

Swelled Sufferings: Challenges After 3 Months Of Cyclone Aila



Cyclone Aila has caused enormous loss of lives and livelihoods in 11 coastal districts. Even 3 months after the cyclone, many villages are inundated by water and thousands of women, men and children live in dismal condition without shelter and proper water and sanitation facilities. People may have to wait for the end of the monsoon to return home. Even then they will have to face hunger and diseases without their livelihoods.

Although the intensity and frequency of weather related extreme events like Cyclone Aila is increasing, due to lack of resources and infrastructures, coastal communities are sometimes not prepared to face them. During the cyclone, high tidal surges broke through many parts of poorly maintained embankments. Over the years, illegal and inappropriate use of public resources such as land, water bodies and forest has weakened structure of the embankments. Poor maintenance of embankments, illegal installation of pipes, tube wells and gates on these, and encroachment of land and water bodies in this area are the contributing factors for waterlogged communities.

The Emergency Capacity Building (ECB) Project urges the government of Bangladesh, along with international aid and donor agencies, to act promptly to assist these communities. The most urgent needs include:

- Immediate initiatives to repair the embankments for people to return their homes and restart their livelihoods.
- Adequate resources to help communities to rebuild their lives and prepare for future disasters.



Approximately 1 million¹ Bangladeshi men, women and children were made homeless after Cyclone Aila swept across the Bay of Bengal and ravaged coastal areas of Bangladesh and neighbouring areas of India on 25th May 2009. In southwest Bangladesh, 11 districts were badly affected as Aila caused a tidal surge to break through embankments, destroying hundreds of thousands of homes.

Hundreds of people were killed while several thousand more were injured. An estimated 4.8 millions were directly affected and nearly 3 millions acres of crops were destroyed.² The United Nation's Water and Sanitation cluster group estimated 500,000 to 750,000 people needed urgent water supply and sanitation supports.³

The disaster came as Bangladesh was still recovering from an even more destructive event in 2007 – Cyclone Sidr, which killed 4,000 people and destroyed millions of homes.⁴

Even 3 months after the cyclone Aila, many communities are inundated with water and thousands of peoples live on the embankments in makeshift shelters. Broken embankments due to the pressure of high tide during Aila which submerged the area in at least one meter of water is the main cause of this unimaginable suffering.

According to the Disaster Management Bureau, nearly 1700 kilometres of protection embankments were either fully washed away or partially damaged, exposing thousands of villages just as the monsoon was beginning.⁵

Twice a day at high tide, water rushes through the damaged embankments and swamps coastal communities. Local residents believe that this area will stay under water till end of October, which may in turn cause a further deterioration in the shelter, livelihoods, water and sanitation situation.

Saline water, along with carcasses and debris, has contaminated ponds that often provide the only source of drinking water for poor families. Most of the tube wells in these areas are still under water. Without safe drinking water, diarrhoea among the children and elderly is spreading.

Destruction of the Embankment

The inevitability of cyclone Aila could not be escaped but much of the disastrous aftermath could have been prevented. The Cyclone Aila came during the high tide causing high tidal surge-in some cases 12–15 feet high tide flooded over the embankment. Lack of maintenance and misuse over the years weakened these embankments, which could not withstand the strong tide.

These embankments were made during the 1960's and haven't been properly repaired in last ten to fifteen years. Additionally, soil erosion has made the embankment weaker over the years.⁶

Embankments were mostly breached near shrimp enclosures. Without enforcement of laws to protect the embankments, shrimp *gher* (enclosures) owners installed numerous permanent pipes, tube wells and gates as pathways for passing saline water, destroying thousands acres of cropland over the years. These permanent pipes, tube wells and gates, thousands in number and arranged closely one after another, weakened the protective embankments from the base and vulnerable spots have been breached during Aila. Moreover, these pipes, tube wells and gates make parallel reserve tanks with saline water, speeding up the process of soil erosion.

In addition, parts of the embankments are often repaired with easily eroded, poor quality 'dry and granular soils', reducing its ability to withstand strong tide. Slopes on both sides are also important for an embankment to protect itself from tidal force.

My home is nothing but few pieces of tin and wood. My whole family is living in a small hut on the embankment. When the rain comes we all get soaked. Water is all around us. The whole village is a waterlogged island and we are driven out of it. It will take many days to go back to my house.

Bishakha Halder, 48, Khutakhali, Satkihra

Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) officials failed to maintain required slopes on both sides, making the embankment vulnerable. Over the years the protective buffer zone (with mangrove vegetation) had slowly disappeared due to leasing out of land, water bodies and forests. Moreover, some embankments were not properly repaired after cyclone Sidr.

Furthermore, the Coastal Embankment Project (CEP) caused the destruction of rivers, canals and land. Unplanned construction of structures on the river and leasing out the canals, rivers, lands and forests to private interest groups has resulted in drastic reduction of natural process of water distribution, contributing to the current water logging.

Unprepared for reoccurring Disaster

Scientists in Bangladesh and around the world are cautioning against global warming, which is contributing to the change of weather pattern including increased intensity and frequency of cyclones. These cyclones may hit the landmass and cause large-scale damage to the lives and livelihoods of coastal areas.

Bangladesh is one of the most hazard-prone countries in the world, with frequent tropical storms and floods, as well as susceptibility to earthquakes. Climate change is predicted to make matters worse as changes in rainfall patterns raise the risk of floods, and rising sea levels erode and inundate coastal areas.⁷

On 25th of May, Cyclone Aila hit Shamnagar and destroyed everything people had. All disasters have a time limit. But this disaster is continuing without a break. Because the embankment is broken, the disaster occurs twice a day with the high tide comes. The longer the water is staying, the suffering of people is increasing. We need to build the embankment. Without the embankment, people cannot go back home

Ashek- e – Alahi, 52, Principal
Atorjan Girls College, Shyamnagar, Satkihra

Since 2007, the Bay of Bengal experienced disastrous cyclone like Sidr, Nargis, Bizli and Aila. In 2007, Bangladesh has seen two floods. In the same year alone, the Bangladesh Port Authority issued 89 storm warning, among them 22 were above 3 storm warning level.⁸ In first 22 days of the 2009 storm season port authority issued total of 11 storm warning. In last five decades the sea surface temperature raised point six degree Celsius (.6°C) and sea level raised nearly 7 mm/year.⁸

Events like Aila may become more frequent in the coastal areas of Bangladesh. Without adequate measures by the government and the international community, millions of lives may be destroyed by these reoccurring natural disasters.

In past few decades, the Government of Bangladesh has achieved significant improvement in early warning system and disaster risk reduction initiatives. However, Cyclone Aila and Sidr have showed us that the much more is needed to protect lives and livelihoods of people living in the coastal region. The communities need timely and accurate information, capacity building including training, resources and technologies to face the destructive impact of climate change.

A neglected disaster

Right after the cyclone, government responded rapidly, organizing resources and coordinating with UN and other national and international aid agencies. Within days of the disaster, government announced food and shelter aid for the affected families. In June 19 government has launched US \$1,149 million appeal for rehabilitation of the 11 "Aila-affected" coastal districts. However, as time passed, the government response slowed.

The European Union (ECHO) and governments of the United States, Switzerland, Saudi Arabia, Sweden Germany, France, Norway, Luxemburg and Ireland also contributed to the humanitarian need and for rehabilitation of affected communities. Much more is needed to rebuild these communities and prepare them for future disasters.

Three months after the cyclone, thousands of families are living on the embankment without adequate shelter. The government has announced a sum of TK 3000 per family for temporary shelter assistance. The government has also announced a Cash for Food (CFF) programme for affected households. These CFF schemes will only last for three months whereas most families will not able to go back home for an additional few months.

Reducing the Suffering

As the intensity and frequency of cyclones is increasing the coastal community must be prepared. The Bangladesh authorities and development organizations have initiated many disaster preparedness measures to help vulnerable communities prepare themselves. The death toll from major cyclones has fallen sharply in the past 40 years largely thanks to such preparations. However, the damage caused by Aila has shown that much more work needs to be done to reduce or prevent destruction and suffering.

While it's impossible to prevent a natural event such as Cyclone Aila from occurring, governments can significantly reduce their impact. The Bangladesh government and international humanitarian and development agencies should do more to reduce the vulnerability of those living in

I haven't seen such water flowing through the village in my life. We had tidal surge in 2007 during the Sidr. But this year (Aila), it is much severe. I think this water is not going to recede until the embankments are repaired and it is not possible to repair those embankments until the rainy season ends.

Bimol Chandra (68), no. 4 Koyra, Shatkihra,
Shamnagar, Satkihra

disaster-prone areas. Government and the international community must assist these communities to recover the loss from the current disaster and prepare them better for any future disaster. In addition to reconstructing people's homes, government officials and donor countries must ensure that communities are involved in disaster-preparedness strategies at all levels.

Recommendations:

- **Reconstruction and repair of the embankment should be prioritized to help people return to their homes.** Government must ensure that the embankment is repaired according to necessary technical specification to stop future tidal surge - with enough slope to both sides and enough space for protective vegetation areas.

- **Government must vigilantly enforce laws to stop any illegal installation of pipes, tubewells and gates by shrimp farmers.** Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) must ensure proper and regular maintenance of the embankment and respective authorities must stop leasing out lands, rivers, canals and forests near the embankments.
- **Communities, civil societies and development agencies must be consulted in the decision making of the maintenance and repair of embankments.** The administration of local BWDB and local authorities must be transparent to ensure that shrimp farmers do not bypass the law.
- **Government, must issue an immediate standing order to cancel all the lease of local water bodies, land and forest to ensure natural distribution of water.** Ministry of Land, Ministry of Environment and Forests, BWDB and district administration must ensure the restoration of canals and other water bodies in this area. This standing order needs to become into a law for proper implementation.
- **The government of Bangladesh and the international aid and development agencies must prioritize the rapid restoration of livelihoods across the cyclone-affected areas.** As the saline water has inundated thousands of acres of land, most agriculturally dependent people will not be able to plant anything for the next crop season. A massive alternative livelihood initiative is urgently needed.
- **The permanent availability of drinking water through out the year should be developed.** Local residents must be trained in rainwater harvesting and water purification techniques. In addition the government must develop a contingency planning and preventive measures against outbreaks of water borne diseases.
- **Government and international community must help these vulnerable communities to rebuild their homes and make them more disaster resilient.** Homesteads must be raised above the regular flood level and ways to keep animals safe must be found and implemented.
- **More cyclone shelters are needed to house the affected population of these areas during cyclones.** The roads must be maintained and repaired to ensure access to these communities during times of disaster.
- **All governments should act proactively to reach a fair and safe deal in climate negotiations.**

¹ 243191 houses are totally destroyed and an additional 370587 houses are partially damaged due to aftermath of cyclone Aila, Situation reports for Cyclone Aila form Disaster Management Bureau (Ministry of Food and Disaster Management) 11 June 2009.

² 190 people have lost their lives and additional 7103 people were injured during the cyclone. Situation reports

for Cyclone Aila form Disaster Management Bureau (Ministry of Food and Disaster Management) 11 June 2009.

³ Special situation report by WASH Cluster Working Group to Disaster Management Bureau, Situation Report for Cyclone Aila, (Ministry of Food and Disaster Management) 9 June 2009.

⁴ Cyclone Sidr affected 6.8 million people, with a death toll of 3,060 people with further 1,180 missing and 34,508 injured. At least 366,000 homes destroyed and 845,000 houses were partially damaged. Bangladesh: Cyclone SIDR OCHA Situation Report No. 9 24 November 2007.

⁵ 213 KM of Embankment is fully destroyed and an additional 1128 KM was partially damaged, Initial Assessment Report With focus on Khulna district by Unnayan Onneshan, Nijera Kori and Humanity Watch, 23 June, 2009

⁶ Community Discussion at Shamnagar, Shatkhira, 2 July 2009

⁷ By 2030 the sea level will rise an estimated 14 Centimeters and by 2100 it will rise nearly 88 CM. As a result the saline water will submerge more and more land inside the costal areas. Report of Community level vulnerability Assessment Conducted in South Western Bangladesh, Reducing Vulnerability to Climate Change (RVCC) , Care Bangladesh 2003.

⁸ Strom warning 3 and above is above the accepted danger level. Ahmed, Ahshan Uddin and Neelomi Sarmind, Livelihood of Costal Fishermen in Peril: In Search of Climate Change Induced Adverse Effects in Bangladesh, Campaign for Sustainable Rural Livelihoods (CSRL), April 2009.

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