live. 1 in 10 children will perish in these flimsy shacks before they reach the age of five. Life is cheap.

Prostitution, drugs and crime riddle the streets. Each slum is governed by gangs of criminals who not only demand rent but also collect a percentage of daily earnings from their 'tenants'. Any resistance is met with intimidation, violence and even expulsion from the slums. Sometimes people just disappear. People sleeping rough, homeless and destitute, huddle inside blankets in the parks and public spaces of Dhaka. These places reveal the real human tragedy of climate change. Dhaka's slum population has doubled in the last ten years and that growth trend is set to continue and increase. At current population figures, the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) estimates that 15 million people will become displaced by sea level rise within 50 years. Nuranahar and her husband watch sadly as their children play with



Nuranahar, Abdul's wife, and their two children arrived in Dhaka with only the clothes they were wearing

the others in the street. "Life in this city is very difficult. There is nothing here for us, nothing for our future. I wish we still had our home."

The Future On Hold

Environmental expert Dr Atiq Rahman of the Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (BCAS) has been analysing the impact of riverbank erosion and forced migration on rural people like Aklima, and Nuranahar and their families. "Riverbank erosion is a major, major, catastrophe in Bangladesh, often disregarded, often not discussed," explains Dr Atiq. A pioneer in the field of climate change research, Dr Atiq maintains that the issues being faced by the people of Bangladesh, indeed by many people in countries the world over, are complex and inter-twined with other social development issues.

"Sadly, many of the poor who get displaced are forced to come to the urban areas for shelter and to eke out a living. But they leave behind a connection to a social system. Our studies have shown that one of the greatest values to a human being in modern society is an address. In the slums they don't have that. Their entire family tradition and all their values, just disappear. They are lost in the crowds."

The future looks bleak and uncertain for many of the people living in the coastal regions of Bangladesh. Having lost their homes, their land and their livelihoods to increased flooding and sea level rises, they will be forced to migrate to the cities where the last vestiges of identity will be taken from them. An entire substratum of society will form, populated by the disillusioned and the dispossessed. The question is: what happens then? How will one of the poorest countries on Earth cope with 15 million displaced persons? Who will give them shelter? How will they survive?

The predicament faced by Bangladesh is not that of its own making. A report commissioned by the World Bank in 2000 states that "Though Bangladesh contributes less than 1 percent of the

total greenhouse gas emissions in the world, it is one of the countries most vulnerable to climate change – particularly sea level rise."

Climate change is not a series of isolated events; one-off media-friendly showpieces that disappear the moment the channel is changed. It is an ongoing and developing threat to the world community, which will require us all to play an important role. Sir Nicholas Stern, adviser to the Government on the economics of climate change, emphasises in his report: "In the case of climate change ... High level international agreements are not going to stop dangerous climate change; it will need behavioural changes by individuals and communities, especially with regard to their housing, transport and food consumption." There is no denying climate change is a problem of our own creation. Our energy driven modern lifestyles, borne from the industrial revolution, will affect everyone, regardless of race or nationality. These changes are already impacting on the lives of vulnerable people around the world and those people could one day become our neighbours, seeking shelter, hoping for sanctuary. What will we have to say to them? **AW**

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