

When the next flood comes will we be better prepared?

RAFIDA BONYA AHMED

DAM after dam gave in to the unseasonably early rainfall in the Haor area (a floodplain depression in the Northeastern region) of Bangladesh. Desperate farmers watched helplessly as the onrush of water submerged their crops right before harvest. Millions of Haor farmers lost all of their livelihood to incessant rainfall and flash floods in Sunamganj, Netrakona, Moulvibazar and other adjoining districts.

While we can sit and debate the legitimacy of climate change, these farmers face a situation of life or death.

Bangladesh, a relatively new nation state, upgraded recently from a "basket case" (remember Kissinger's dismissive term?) to a test case for development agencies in the past few decades. Bangladesh, today, is also a laboratory for climate change experiments of sorts. Despite prevalent natural disasters, the government and thousands of development agencies have neglected to implement any effective, long-term solutions. Looking at the reports of overwhelming unpreparedness of the government and the local authorities, one cannot help but wonder what we have really achieved.

Special warning systems were not built to forecast flash floods in a flood-prone area like this. Farmers complain that most of the dams tore to pieces due to the negligence and shameless corruption associated with building and maintaining these embankments. Heavy siltation in the rivers and unplanned illegal developments in the lowlands have only worsened the situation. The authorities' fortifying the last few operational dams after much of

the region was already flooded did not offer much respite.

Haor is a mono-crop region with unique land and weather patterns. For their annual livelihood, Haor's inhabitants depend on planting one paddy crop. Typically, flash floods strike the area in late April - after the paddy is harvested. But this year, heavy rainfall and the floods came weeks early, right before the harvest began. Haor's residents cannot remember the last time floods struck so early with so much devastation.



Havoc in haor.

The farmers could barely process one calamity before another occurred: the water's pH levels rose, killing the fish in Haor. Farmers who raised ducks suffered as ducks died when the water became contaminated with submerged paddy. When these desperate farmers simultaneously rushed to sell their cows, prices fell, and farmers could no longer sell their cows for substantial cash.

Local media has been featuring dead fish and ducks floating on the water along with people like Tara Banu, who committed suicide after

watching her livelihood wash away. Tara Banu was an example of the much talked about 'resilience' in the 'global south' (believe it or not, it is a well established term to refer to the third world countries) - she had begun farming years ago to make ends meet after her husband became disabled.

Many of these poor farmers took loans with the anticipation that they would pay them off after the harvest. Now, they have no idea how they will pay these back while they struggle to feed

so proper relief distribution can start immediately. However, the government refuses. It was hard to believe when one of highest Bangladeshi government officials said that the only way Haor could be declared an "affected area" was if half the population died! (<http://www.dainikamadershomoy.com/todays-paper/editorial/75705/>).

As a universal political tactic, the government has also been criticising the media for exaggerating the losses within

on a regular basis. Every time a severe natural disaster occurs, displaced villagers swarm into city centres with hopes of joining the nation's industrial workforce. Many research and development institutions - as well as the Bangladesh government and World Bank - assume that dispossessed rural populations can be absorbed into export-led businesses, such as the garments or frozen shrimp industries.

However, the reality is, there are not enough jobs to support these displaced populations. It will be impossible to absorb this influx of new labour when even the existing factory workforce cannot be accommodated properly. Recent reports say more than 40 percent of the surviving workers of the collapsed Rana Plaza building are still unemployed. How can we absorb more dispossessed people into these industries while the existing labour force has such a hard time finding work?

But the problem in this particular Haor region is much deeper. The Haor area sits in the south of the Dauki fault which runs from east to west in the Shillong Plateau. Geologically, the region is sensitive to shifting as the Indian tectonic plate drives north; the Shillong mountain rises and the plain below subsides, which will cause more flooding in these areas. Some reports say that unseasonable flooding (not as bad as this year's devastation) has been more common in recent years. The fault has also been identified as a potential zone for future earthquakes. Climate change manifests in significant increase in the magnitude and variability of rainfall and temperature, more frequent occurrences of floods, cyclones, storms and droughts.

Researchers also worry about the acceleration of melting of the glaciers on the Himalayas, which contains the third largest body of snow after the Antarctic and Arctic.

Decades of development projects, triumphing high interest micro credits in the 'global south', might have successfully stopped the people's movements for structural changes, provided us with the 'feel good' talking points and a romantic satisfaction of doing 'something', but at the end of the day, it has done very little to solve the overarching problems.

The Bangladesh government proudly showcases its GDP growth which is an excellent numeric indicator to make headlines. But, it does very little to deal with the ever growing inequality, dispossession, gross human rights violations, minority oppression, rise of religious fundamentalism and massive corruption.

But, do we really want to address the broader questions of poverty, dispossession through natural disasters and climate change in a planetary scale at this critical juncture of human history? In order to do that, we will need a holistic understanding of the problem with a scientific approach and a sincere investment plan with a long term vision. Meanwhile, adequate warnings systems must be developed, legitimate relief programmes should be administered alongside implementing practical adaptation programmes for these farmers. And, we will need an accountable government to administer that. The burning question is, how do we do that?

The writer is an author, blogger and editor of Muktomona. She is a visiting research scholar at University of Texas, Austin and Senior Director at Equifax, USA.

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The negative impact of fake news



CHONG LIP TECK

FAKE news spread during the presidential election of the United States caught global attention last year. The fake news went viral and shocked the public. United States President Donald Trump's victory was even regarded as the outcome of fake news.

If fake news or rumours had an impact on the US presidential election, similar cases have also occurred in Malaysia.

Although the situation and magnitude of the cases are not comparable to the US, it is enough to show the abuse of fake news on internet.

Many are unable to identify authentic news and those with vested interests are exploiting the situation.

The creation and spread of fake news and hoaxes on the internet are money-oriented, politically-oriented or linked to other hidden agendas.

Tracing back the General Elections in 2013, when the opposition was seen as capable of winning, fake news and photographs went viral on the internet. The ruling party was accused of importing 40,000 foreign workers from Bangladesh to be voters. Many took it as genuine and even heeded the call made by non-governmental organisations on social media to arrest the phantom voters at polling stations.

Despite denials made by agencies such as the Election Commission, immigration authorities, police and national registration department,

many voters still believed the fake news.

On polling day, voters who resembled foreign workers were cornered and questioned. Many were unable to defend themselves in such a situation. Although the "phantom voter arresting team" apologised later for wrong identification, the incident proved that fake news can have a far reaching impact.

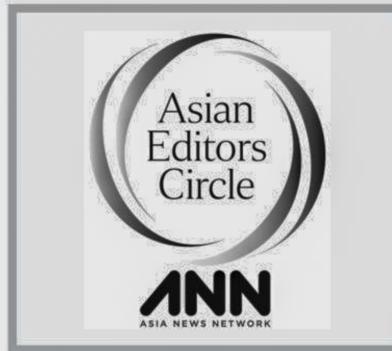
Other fake news which went viral during the same election was a rumour that a power outage had occurred in the vote counting centre in Bentong parliamentary seat, as well as reports that a suspicious ballot box had been sent to the centre. Hence, the electoral result was seen as fabricated.

When Wong Tack, a candidate from the opposition party lost marginally to Liow Tiong Lai of MCA under the ruling party coalition, rumours went viral on social media. Although opposition leaders came forward to clarify that there was no blackout at the vote counting centre and no appearance of a suspicious ballot box at the 11th hour which overturned the electoral result, many voters still believed lights were switched off or there was some unseen transaction taking place after the election.

In the phone theft incident at Low Yat Plaza digital mall, the version of events circulated on social media stated that "after the suspect bought the hand phone, he realised that he was short changed and the dealer declined to change the hand phone for him. Clash took place after that."

Fanned by emotional posting, the incident almost turned into a racial conflict.

Gleanegle Hospital in Kuala Lumpur also fell victim to a fake news story alleging that



staff members released a "toxic fragrance" for a period of 16 years. Despite the hospital's repeated clarifications, someone is still spreading the news until today. The hospital is helpless.

Fake news and rumours continue to dominate cyberspace in Malaysia. Early this year an elderly Chinese lady was falsely accused of being part of a syndicate to kidnap children. After investigation and verification by the print media, the lady was identified as a regular at a shopping mall who was close to some of the staff in the shops. As newspapers reported the truth, the lady's name was cleared. However, the damage was done. The elderly lady was afraid of going out. She shied away from people, remaining at home throughout the entire Chinese New Year.

At present, fake news and rumours on social media are still hot, prompting the Najib administration to set up a portal called sebenarnya.my to combat the problem, as the

authorities and personalities involved are having a tough time debunking false stories.

At the end of the day, our readers or netizens should have a better understanding of the media. The root cause of widespread of fake news is due to lack of understanding of media. The public is unable to identify fake news, or do not know how to verify or boycott it. To wipe out fake news one should start with education.

As media, Sin Chew Daily is also a victim of fake news and rumours. The paper shares the same feeling with thousands of people

affected by fake news and rumours. Based on the urgency of the situation, we decided to start a special page called "seek the truth" on May 3rd in conjunction with World Press Freedom Day to counter fake news by tracing it. Readers would be guided to identify fake news.

We hope everyone will be a responsible internet user by not forwarding unconfirmed news from unidentified sources. Bring positive energy to society.

The author is a Leader Writer, Sin Chew Daily, Malaysia. This is a series of columns on global affairs written by top editors and columnists from members of the Asia News Network.

QUOTABLE Quote

ISMAIL KADARE
ALBANIAN NOVELIST AND POET.

Literature led me to freedom, not the other way round.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Rough guesses
- 6 Gators' kin
- 11 City on the Nile
- 12 City on the Red River
- 13 Florist's creation
- 15 Bright beam
- 16 Fresh
- 17 Catch sight of
- 18 Storytelling uncle
- 20 Academy attendee
- 23 Swivel
- 27 Plow pullers
- 28 Existence
- 29 Decimal fraction
- 31 Enjoy the rink
- 32 Laced with profanity
- 34 Boxing punch

DOWN

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- 4 Lingerie buy
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- 6 Grind to bits
- 7 Lamb's father
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- 10 Location

14 Sparkler

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- 19 Smooth
- 20 Guest's bed
- 21 Hatched's Kin
- 22 Comfy home
- 24 By way of
- 25 Many a time
- 26 Course peg
- 30 Customs
- 31 Fans' place
- 33 Firewood unit
- 34 Baby food buys
- 35 Vicinity
- 36 Toot one's own horn
- 38 Heredity unit
- 39 Kitty part
- 40 Dance part
- 42 Blackjack card
- 43 Yoga need

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

FLAB MATH
GRADE AXIOM
RANIN PENNA
ENCODE COT
ACES NATURE
TED SCRAPS
TULIP
QUINOA BET
DURESS SORE
RIB ENCORE
AVAILABLE
GAVAIL ORGANS
READ ABED

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Age Limit: Not above 35 years.

Department Secretary (Dept. of Public Health): 01 position

Academic Qualifications and Experience: Excellent academic credentials; Masters degree preferable in Public Health, MBA or any Life Science subject with excellent academic background. Minimum 2 years of experience in university administration will be given preference. Good communication skills in English and Bengali. Well conversant in MS-Word, MS-Excel, SPSS etc. High level computer literacy is essential.

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Director (Administration)
NORTH SOUTH UNIVERSITY
Bashundhara, Dhaka - 1229
E-mail: nsuhr@northsouth.edu

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