



These homes in Chandanbaisha of Sariakandi in Bogra have been inundated for two weeks. The inhabitants have moved to higher grounds with their belongings and livestock. All belongings, right, are either hung or put on tables and beds inside a home hit by the flood at Majhipara of the same upazila yesterday.



PHOTO: STAR

Act to resolve refugee crisis

Tulip, 2 other British MPs write to Cameron

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh-origin British lawmaker Tulip Siddiq along with her two colleagues has written a letter to British Prime Minister David Cameron seeking a concrete and urgent action from him to end the current refugee crisis.

"We're calling on the British government to internationally push for a number of practical actions to be taken to address this crisis," she wrote in the letter.

Two other signatories to the letter are Keir Starmer, MP and Catherine West MP.

The three mentioned that they have turned a blind eye to the often dismal, appalling conditions which refugees have had to endure, according to the letter. "For those refugees who attempt seaborne access into Europe across the Mediterranean, the journey can often be treacherous and fatal."

The legislators said they believe the refugee crisis currently facing Europe demands urgent action. "All member states of the EU must look beyond their borders to address wider, global issues. But Europe -- far from rising up

to this challenge -- is turning in on itself."

"Britain consistently grants asylum to considerably fewer foreign nationals than most other EU states. To help alleviate the pressures caused by the nearly four million refugees displaced by the Syrian conflict, the UN High Commission for Refugees [UNHCR] has set up an international programme, with a quota system, so that developed countries can equitably share in the burden. Britain -- instead opting to operate our own separate programme -- has persistently refused to sign up to the scheme."

The British government's current position on this issue is contributing to the very crisis they are facing, the letter reads.

"The tragic, human effects of this were made all too clear on the front covers of Wednesday's papers. They will continue to occur unless Britain plays its full part."

Finally, they said, in line with other member states, the UK must also take their fair share of those affected by this crisis. "Britain's full participation in the UNHCR programme for Syria's refugees must be part of this."

Austria, Germany open borders to refugees

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refugees this year without raising taxes and without jeopardising its balanced budget, Merkel said yesterday.

In light of the influx, the government plans to introduce a supplementary budget to free up funds for the refugees and to help towns already struggling to fund accommodation and medical care for the new arrivals.

"We cannot just say 'Because we have a difficult task now, the balanced budget or the issue of debt are no longer important,'" Merkel said in her weekly video podcast.

In an interview with local newspapers, Merkel promised that Berlin would not raise taxes because of the refugee crisis.

"It was just such a horrible situation in Hungary," said Omar, arriving in Vienna with his family and hundreds of other migrants who poured out onto a fenced-off platform and were handed food, drinks and other supplies.

In Budapest, almost emptied of migrants by nightfall on Friday, the main railway station was again filling up with newly arrived migrants but trains to Western Europe remained cancelled. So hundreds set off by foot, saying they would walk to the Austrian border like others had tried on Friday.

After days of confrontation and chaos, Hungary's government deployed over 100 buses overnight to take thousands of migrants to the Austrian border. Austria said it had agreed with Germany that it would allow the migrants access, waiving asylum rules that require them to register in the first EU state they reach.

Wrapped in blankets and sleeping

bags against the rain, long lines of weary migrants, many carrying small, sleeping children, climbed off buses on the Hungarian side of the border and walked into Austria, receiving fruit and water from aid workers. Waiting Austrians held signs that read, "Refugees welcome".

"We're happy. We'll go to Germany," said a Syrian man who gave his name as Mohammed. Another, who declined to be named, said: "Hungary should be fired from the European Union. Such bad treatment."

Hungary insisted the bus rides were a one-off, even as hundreds more migrants assembled in Budapest, part of a seemingly relentless surge northwards from Turkey and Greece.

By contrast, the Austrian state railway company OeBB said it had added 4,600 seats for migrants by extending trains and laying on special, non-scheduled services.

HUNGARY FORCED

Hungary, the main entry point into Europe's borderless Schengen zone for migrants, has taken a hard line, vowing to seal its southern frontier with a new, high fence by September 15.

Hungarian officials have painted the crisis as a defence of Europe's prosperity, identity and "Christian values" against an influx of mainly Muslim migrants.

Prime Minister Viktor Orban said yesterday Hungary would deploy police forces along its border with Serbia after Sept 15 and the army too if parliament approves a government proposal.

"It's not 150,000 (migrants coming) that some (in the EU) want to divide

according to quotas, it's not 500,000, a figure that I heard in Brussels, it's millions, then tens of millions, because the supply of immigrants is endless," he said.

For days, several thousand camped outside Budapest's main railway station, where trains to western Europe were cancelled as the government insisted all those entering Hungary be registered and their asylum applications processed in the country as per EU rules.

But on Friday, in separate rapid-fire developments, hundreds broke out of a teeming camp on Hungary's frontier with Serbia, escaped a stranded train, and took to the highway by foot chanting "Germany, Germany!"

The government appeared to throw in the towel, ordering over 100 buses to take them to the border. Arriving at a Vienna railway station, migrants were met by announcements for Germany-bound trains in Arabic as well as German.

The scenes were emblematic of a crisis -- about 350,000 refugees and migrants reached the border of the European Union this year -- that has left the 28-nation EU groping for solutions amid squabbling over burden-sharing.

"Given the challenges facing our German friends as well, all of Europe needs to wake up. (The time for) reverie is over," Austrian Interior Minister Johanna Mikl-Leitner said.

"Now the continent of Europe is challenged. In this great challenge the entire continent has to give a unified answer. Whoever still thinks that withdrawal from the EU or a barbed wire fence around Austria will solve the

problem is wrong." **BOY'S BODY PRICKS EU'S CONSCIENCE**

Pressure to take effective action rose sharply this week after pictures flashed around the world of the body of a 3-year-old Syrian Kurdish boy washed up on a Turkish resort beach, personalising the collective tragedy of the refugees. Aylan Kurdi had drowned along with his mother and brother while trying to cross by boat on a tiny rubber dinghy to a Greek island.

Hungary has lashed out at Germany, which expects to receive 800,000 asylum seekers this year, for declaring it would accept Syrian requests regardless of where they enter the EU.

Budapest says this has swelled the influx, and like some others in ex-Communist east European states -- unused to taking in notable numbers of foreigners -- is resisting calls by some western EU leaders for each of the bloc's 28 members to accept a quota of refugees. The discord continued on Saturday.

"What happened is the consequence of the failed migration policy of the European Union and the irresponsible statements made by European politician," Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said on arrival at a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Luxembourg to discuss the migration crisis.

Polish Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz reiterated yesterday that Warsaw was ready to accept 2,000 migrants. "We are committed to solidarity but it has to be a responsible solidarity."

Arab countries doing nothing

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small number of refugees, or for discriminating between Muslims and Christians. There's also been a good deal of continental hand-wringing over the general dysfunction of Europe's systems for migration and asylum.

Less ire, though, has been directed at another set of stakeholders who almost certainly should be doing more: Saudi Arabia and the wealthy Arab states along the Persian Gulf.

As Amnesty International recently pointed out, the "six Gulf countries -- Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain -- have offered zero resettlement places to Syrian refugees."

As Sultan Sououd al-Qassemi, a Dubai-based political commentator, observes, these countries include some of the Arab world's largest military budgets, its highest standards of living, as well as a lengthy history -- especially in the case of the United Arab Emirates -- of welcoming immigrants from other Arab nations and turning them into citizens.

Moreover, these countries aren't totally innocent bystanders. To varying degrees, elements within Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE and Kuwait

have invested in the Syrian conflict, playing a conspicuous role in funding and arming a constellation of rebel and Islamist factions fighting the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

None of these countries are signatories of the United Nations' 1951 Refugee Convention, which defines what a refugee is and lays out their rights, as well as the obligations of states to safeguard them.

For a Syrian to enter these countries, they would have to apply for a visa, which, in the current circumstances, is rarely granted. According to the BBC, the only Arab countries where a Syrian can travel without a visa are Algeria, Mauritania, Sudan and Yemen -- hardly choice or practical destinations.

A spokesperson for UNHCR, the UN's refugee agency, told Bloomberg that there are roughly 500,000 Syrians living in Saudi Arabia, though they are not classified as refugees and it's not clear when the majority of them arrived in the country.

Like European countries, Saudi Arabia and its neighbours also have fears over new arrivals taking jobs from citizens, and may also invoke

concerns about security and terrorism.

But the current gulf aid outlay for Syrian refugees, which amounts to collective donations under \$1 billion (the United States has given four times that sum), seems short -- and is made all the more galling when you consider the vast sums Saudi Arabia and the UAE poured into this year's war effort in Yemen, an intervention some consider a strategic blunder.

As Bobby Ghosh, managing editor of the news site Quartz, points out, the gulf states in theory have a far greater ability to deal with large numbers of arrivals than Syria's more immediate and poorer neighbours, Lebanon and Jordan:

No reason other than either indifference or a total lack of political will. In social media, many are calling for action. The Arabic hashtag #Welcoming_Syria's_refugees_is_a_Gulf_duty was tweeted more than 33,000 times in the past week, according to the BBC.

"The Gulf must realize that now is the time to change their policy regarding accepting refugees from the Syria crisis," writes the columnist Qassemi. "It is the moral, ethical and responsible step to take."

Solution only in free rivers, canals

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organised the programme at its Karwan Bazar office yesterday.

Mayors of the two Dhaka city corporations underscored the need for a designated body to coordinate the activities among all the government agencies concerned to resolve the mammoth problem.

Annisul Huq, mayor of Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC), said canals, which play the crucial role of storm drainage, are grabbed by some powerful people and clogged with solid waste. "It is not easy at all to reclaim canals from the grip of the influential quarters."

The storm drainage problem would not be solved unless rainwater can be carried to the rivers around the city, he said.

The 2,000km-long surface drains maintained by the city corporations mostly remain clogged with waste and construction materials, thanks to carelessness of people.

More than a dozen government agencies are responsible for looking after the drainage system in the city. But in the absence of an umbrella organisation, no coordinated steps are taken.

"A coordinated body with political and bureaucratic authority would help solve the waterlogging problem," DNCC Mayor Annisul said at another programme at Dhaka Reporters Union later in the day.

At the Prothom Alo discussion, Mayor



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reclaiming canals, wetlands, rivers
- Immediate clean-up of the rainwater catch-pits along drains
- Clearing storm sewers, surface drains, box culverts
- Installing separate sewer for human waste disposal
- Introducing a powerful coordination body

Sayeed Khokon of Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) too stressed the need for this coordination agency.

Prof Nazrul Islam, honorary chairman of the Centre for Urban Studies, said that Dhaka city indeed has no custodian.

"A powerful coordination body and priority commitment from the prime minister or parliament are badly required for solving Dhaka's waterlogging," he said, adding that the city mayors can appoint "friends of mayors" -- an advisory council of professionals -- to effectively address such problems.

Syeda Rizwana Hasan, chief executive of Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers' Association, said, "The problem and its solutions have been discussed numerous times. But it appears that there's absolutely no political commitment to making Dhaka liveable."

Storm drainage system will not work if canals and wetlands are not freed from encroachment, said Md Mujibur Rahman, a Buet professor with over three-decade-long experience in working on urban drainage system.

But as immediate measures, the authorities have to clean all the existing storm and surface drains and reclaim the canals, he said.

Former president of Institute of Architects Bangladesh Mubasshar Hussain, among others, spoke at the discussion moderated by Prothom Alo Associate Editor Abdul Qayyum.

IN SUMMARY

- Govt approved housing projects on flood flow zones, farmlands.
- About 5,797 acres of wetland in the master plan area lost a year.
- All the floodplains and retention areas by the rivers Balu, Buriganga and Turag are feared lost.
- Dhaka Wasa's 672 deep tube wells pump 80 percent of 230 crore litres of water; the rest of the demand is met with water from its treatment plants.
- Out of 400sqkm of the city's core area, 350sqkm is covered with concrete structures that prevent natural percolation of underground aquifer.
- Wasa extracts water from aquifer 600 feet below the surface; almost no water for up to 300 feet below the surface
- Three water treatment plants to be set up at a cost of \$1.6 billion.

Double disaster in the making

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Sarmin Sultana, an assistant professor of geology at Dhaka University, said wetlands and water retention areas contain rainwater for months and help natural percolation of water as it gets cleaned in the process of permeation.

Floodplains, water bodies, retention areas and open spaces together constitute one third of the 1,525-sqkm master plan area of Dhaka. But according to an unofficial estimate, influential realtors have so far destroyed over 80 percent of conservable wetlands by filling them with earth and building concrete structures, with approval from the government in some cases.

Dr Ishrat Islam of Buet's urban and regional planning department said around 5,797 acres of wetland is

lost every year in the master plan area.

Khondaker M Ansar Hossain, one of the planners of the Detailed Area Plan of Dhaka, said satellite images show that floodplains in Kashimpur of Gazipur and water retention areas by the river Buriganga in Mohammadpur have been ruined.

Similarly, floodplains by the river Balu in Rugganj, water retention areas by the same river in Beraid and Kahetpara and floodplains and retention areas by the rivers Buriganga and Turag in Ashulia and Savar have been destroyed.

Dhaka Wasa Managing Director Taqsem A Khan said out of 400sqkm of the city's core area, 350sqkm is covered with concrete structures that prevent natural percolation of underground aquifer.

Currently, the Wasa extracts water from underground aquifer 600 feet below the surface. There is almost no water for up to 300 feet below the surface due to excessive extraction. The water table in the core city area is depleting by one to three metres a year, he added.

Taqsem said as the freshwater reserve of aquifer is depleting fast and the water of the Buriganga, the Turag, the Balu and the Shitalakkhya has become untreatable, the Wasa is planning to implement three mega projects involving \$1.6 billion to set up three surface water treatment plants with foreign loan.

The plants will be built on the fringes of the city to treat water from the Padma and the Meghna rivers and meet 70 percent of the capital's total demand for water by 2020, he

noted.

Khondaker Ansar Hossain said the Wasa's idea is unrealistic because it would be quite expensive to pipe in drinking water from rivers around 20 to 30 km away.

Eminent climate change expert Dr A Atiq Rahman said the national water policy specifies a balanced use of surface and ground water as a viable solution to the problem.

Life in the capital comes to a grinding halt almost every time there is usual monsoon rain, thanks to poor drainage. Streets and alleyways are flooded and the traffic goes haywire.

Leading experts have cautioned that the city would see much bigger disasters in future unless the dedicated floodplains, water retention areas and canals are reclaimed on a war footing.