

## Climate change threatens to push more Bangladeshis into India

Many people from coastal areas of Bangladesh forced out of their homes by the effects of climate change have started migrating towards already over-populated and infrastructure-crippled cities - and to India for their survival.

'The climate refugees are moving towards cities. After Cyclone Aila in May 2009 many from Khulna (one of Bangladesh's coastal districts) have moved to Dhaka and India,' Ainun Nishat, senior climate change adviser and one of those who drafted the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy And Action Plan 2009, told IANS in an interview.

'Another impact of climate change would be in the form of increase in river bank erosion. This will also push people out of their original settlements. For a densely populated country like Bangladesh, any further concentration of population in safe areas will not be desirable. Thus migration, first within the country, then to areas far beyond, is not to be ruled out,' he said.

Bangladesh is the world's seventh most populous country with 112 million people, most of them poor. It is bordered by India on all sides except for a small border with Myanmar to the southeast and by the Bay of Bengal to the south.

Its major cities include Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi, Sylhet, Barisal, Bogra, Comilla, Mymensingh and Rangpur. It is feared that up to 50 percent of the land could be flooded if the sea level were to rise by a metre as a result of climate change.

In that case more people will move to the already infrastructure crippled cities and also to India, which is already facing a huge problem of illegal Bangladeshi migrants who are a burden on its economy.

Peter Kim Streatfield of an international health research institution in Dhaka said slums in the city are already growing at the rate of seven percent every year while the city itself is growing at the rate of 1.1 percent.

'It will add more burden on the resources,' he added.

According to the national action plan, the area that will suffer from major impacts of climate change will lose livelihood opportunities and face reduction in productivity in the agriculture sector. The worst affected area will be the coastal belt of the country.

It would be impacted by the rise of sea level that could drown unprotected low-lying areas. The water in the whole coastal belt will become saline as the level of sea rises gradually. This in turn will affect the land areas by the increase in salinity level, resulting in significant reduction in crop production. The coast will suffer from the onslaught of cyclones and storm surges whose frequency and intensity are likely to increase.

Increase in frequency of cyclones will impact livelihood of fishermen as they will be required to come back to safer grounds as the sea becomes rough and will have to stay back in safe places till the sea calms down. Therefore, it is apprehended that population of coastal belt will face an adverse situation through a reduction in foodgrain production as well as lost livelihood opportunities. People

will be forced to move to areas in search of safety and livelihood.

'The process of migration of climate change affected people, both inside and outside the country, needs to be monitored closely. Attempts should be made to provide safety against food insecurity and loss of land from submergence. However, soon such efforts may no longer be able to contain people in the difficult locations and actual movements of the affected people will start,' the plan added.

Mohamed Ziaul Haque, deputy director in Bangladesh's department of environment, said: 'We are aware that people affected by climate change are migrating.

'The problem is aggravating as the number of people coming to cities is increasing every day. But we do not have any systematic data to show how many people in the past have actually moved to the cities.'

Asked about the government measures to tackle the problem, Haque said as per the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy And Action Plan 2009, the government has adopted two strategies.

'First we are collecting data on how many people have been dislocated and how many are coming to the cities. The other is their rehabilitation and giving them employment.'

Saleemul Haq, senior fellow of the climate change group and also chairman of the Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies, said people are not aware of what the future holds for them.

'There is migration from rural to urban areas and climate change has aggravated the problem. Bangladesh is one of the countries most vulnerable to climate change and in the next 20-25 years it will become a severe problem because of the increased flood frequency. The type of floods which we used to have once in 20 years are now occurring once in five years,' Haq added.

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