

# Post-flood Rehabilitation Fight to Cling to Life Continues

by Morshed Ali Khan, back from Tangail

*Like in any other flood affected area of the country people of Tangail district also keep their fight on to overcome the difficult situation left behind by the most devastating flood of the century.*

**M**OST part of the 21.38 square kilometre area of the Tangail district town has been protected from the devastating floods thanks to an ambitious Tk 117 crore project under the FAP-20. But for the last two months the town has remained water logged. The stagnant rain and waste water inside this area has contributed to mosquito breeding and a consequent risk to public health. At places the stench of waste filled the atmosphere.

Outside the protected area of Tangail the scenario is quite different. The usual landscape of the villages has changed. The two-month long flood has left a distinct scar. The lower half of the trees, houses and fields looked lifeless, wearing a grey colour, while the top remained mostly green.

Along the route to Char Ishapasha, across the mighty Jamuna women picked up rubbles in their homes while children and men were busy fishing with all sorts of nets available. The flood water was receding by the hour.

The local saw mills were keeping busy as villagers brought in the dead trees — mostly jackfruit — to get them sawn into planks. A villager from Nandipara under Porabari union said the flood has killed all the jackfruit trees of the area. "You cannot find a single jackfruit tree alive in the flooded area because it does not survive in water," he said.

At Char Fatehpur under Dhanya union by the river Dhaleswari, four families lived on an elevated piece of land surrounded by trees. Their thatched houses had become frail as they had remained under water for two months. Some women cooked rice while others said they did not have anything

to eat. Rafts made of banana plants lay idle on the ground. At one corner two bone-and-skin cows fed on banana shoots.

"We spent the last two months on platforms inside our house and my two cows were on those rafts," said Sohrab Ali of the village. Vanu, a mother of two children moved with her parents in the village after her husband had died recently. She said she was a burden on the elderly parents. "I have nothing on earth and here I am considered a *utholla* (an outsider taking refuge), please write my name so that the chairman enlists me for some relief," Vanu pleaded holding her frail looking children with her hands.

Vanu's father Falu Mandal, about 60 and a farmer all his life, struggled to support himself with a stick. Falu wept as he talked to this correspondent. He said he still worked in the fields. "I do not know what we will eat till the next harvest. All my *aman* crop is gone," he said. Falu's neighbour Didar Ali gasped for air. He was suffering from acute asthma while his wife Shona Khatun was fast losing her eye sight. Pupils of Shona's both eyes were almost entirely white. The elderly couple lived in a thatched one-room house. They said life was too hard for them to work. "We were marooned for two months and whatever saving we had is gone. My sons are looking for work and they were struggling to survive with their wives and children," Didar Ali said.

As this correspondent boarded the trawler from Char Fatehpur, inmates of other adjacent houses called out for relief. "Please come to our house and see for yourself what we are left with," called out a woman adding she had only received 2 kilograms of rice over the last



Villagers dug ten feet to reach the tubewell buried by silt during the flood. — Photo courtesy: BELA

two months from the chairman. Torabganj bazar, a trading or badly damaged. The culverts

and bridges lay tilted. Rows of trees which were planted along those roads, however, still stand high.

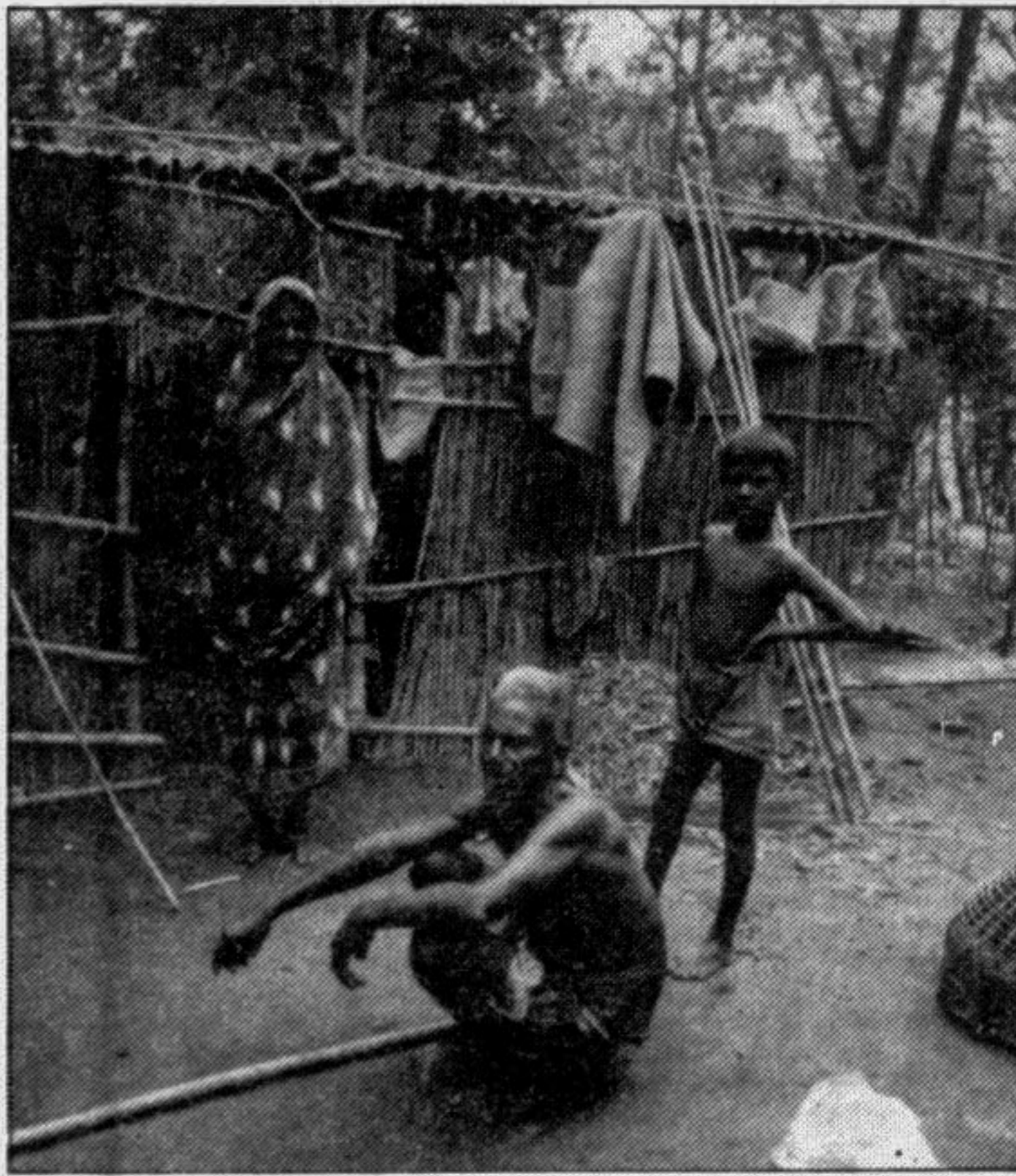
Few kilometres in the west from the Bazar at Dubal under Katuli Unoin a frail looking Surja Banu was trying to put

her thatched house in order. She spread some small fish in the sun for drying. Mother of seven children, Surja explained how she had spent the last two months on a platform with her five children. Two of her five daughters were living with their

pharmacy owner, Abul Hossain, disagreed. He said the farmers did not have any dry place to boil and dry the paddy during the last two months. "Before you bring the paddy for crushing you need to boil and dry it. The farmers could not do it in large scale," Hossain said. He however added that there was an acute shortage of seeds for the coming *rabi* crop season.

Hossain said he was selling orsoline and medicines for high fever most. Most of the sufferers are children. "Children are contacting pneumonia and diarrhoea because all day long they are playing in the water," he said.

In the Bazar plenty of coarse rice was up for sale. A rice trader said the prices varied from Tk 14 to 16 per kilogram. All along the route earthen roads were found washed away



Falu Mandal: a farmer wept all his life helplessly. — Photo courtesy: BELA

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Surja Banu and Farhad with children, kept awake at night to beat the snakes away. — Photo courtesy: BELA

husbands in a nearby village.

"During daytime this banana raft was our only help where I cooked and on which my husband went around to look for food. At night my husband and me took turns to keep vigil over snakes when the children slept," she continued. "I kept a stick in my hand and whenever a snake tried to climb the platform I beat it away."

One of Surja's daughters, about nine years old, was suffering from high fever. She looked very frail and weak. Surja said her children were weak because over the last two months they had less than half of what they used to eat before the floods.

Her husband Farhad, a rickshawpuller in Dhaka, said during the floods he pulled rickshaw only for seven days. "When I returned home I could not go back to my work because of fear for my children," Farhad added, "my wife could not manage alone and I was afraid they would drown or die of snake bite."

Across the Jamuna river in a Char (shoal) known as Char Ishapasha lived 28 families. The utmost courage of human beings to cling to life when the nature was in its height of fury could be heard. Most of the villagers had moved to safer place with their families and cattle when the Jamuna exploded with its rage. But Abdul Karim and Mozammel Haque stayed back with their families.

"Day after day we lived in the strong current that flowed through our houses," added Karim, "my elderly mother and four children stayed on the platform inside the house and we had a strong banana raft."

"The worst fear was not the current but the rapid siltation. It was so fearful that I kept awake for nights together fearing that the silt might bury us overnight," said Mozammel.

Finally when the water receded, more than ten feet of silt had settled on the char almost burying their houses. In the

presence of this correspondent the villagers dug out the tubewell from ten feet below the new surface.

They said the alluvial soil was now extremely rich for any crop but they could not find the seeds. They said they wanted to cultivate ground nuts but seeds were selling at a higher price. In the district headquarters in Tangail, chairmen from at least ten unions gathered at the Deputy Commissioners office to ask for relief.

"We understand in this situation no government can afford to supply adequate relief," said Khalequzzaman Chowdhury, chairman of Korotia union, "but we are in difficulties because the affected people have high expectations from us." They said almost all infrastructures have been damaged by the unprecedented floods.

"We are urging the government to start food for work scheme to repair our roads and other facilities immediately," said Zahurul Islam Badal, chairman, Selimpur union.

With more than 65 Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) active, Tangail accommodates the highest number of NGOs than in any one district of the country. As the flood reached its peak, a forum of 35 NGOs "Shurakhya" launched its effort to procure whatever they could to help the flood victims.

"Every day we are preparing about six thousand *chapatis* and are distributing among the victims of flood," said a Surakhya activist and an official of the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA). Like in any other flood affected area of the country people of Tangail district also keep their fight on to overcome the difficult situation left behind by the most devastating flood of the century. The utmost courage of millions of people to cling to life in the most difficult of times is undoubtedly unique. The fight continues.....



Abdul Karim and Mozammel Haq (second and third from left) of Char Ishapasha: Utmost courage to hold on to life. — Photo courtesy: BELA

## Thank You Banana Plant!

by Shafiqul Islam Chowdhury

**T**HANK you banana plant. Thank you very much for your exemplary services during the two-month long devastating flood that gripped the whole country.

As the flood water engulfed my dwelling, I cut you down from my cherished garden to make a raft. When it inundated our village and snapped all road communication I found you as an angel to carry us from one place to another.

With the help of a long bamboo pole to navigate I went on board you to the bazaar to do vital shopping for my family to survive. You even carried my children to the school until it was closed due to the deluge.

My domestic animals owe their lives to you. You not only saved them from perishing, you also saved my livelihood by holding them on the floating platform made of your trunk. And during this prolonged

flooding when I did not find anything give them to eat, I chopped your leaves and shoots to offer them as feeds.

The flood wore a more torment look everyday submerging everything we could see around us. Then, along with my family I took refuge on the raft to save our lives. Marooned, we ate your fruits saved earlier and tried to forget the pain of hunger.

Now that the cruel water is fast receding, hundreds of us are using your raft to catch fish. These catches will supplement the lost proteins which incurred during the long marooning.

As we now find ourselves amid a devastation that robbed us of our crops and vegetables, your shoots will frequently find its way to our kitchens for essential curries.

Thank you banana plant!  
BELA



## Surrounded by Floods, Who are the Forgotten People? A Call for Understanding and Action

by Julian Francis

**E**VERYONE providing relief food and medicine to those affected by the floods in Bangladesh say, in their beneficiaries criteria handout, that they are reaching the most disadvantaged, but in reality they mean that they are giving preference to women and children. I was in Rampura Road the other day where invaluable clean water from CARE and mouthwatering 'khichuri' from the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS) were being made available to slum-dwellers who are still seriously affected by filthy stinking waist-deep water and who are unlikely to get any work for some time to come. The food relief centre is expected to remain open for 3 or 4 weeks.

To come and go between their slum houses and Rampura Road the people either wade through the sewage-ridden wa-

ter and risk serious fungal and other infections or take a small boat at the cost of 3 to 5 taka each way, which they cannot really afford. If they were one of the lucky ones to have received a ration card from the BDRCS, their family could have tasted the inviting looking food. The rice and dal (lentils), the base materials of 'khichuri', had been provided through the international appeal launched by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), but the rest of the costs of the other nutritious ingredients had been and will be borne by some fifty local Life Members of the Red Crescent.

Apart from salt and spices, they had included onion, potato, pumpkin and green papaya.

Local fundraising has been very active in other Red Crescent Units up and down the country organising *chitra/gur* distribution and making ORS

packets for use among many communities. It is important to realise and recognise that most of the assistance for the most vulnerable comes from the local people themselves. Support from abroad is both welcome and very necessary, but it must be recognised that the biggest number of philanthropists offering needy people assistance are, in fact, Bangladeshis.

Be that as it may, nowhere have I seen people with disabilities receiving relief assistance. Is anyone helping them? Are members of the community or family relations managing the situation? With these devastating floods, how have the wheelchair users and the physically disabled managed to cope? Those with visual, hearing and learning disabilities need special help. They cannot see the approaching floodwaters or hear the warnings to move. And women with disabilities are

particularly at risk. With few exceptions, their voices are never heard. They remain trapped in their houses with water all around. And yet they are expected to organise everything for the family. They epitomise everything Bangladeshis, they are wonderfully resilient.

IT IS IMPORTANT TO INSIST THAT ALL GOVERNMENT AND NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS MUST ENSURE THAT PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES HAVE ACCESS TO ALL RELIEF AND REHABILITATION SCHEMES. THEY MUST NEVER BE FORGOTTEN.

The writer whose life has been enriched by a brother and son, both of whom have severe learning disabilities, and who has many friends with disabilities in Bangladesh, is Disaster Preparedness Delegate, IFRC, stationed in Dhaka.

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GREETINGS, LADIES AND...

CRASH!

GIVE 'EM WHAT THEY WANT, I SAY

CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP

JAN FLEMING'S James Bond DRAWING BY MORAX

VERY WELL, MR BOND - I'M LAYING DOWN MY GUN, AS YOU SAY, YOUR TURN NEXT...

AND HERE'S THE BOMB! NOW WE'LL STRAIGHTEN UP TOGETHER - AND KICK THEM BOTH INTO THE GRAND PIT!

I'VE FEAR YOU'VE MADE ONE MISTAKE, MR. BOND!

## Couple Fashions Giant Solar Cooker

Batuk Vora writes from Valsad (Gujarat)

**A**N Indian couple which has been crusading for conserving energy and environment for the past decade has devised a massive solar cooker which can cater to 10,000 people at a time. Shirin and Deepak Gadhia have set up the giant cooker in the premises of Brahmakumaris World Academy, a spiritual and cultural institution, in Mount Abu, in the western Indian state of Rajasthan. They are also working on a solar crematorium to save the large amounts of wood used up in Hindu funerals.

The construction of the giant cooker, which is made up of 84 dishes and has a surface of 840 square metres, began last January. Expected to be fully functional by December, it will cost a total of five million rupees (\$119,000) and is claimed to be the largest solar cooker in the world.

"We have offered two models of solar cookers: one for do-

mestic use and another for community cooking," Deepak, who has a Ph.D. in engineering from Germany, said. "We are able, after long efforts in collaboration with our German friends, to offer a solution to the cooking needs for a household of up to 10-15 persons as well as for 10,000 people at a time."

After establishing a trust called the International Centre for Networking Ecology, Education and Reintegration (ICNEER) at an industrial location here, Shirin and Deepak's interest in all things natural became their "tryst with destiny."

They returned from their decade-long stay in Germany in 1985 "to serve our motherland and encourage other non-resident Indians (NRIs) to come back and serve the people in India."

"We set up this eco-centre to

serve as a nucleus to promote sustainable development that takes both the ecology and economy into consideration. We like to propagate the concept of natural living, natural farming and conservation," Deepak said.

"We strive to encourage the use of low external-input agriculture, alternative sources of energy and its appropriate technologies. We believe in bringing the people closer to nature with a long-term perspective of changing them from ecological parasites to useful citizens of planet earth," he said.

Shirin, who too earned her doctorate in Germany, is the president of ICNEER and looks after ecology aspects, explores simpler technology for organic farming, water conservation and carries on environmental awareness campaigns. Deepak, who is the secretary of the centre, looks after alternative en-

ergy aspects and makes available appropriate technologies.

With their German friends, the two have also developed three vertical-axis windmills of 500 watts and even exported one to Thailand and one to Germany. "But at present our full success has been in the area of solar cooking," Deepak admitted.

The Gadhia couple has also trained other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in India to manufacture such cookers.

"We want to go for dissemination of technology in a manner that is understood properly and is not misused for getting subsidy, bringing the solar systems a bad reputation," Shirin explained.

The couple has edited the first two issues of the *Asia Network* newsletter of the International Federation for Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM).

— India Abroad News Service

by Jim Davis