

Displaced streaming into city

At railway and bus stations and launch-terminals, numerous new faces can be seen every day, as they were forced out of their villages by the devastating floods

MIZANUR KHAN

Ayesha Begum, 36, who abandoned her submerged home in Sirajganj, managed a tiny room at a flood shelter in Bashabo. She, along with her husband and their 8-year-old daughter Aklima, came to Dhaka a week ago and spent two nights at Kamalapur Railway Station.

"We have nowhere to go. We have finally come here after roaming many places and spent two nights without food or water," Ayesha said.

Desperate for a job, her farm worker husband Abul Kashem, 46, was out of the shelter and Ayesha does not know when he will be back. "He will grow mad if he does not find some food today. How can a child spend days without food," she asked.

"If we stay in Dhaka, we will be able to find some baby food but there is nothing back at home."

Ayesha's is not a one-off story. Displaced people moved into the city because of the raging floodwaters that blighted two-thirds of Bangladesh.

Because of the floods, Dhaka has to provide shelters for new comers while the city is already overburdened with more than 13 million people. "Poor people have been coming to the city in search of jobs for long. Now the numbers will increase as they are driven by the deluge," a university student said.

The floodwaters left more than 30 million people homeless or cut off in 47 districts, while about five million people are affected in the capital.

At railway and bus stations and launch-terminals, numerous new faces can be seen every day, as they were forced out of their villages by the devastating situation.

Abdus Salam, 35, who took refuge at

Kamalapur Railway Station said: "I have rushed to the capital to survive. Floodwaters have washed away my home and crops. I do not know whether I could go back."

Many flood victims in different shelters and slums said they would not go back to their home villages soon. Slum dwellers have moved to higher ground and city pavements as shanties have been inundated.

Most of them have come from the outskirts of the city as their homes in the low-lying areas went under water. More than 200,000 people have taken shelter in schools that turned into flood shelters in Old Dhaka, Kamrangirchar, Badda, Kamalapur, Demra and Keraniganj.

The inflow of displaced people to the city is up. They are rushing to the capital like floodwaters. Most are living under flimsy shelters built with plastic sheeting on sidewalks and pavements.

Subed Ali, a farmer from Kishoreganj, has bought a boat at Tk 1,500 to make a living. "City streets have turned into canals. If I pedal a rickshaw, it will not help me," he said.

"I am happy with my earnings. I ferry people from Bashabo to Kamrangirchar and charge a passenger Tk 40."

"I will not go back even after the recession of water from the city. When floodwaters go down I will sell this boat and buy a rickshaw," he added while rowing his boat through the dark and filthy water through the narrow streets in Bashabo.

The agriculture ministry assessed the agricultural loss in 38 flood-hit districts and it stood at Tk 22.91 million until July 25. The ministry decided to provide 1.2 million affected farmers with seeds, saplings, fertiliser and pesticides.



A crowded Kamalpur railway station yesterday.

Garment units give a hand in need

In a praiseworthy move, some factories shelter flood-hit workers to keep up export target

KAUSAR ISLAM AYON

The flood affected readymade garment factories in Dhaka and adjoining areas are trying to continue their production to meet export deadline while providing shelter and food to the workers at the same time.

More than 1,100 factories the capital have been struck by the worst flooding in years, according to the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA).

The factories have now become temporary home to hundreds of employees. Their belongings can be found between the rows of machines on the production floors.

The rooftops are filled with wet clothing of the workers left to dry. Apart from the ones who have started to stay in the factories as the flood has submerged their homes, other employees who come to work by wading through chest deep water at places, are using the roof for the same purpose.

"I come from Meradia and always bring an extra set of clothes so that I can change when I reach the factory. By the time I head back, my wet cloth is dry again,"



said Jesmin who works at the Pole-star Garments in Uttar Goran. Pole-star's management has provided accommodation to 150 workers badly affected by the flood out of its 495 employees.

The daily routine of the workers has also changed. The usual stream of men and woman going out for lunch can no longer be seen. No one brings any food from home. They collect the lunch from caterers employed by the factory.

Most of the workers have expressed their gratitude towards factory authorities for standing by them in times of need.

"No relief has been distributed

in my area although it has been hit hard by the flood. Without my employer's help, I might not have lived," said Ramisa Begum of Dragon Sweater in Malibagh.

Owners of these factories said that worker attendance improved after they offered them shelter and foods. During past floods, it had come down to around sixty percent as most of the garment workers reside in the low-lying areas that easily became inundated.

A large number of workers are still facing obstacles in coming to work most of whom are women.

"I can not concentrate on my work as I am always worried that my two children may fall down in the six feet deep water that has engulfed my home in Meradia," said Rehana Begum of Pole-star fashion Ltd.

"I constantly remain worried till I get back home. An accident could happen anytime. I could have worked in peace if my children had got shelter here," added Rehana. Like her, many other women workers want to stay in the factories until the waters recede but for already crammed factories, it is not always possible to offer them a roof.

Many of the employees who could not join work or could not take shelter leaving their homes are concerned that they could be laid off.

"I am worried whether I still have a job," said Fatema Begum who became marooned in Nandipara in Madertek. She could not go to her work place for seven days.

But one of the directors of BGMEA has assured that employees who have failed to attend work

because of the flood will not lose their jobs.

However, he could not say whether the absent workers would get their wages. "It will depends on the factory management and the post flood situation."

"We are providing shelter and food to them so that we can continue the production and help them at the same time," said Shafiqul Islam, owner of Alliance garments who is also a director of BGMEA.

Factory owners are hoping that if they can carry on the production this way, the deluge would not have as severe an impact on this sector as feared at first. But some manufacturers are wary of missing deadlines as they are suffering from shortage of storage facilities which is making it difficult to preserve raw materials like yarns and fabrics.

Although many garment factories have shifted their operations to upper floors under make-shift arrangements, they could not save the entire production. Floodwater has already damaged some raw materials stocked in ground floors and basements in about 200 garments.

The BGMEA has appealed to the international buyers to show an understanding attitude given the current flood situation in the country.

To deal with the disruption of road and rail communication, the BGMEA plans to introduce special cargo trains and ferries over the Meghna River to Comilla, from where the cargo can be transported to the Chittagong port for shipment.

What's the task of the taskforce?

No move to arrest spiralling prices of essentials

AVIK SANWAR RAHMAN

A commerce ministry taskforce to arrest price hike proves ineffective with essential prices spiralling as flood worsens.

The Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB) has been asked to coordinate the taskforce and monitor essential commodity prices on a day-to-day basis.

Commerce Minister Altaf Hossain Chowdhury called a meeting of the taskforce on July 22, to check price-hike due to floods where members of the taskforce and business representatives were present.

The TCB told the meeting that it analysed the last six months' data on Letters of Credit and checked on the shipment schedules. The analysis showed supply of essential commodities should be ample and there was no reason for price hike unless artificially increased by any organised syndicate.

"There is a possibility of price hike for vegetables as floods damaged farmlands and transportation cost increased because of bad communication," said TCB Chief Officer Abdur Rob Sikder.

"We have singled out transportation as the cause of price hike. But the taskforce did not decide any specific measures. The commerce ministry only said it would try to maintain smooth transportation by road, rail and river routes although it did not specify. If the private sector controls transportation, prices will increase," said a member of the taskforce present in the meeting.

"Commodity prices are stable in the market, and so we don't see any need to intervene. But we have asked the taskforce to monitor prices and asked the district commissioners to check price hike in their areas," said Commerce Secretary Suhel Ahmed.

The TCB has sought permission to import some essential items such as sugar, salt and onion so that they

could have some bearing on their prices.

"We don't have permission to import, and even if we did, hoarders would have been discouraged to make windfalls," said the TCB chief officer.

Meanwhile, unscrupulous businessmen are cashing in on the flood situation. Adulterated packets of rice saline are selling in the open market.

This may lead to health hazards, alleged the International Centre for Diarrhoea Disease Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR,B).

Some suppliers tasked with relief work for flood victims are supplying spoiled rice and rotten potato along with allegations of irregularities in the distribution of relief.

