

Feature

Environment

CONSEQUENCES OF FARAKKA BARRAGE

An Irreversible Human and Environmental Loss

by Masud Hasan Khan

S HUKUR Mamud was anxiously looking at his small boat and at an unsurfaced road that ended far from the bank of the Ganges near Pakshi in Rajshahi district.

Ganges, the Goral nourishes eight south-west districts with fresh water. A newsprint factory and a power plant in the coastal Khulna district now bring fresh water from the up-country as salinity rise in the river has made it difficult to keep the plants operative.

due to low ground water level. Water shortage or high salinity is a recent phenomenon, the villagers said, adding that even 10 years back fresh water was abundant in these areas.

inland during the last ten years threatening industries and the availability of drinking water. According to Ainun Nishat of Water Management Department of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), the only solution to the problem lies in the augmenting flow of the Goral with at least 10,000 cusec of water.

keep the plant operative. Open water fishing has also been affected in Khulna areas because of lean-flow in the Bhairab, Passur and the Goral.

Bangladesh, is lost. Fifteen piers of the Hardinge bridge now stand on sand as people and vehicles cross the river by land during the four months.

But the chance of another passenger was bleak as people during winter preferred sandy roads to cross the Ganges, known as the Padma inside Bangladesh.

Besides, there was tough competition with other boatmen in the same profession. Shukur Mamud of Raita village in Kushtia district of Bangladesh is one many who have become victims of a dam that has 'controlled' the Ganges.

"That is India," Mamud said pointing towards the horizon in the west, "I hear they have built some kind of wall on our Padma," he said. The west was an ocean of sand with thin stripes of blue water.

"What a mighty river she was," the boatman recalled with a sigh, "Once, be it in summer or in winter, I had to think twice before crossing the great river."

And now in early July, people no longer needed boats to cross the Padma but preferred horse-drawn carriage or bullock-cart," Mamud said.

Down the river, the metallic structure of the imposing Hardinge railway bridge was only a silhouette. Caravan of carts, people on foot or on bicycle crossed the sandy trails.

"It is a bad time for us," said another boatman Khairul, "Our life is linked to the Padma's water... no water means no works, no food."

Summer in Bangladesh starts from March and continues until May. The monsoon lasts from June through October while the winter begins from November until February.

Not far from the British-made Hardinge bridge, Bangladesh's largest Ganges-Kabodak (G-K) Irrigation Project at Bheramara, Kushtia has collapsed due to shortage of water in the Ganges.

The irrigation project earlier poured water into 1,20,000 acres of dry cropland in four Bangladesh districts.

A major river, Goral, has already begun giving its dying hicups because it no longer gets waters from its source.

As a distributory of the

"It is a bad time for us," said another boatman Khairul, "Our life is linked to the Padma's water... no water means no works, no food."

They warn fresh water diversion by the Farakka Barrage, only 19 kilometers from the Indo-Bangladesh border, would deteriorate the agricultural capacity of 11 south-western districts.

It may also kick off a major eco-migration in the region forcing people to move elsewhere in the country of about 110 million people, they say.

Peasants, politicians and environmentalists of this agrarian country are now crying hoarse against the environmental impacts of Farakka Barrage and pushing the government to raise the issue on the international forum.

In response to the increasing public outcry, Bangladesh government has worked out a 278 million-dollar 'bill' to demand as compensation from India, officials said.

The figure came out while assessing damage on six sectors — agriculture, fisheries, industries, navigation and dredging — caused by Farakka Barrage since 1976 until 1992.

An elaborate report on the damage is now with the Bangladesh Foreign Minister, which is considering its legal side.

When completed, Bangladesh might file a damage suit in the International Court of Justice linking Farakka Barrage to the worsening environmental situation in Bangladesh, top irrigation Ministry officials said.

Daily morning trek for fresh drinking water from the nearest available sources has become a way of life for the people living in the region of Satkhira, Bagerhat and Khulna districts.

Most of the tubewells in these areas have either become salinised or inoperative

Unplanned shrimp culture and erratic levees along the coast have only worsened the situation, they added.

Health officials at Khulna district said the people of Bathiaghata, Dakop and Paikgacha areas have developed acute diarrhoea because of regular saline water consumption.

Salinised water is a safe haven for the diarrheal germs, the officials pointed out.

However, ground water level is comparatively higher in the northern region of 35,742-square-kilometer Khulna Division where water is available within 200 feet under the soil.

The highest tolerance level of salinity for drinking water in the Khulna region is 500 micro-mhos and 2000 micro-mhos per centimeter for agriculture.

With the dwindling discharge of fresh water by the Farakka Barrage, there has been a successive build-up of salinity in the south-western coastal districts over the last ten years.

Latest figures available from the Irrigation Ministry show that with increasing diversion of water at Farakka, the salinity level has far crossed the limit in all the 16 districts under Khulna Division.

During 1978 and 1982 the maximum salinity in the region was recorded at 1300 micro-mhos and 14,000 micro-mhos per centimeter.

The salinity level in these areas reached its peak with 28,000 micro-mhos in 1989 and 25,000 micro-mhos in 1991.

Irrigation Ministry officials said the salinity belt has moved about 200 kilometers further

upstream. Carrying of water by barges costs the mills taka 125 (US\$ 3.12) for every tons of newsprint it produces.

The Mills requires about 400 tons of water a day, KNM officials said.

They said the salinity in the river has reached a level of the factory by a wide range. The maximum tolerance level for the Khulna Newsprint Mills is only 40 Particles Per Million (PPM).

The salinity reached an alarming 3600 PPM on March 21, 1992. KNM officials pointed out. Other than the cost of carrying water, the salinity is also causing serious damage to the plant machinery.

If damage to the machinery is included, the production cost of each ton of newsprint sums up to taka 1000 (US\$ 25), according to the state-run Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation.

Fresh water is also brought for the Goalpara Power Station from the northern areas to

the United Kingdom's Overseas Development Agency (ODA), the sundari trees are now being replaced by 'Gewa' (Excoecaria agallocha) — trees more tolerant of higher soil and water salinities.

Any change in the brackish littoral forest would destroy the ecological balance as well as habitat of the Sundarbans animals, said Forest Department officials.

Lack of food would also turn the Royal Bengal tigers to man-eaters, they said adding that the mammals would die while sharks and reptiles would infest under the changed environmental situation.

Due to the dehydrational impact of the Farakka Barrage, an estimated 120 thousand farm families, beneficiaries to the Ganges-Kabodak Irrigation Project, could not grow high yielding variety Aus rice seedlings in the current cropping season, said Irrigation Ministry officials.

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Environmental Action Plan Being Finalized

Government-NGO Cooperation for People's Consultation

THE Government of Bangladesh through the Ministry of Environment and Forest has started a process of people's consultations for developing a comprehensive National Environment Management Action Plan (NEMAP) together with NGO community through the Association of Development Agencies of Bangladesh (ADAB) and the Coalition of Environmental NGOs (CEN). The process of consultation will consist of a number of elements, including a series of twentythree grassroots level workshops around the country, five regional, eight professional and national workshops for different sectors such as government agencies, members of parliament, NGOs media, women, etc. a media campaign including advertisements and special programmes on radio and television, and distribution of leaflets/questionnaires around the country to let ordinary citizens give their views.

The television coverage will consist of a specially made short drama/advertisement to be shown repeatedly over the coming months to show the importance of people's participation in addressing environmental issues.

Leaflets/questionnaires In addition to the workshops and media campaigns the Ministry of Environment is also publishing over 100,000 leaflets/questionnaires which will be distributed all over the country through local governments, BRDB groups, schools and colleges, NGOs, Boy Scouts, trade unions and others. They will encourage people to give their views as to what are the important environmental issues and also what they feel should be done about them. The leaflets/questionnaires will also be published in several mass circulation newspapers to allow the maximum number of people an opportunity to give inputs.

Experience so far Although the process of consultations have only begun the experience so far has been very positive. The Minister for Environment and Forest, Akbar Hossain, has termed this as an example of how to carry out participatory and consultative planning which can become a model for national level planning. It is also being seen as a model for cooperation between the government and the NGOs as was evident by the response from both the chairperson of ADAB, Khushi Kabir, and the chairperson of CEN, Kazi Farooque Ahmed, who have publicly committed the NGO community towards this effort. The resident representative of UNDP, Emi Watanabe, in a meeting with the government chaired by the Secretary, ERD, Lutfullah Majid, congratulated the ministry of Environment on its efforts to carry out the consultative process and on the speed with which it was able to do so. The ERD Secretary noted that it was the first time a government ministry had received such an accolade from a donor agency.

At least fifty percent women's participation will be ensured. Although the groups of people, strictly speaking, are not exactly from grassroots and are quite mixed from the point of educational and socio-economic backgrounds an effort has been made to ensure that every participant has an opportunity to present his or her views. For this reason the workshops are being held over two days to ensure maximum opportunity to interact and the plenary sessions are being kept to a minimum in order to allow discussions to be held in small groups where the composition will be kept as homogeneous as possible (for example illiterate and literate people will not be mixed into the same group in order that not one feels intimidated). Each group will have a trained facilitator and rapporteur to record the discussions which will then be presented in the plenary session by the group's chosen representative.

Media campaign The media campaign will be carried out using the print media as well as television and radio. The newspapers have already started to cover the grassroots workshops and will continue to do so. There will also be some advertisements in leading newspapers informing the public about NEMAP and soliciting their inputs and views.

Organizers The effort is being carried out in partnership between the Ministry of Environment and the NGOs both of whom are making substantial contributions in terms of manpower and resources with additional financial assistance from UNDP.

A large number of NGOs are providing inputs into the process including trained facilitators for the workshops, facilities for holding grassroots workshops and report preparation, the Forum for Environmental Journalists (FEJB) are arranging media coverage, a team of local consultants and resource persons and rapporteurs are pulling the whole process together to prepare the draft synthesis report which will be presented and discussed at the national workshops to be held in June 1994. The entire process is being coordinated by a review committee chaired by the Joint Secretary of the Ministry of Environment, Fazlul Haq, and consisting of representatives of the Government, NGOs, media and donor agencies with a NEMAP secretariat within the Ministry. The grassroots workshop are being organized by ADAB/CEN with each individual workshop being the responsibility of a local ADAB chapter and local NGOs.

Grassroots workshops There will be twentythree grassroots workshops in different parts of the country during February, March and April.

The overall organization is the responsibility of ADAB/CEN who have already carried out a training of 20 facilitators who were provided from different NGOs at their own expense. The first three workshops in Comilla, Mymensingh and Chittagong were held one after the other so that all the facilitators and resource persons could attend together, share their experience and refine the methodology of conducting the workshops. Thereafter the workshops would be held simultaneously in different regions because of the time constraints and the facilitators and resource persons would split up in order to cover all the workshops.

Each workshop will bring together local people from all walks of life including farmers, fishermen, small traders as well as NGO workers, local elected representatives and government officials.

At least fifty percent women's participation will be ensured.

Save the Whales or Lose Tourists, Islanders Warned

by Nancy McGuire

FOUR Caribbean island states are furious with threats by 'save the whale' campaigners to organise an international boycott of their tourist industries if they support Japan at the forthcoming International Whaling Commission (IWC) meeting.

The islands in turn are accused by pressure group activists of voting alongside Japan in favour of commercial whaling as a result of promises of aid and other financial inducements from Tokyo.

Caribbean countries voted with Japan at both meetings. Japan is now trying to gather enough support to get the ban lifted and the sanctuary proposal vetoed when the two topics come up for discussion at the next IWC meeting in Mexico in May.

Environmentalists say that commercial whaling has devastated the whales of the Southern Ocean. The first Antarctic whaling station was established in 1904. Since then, says the environmental organisation Greenpeace, more than 1.5 million whales have been killed in those waters.

Some species have lost more than 90 per cent of their original populations. The blue whale has lost 99 per cent and shows no sign of recovery even after a 30-year ban on hunting.

Japan has provided significant aid to fishing industries in

top post in the World Health Organisation.

Dan Morast, president of the US-based International Wildlife Coalition, accuses Grenada, St Vincent, St Lucia and Dominica, which together make up the Windward Islands, of "blatant collaboration" with Japan at previous IWC meetings.

He claims delegates from the four states had to hold "special hallway meetings

"irresponsible and fanatical people who feel it is wrong to kill whales because they're special creatures."

Accusations of selling out the whales — the world's largest mammals — have been flying across the Atlantic Ocean since the IWC meetings in Japan last May and in Australia in February.

At issue are Japan's efforts to have the internationally agreed moratorium on com-

Swimming against the tide. Blue: Largest animal ever recorded. Now close to extinction. Humpback: Almost exterminated. Fin: Down to 25,000 from 500,000 at turn of century. (2m) whales killed this century.

mercial whaling lifted and its opposition to a French proposal for a whale sanctuary in Antarctica on the lines of an existing sanctuary in the Indian Ocean.

Amid allegations of taking money from Tokyo, the four

islands are accused by pressure group activists of voting alongside Japan in favour of commercial whaling as a result of promises of aid and other financial inducements from Tokyo.

Dominica as part of the culture.

Senator Nanton also defends St. Vincent's whale harvest: "We defend the right of our people to continue to whale, so long as it is done on the basis of regulation, conservation and scientific advice, and that is why we attend the meetings of the IWC."

He says that no non-government organisation has the right to shut down an industry "which our people have every cultural right to continue."

But that is not the issue. Environmentalists accept that traditional whaling communities should be allowed to continue with their small-scale activities. "It is commercial whaling which we oppose,"

says London-based Greenpeace campaigner John Frizell.

In an attempt at diplomacy, the Caribbean Conservation Association has suggested that the islands focus efforts on whale-watching. Dominica offers whale-watching as a tourist attraction, and Grenada is making an appraisal of the feasibility of establishing whale-watching locations.

Sean Whyte, who was recently in Grenada to promote whale-watching, says more than four million tourists a year pay to watch whales in nearly 30 countries.

— GEMINI NEWS NANCY MCGUIRE is a freelance journalist living in Grenada.

The Biggest Victims of Poverty

AMONG the worst affected victims of the poverty-environment cycle have been the African elephant, poached in numbers that were inconceivable 30 years ago. From a population of about 1.2 million in 1981 there were approximately 610,000 left by 1989, a disproportionate number of them females, as the males had been hunted for their tusks. The poaching was driven by high world prices for ivory during the late 1970s and 1980s, although this is now a thing of the past, as the price of ivory collapsed after international trade in ivory was banned at the 1989 Lausanne meeting of the parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

But poaching has continued, albeit on a reduced scale, for many of the poachers were, and still are, driven not by the quest for big money from ivory sales, but by a quest for any money at all. Faced with animals that tramped through their crops, local people made an obvious choice to cash in on such a lucrative nuisance. But this was not simple opportunism. Cut off from the cash economy and much of their traditional land, and surrounded by rapid human population growth, the poachers often felt they had few choices. Most of those out in the field, of course, did not make big money from their labours; they were desperate and would accept modest sums for the tusks, forcing them back to kill yet more elephants.

But, since the ivory trade was banned and poaching slowed down, efforts have been made to recognize the needs of people who live near elephants and who still see these animals as a nuisance — but now a less valuable one. At a meeting held at UNEP's Nairobi headquarters in January 1992, African countries with elephant populations met donor countries. Detailed conservation plans were prepared for 33 of the 35 countries with elephant populations, including calculations of the costs of implementing the plans. While a lot of the money pledged at the conference included protection measures, such as radios, trucks and other equipment, for wildlife protection staff, promotion of elephant-based tourism for the benefit of local people



was also a significant part of the most of the plans. Kenyan wildlife expert Dr Perez Olando, in an interview during the meeting, argued that, "Elephants are good workers, because, through tourism, they attract money into the respective countries. ... Once those communities see that elephants positively affect their development expectations, they are going to set aside a portion of their land for elephants." Since that meeting, there has been an increased effort made to channel the financial benefits from elephant conservation directly to the people who might once have poached them. But breaking out of the poverty trap into which the elephants have fallen will take not only money, according to Olando. The issue of human numbers must also be addressed. The question relating to human population cannot be solved by money; it is going to be resolved by a change of attitude and also the intensification of government policies on national population. — UNEP