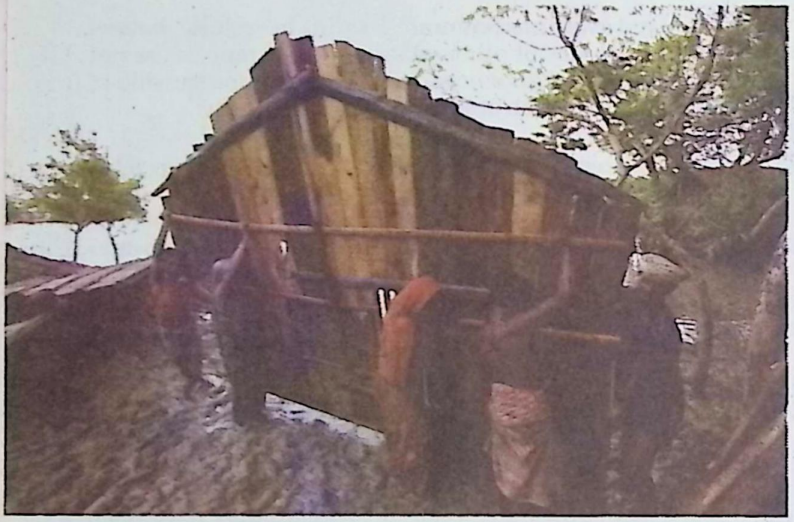
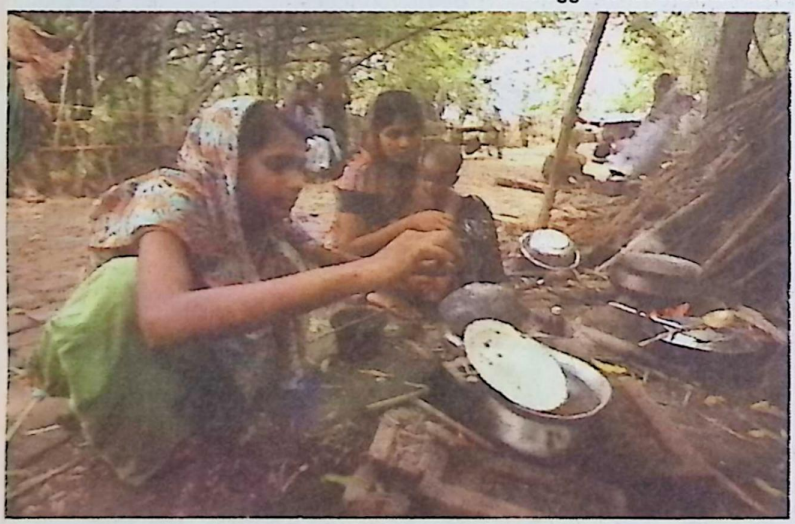


The struggle to rebuild their lives.



With scores of displaced people still living in makeshift houses on river embankments, suffering from an acute lack of food and drinking water, we are still in the midst of a problem that calls for more.

people are dependent on water purification plants, bottled water and purification tablets. The odds of the water receding are slim given that the monsoon is already here and there is no longer an embankment. Repairing the earthen embankment is quite a challenge as the repairs continue to get washed away by the rain and the tidewater.

We face long term challenges in terms of agriculture and other livelihood options as the salt water stagnation over a longer period of time will kill all the remaining local plants, fruit trees, destroy arable soil and kill fish. Already, banana, jackfruits and berry trees have been found to be dead or dying.

The only work available is embankment repair under the Government's 'food for work' and 'cash for work' programmes, but payments in cash and kind have not been regular. In the long term, we have to explore climate resilient livelihood options for example, salt-water resistant plants and crops for the residents as salinity is going to be a long-term problem.

The people in the severely affected unions have felt compelled to sell surviving cattle and poultry for meagre prices, for lack of animal fodder and poultry feed, and need for food and drinking water. Some are sending off cows and goats to relatives' homes in uninundated places with the hope of at least retaining their productive assets.

The fisherman, who would previously go out to the Sundarbans for a day's catch, are stranded at home with no fishing nets or boats, as the storm had blown or washed them away. These are the same fisherman who had finally just recovered from the blow dealt by Cyclone Sidr in November 2007.

Outward migration from some areas is probably permanent as water levels are not expected to recede anytime soon. We're talking about villages of displaced people who will need shelter, food and eventually a job. And ominously, there has been an increase in girl/child trafficking in these regions.

Break the silence, NOW

As daunting as the long-term challenges are, we can overcome them. We have overcome worse natural disasters in our history.

But, there is something different about this disaster. The biggest obstacle facing the survivors today is the strange sound of silence about their plight. The biggest hurdle that we face in survivor rehabilitation is general apathy. No one seems to be taking the situation seriously enough. There has been no visit to the river embankments, where the displaced people reside, by senior officials. The print and electronic media report more important issues like oaths to change the country. And the chattering classes babble on a general's retirement, oblivious to the disaster.

The donors and international NGOs can't release funds towards rehabilitation till the Aila survivors' predicament is given the profile it deserves--a profile that calls for immediate action for rehabilitation. And yet, the government, with a bold refusal to solicit external help, seems to be playing down the crisis. The government is now solely responsible for helping these people recover from this situation. Saying no to help is fine, just as long as we are able to solve the problem by ourselves. With scores of displaced people still living in makeshift houses on river embankments, suffering from an acute lack of food and drinking water, we are still in the midst of a problem that calls for more. We are in the throes of a humanitarian crisis that seems to be spinning out of control. The immediate task is to break the silence on it.

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Photo Credit: Shafiqul Alam Kiron/ Save the Children