

| MIGRATION AND CLIMATE CHANGE |



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

“How can anybody survive there?” a frustrated Mohammad Gul-e-Nur laments. “Whatever we planted is now under water. Even the fish is floating dead. What will they eat there? Everybody knows how bad the situation is,” he goes on, while wiping what seems like an ounce of sweat from his forehead.

“My wife and I have come here [Dhaka] and let me tell you, it won’t be too long before many more arrive,” he says while resting his shovel against the corrugated tin-made wall of his quarters.

Gul-e-Noor’s wife, Parvin, echoes a similar sentiment. “I think... around 70 of us were on that train. We left the village in the morning and reached here at midnight. Life is tough here, but this is our only option. It’s better than starving at home,” she says while staring outside through the broken door of her new humble abode.

The havoc in the haors

The Noors are one of the many families who decided to leave their home and move to Dhaka after flash floods caused havoc in the haors in late March. While floods are a common occurrence in the haors, the farmers were taken aback this time around since the water rushed in at least 15 days earlier than it was normally supposed to, destroying their returns from the fields.

According to an analysis conducted by Professor AKM Saiful Islam of the Institute of Water and Flood Management at the Bangladesh

University of Technology (BUET), this was the first time, in the last 17 years, that a flash flood had hit the area before April. Last year, the floods had arrived mid-April.

What was worse was that even ducks and different kinds of fishes were found dead due to the flash floods. It was, in a sense, an all-round climatic attack on the different means of livelihoods of the farmers living there.

Soon after the floods, farmers in the region stated that the disaster could have been minimised had the submersible embankments been constructed as per schedule by the start of the year.

According to the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), 133,000 hectares of land out of the 166,000 cultivated were submerged and it caused huge losses to more than 250,000 farmers.

‘I am not a city girl!’

Like many others, the Noors, until March this year, lived at the Tanguar Haor as tenant farmers on land that didn’t belong to them.

Despite not having any ownership, the share that they got from the rice paddy during harvest was enough for them to lead a decent life at the haor. Today though, Gul-e-Noor and his wife live in Nabiganj in a small room that includes kitchen utensils, a wire hung up to dry their clothes and a couple of rolled-up mats to sleep on.

Soon after the floods hit the haors, Gul-e-Noor contacted his relative in

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NAIMUL KARIM

Narayanganj. A few days later, the couple was on its way to begin a new life.

Along with 25 other families, they came to Dhaka in the last week of April. The duo has ever since been earning money by digging roads for the placement of new rail-tracks.

Depending on the number of hours they work, they go on to earn between Tk 200 to Tk 350 per day. While that’s a bit more than what they used to earn financially back in the haors, the expensive city life, something that they didn’t experience before, means that they struggle to save money and support their parents and children back home in the haor.

“I have one girl and one boy and they both go to school. We didn’t bring them

here because it would have been more expensive for them to live here,” explains Gule-e-Noor.

“Back home, we did not have to spend much. We had enough rice and we did not have to buy vegetables either. We did not have to pay rent as well. Over here, we have to pay for everything,” he adds.

While an emotional Gul-e-Noor hopes to return home as soon as the water in the haor recedes, his wife Parvin seems to belong to a more pragmatic school of thought.

“Why should we go back now? The water keeps coming back every year. We won’t go back. We will send money to your [Gul-e-Noor] parents from here. At least this life is more certain,” says Parvin.

Gul-e-Noor forces himself into a wry smile after Parvin’s reply, before deciding to lie down for a bit and take a breather for the first time in the day since

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returning from a hot day at work.

A few feet away from Gul-e-Noor and Parvin, lives Mohammad Shakhawat and his wife Nahida. They arrived in Dhaka on the same day as the Noors and have ever since been neighbours.

Shakhawat and Nahida used to stay in a remote village called Kaohani, located in the Dharmapasha Upazila of the Sunamganj district. After the floods broke out and destroyed their cultivation, Nahida called her brother, who lives in Narayanganj, and asked for help.

Upon their arrival, Nahida’s brother, Abidur helped the couple in getting jobs. Shakhawat works as a transporter at the brick kilns, while Nahida got a job at a small garments factory.

“It became really hard to survive there after the floods. We are a total of six in the family. Two boys, two girls and the two of us. We did get some money from the government, but that was not enough for us. We were barely able to eat three meals a day,” recalls Shakhawat.

“The children are really young and they did come here at the beginning. I tried to get them admitted in a school here, but they wanted many documents and papers, which we didn’t have. So we sent them back to the haor to study in their old schools,” he adds.

have to go back some time,” he concludes hopefully.

‘My brain has stopped working’

A visit to the Kaohani village recently, where Shakhawat and Nahida used to stay, paints a rather bleak picture. According to the Imam of the mosque there, Abul Hasan, the situation there hasn’t improved as much since March,



PHOTO: STAR FILE

The launch ghat at the Sunamganj district has witnessed hundreds of people from flood-hit villages last week travelling towards Sylhet and Dhaka in search of a new source of income.



PHOTOS: NEBER HAQUE

While they did get jobs in Dhaka, Mohammad Shakhawat and his wife Nahida are desperately waiting for the day they can go back to the haors and start farming again.

While Shakhawat did not own any land back home, he had, however, invested around Tk 50,000 on the field. He was hoping to make a decent return before the flood crashed in.

Today, he earns around Tk 200 to Tk 300 per day whilst working at the brick kilns, while his wife has been promised a salary of Tk 3,500 per month from the garments factory.

Despite having jobs, neither of them wants to stay here for too long.

“I am not a city girl,” smiles Nahida. “Yes, we are earning money, but really, I can’t save anything. Also, there’s a lot more freedom back home,” she adds quickly.

“Look, we are farmers,” Shakhawat chips in from her side. “If we don’t farm, then we can’t really do anything. We

and that more and more residents of the village are leaving as days pass by.

“We have lost the Boro cultivation totally and there’s no way to fish in the water body of the haor and no work for day labourers. So many have decided to move on,” says Hasan, while pointing towards a number of empty houses in the village.

A visit to the launch ghat in Sunamganj also suggests that people from the haor have begun migrating towards the more developed towns.

Carrying a small bag and making his way out of the launch was Badshah Mia, a 55-year-old farmer from Bhati Tahirpur village of the Tahirpur Upazila in Sunamganj. He decided to move to the city after his Boro field went under water in March.

Along with him were brothers Jahirul Haque and Shahidul Haque from a village called Baghmara belonging to the Bishwambarpur Upazila. Having faced a similar fate as Badshah Mia, the two brothers now plan to pull rickshaws in Dhaka for survival.

Another reason why a number of farmers seem to be leaving the haors is because of the pressure created from moneylenders. Farmers borrow money

am in Dhaka. There are times when my brain actually stops working I think. I don’t know the city. I have to keep asking people for help. I don’t know who to ask for money right now,” Muktadir goes on non-stop.

More pressure on the capital
While it’s clear that people from the haors have begun moving towards the cities in search of better lives, a proper research following the recent disaster, in order to provide clear numbers, is still not available.

Migration-related organisations in Bangladesh are still in the process of figuring out and measuring the after effects of the flash flood in the haors.

Kamruzzaman, the Additional Deputy Commissioner (General) of Sunamganj admits that people have begun to migrate to larger cities after March. However, he also says that it is not yet considered to be an official concern.

Migration following an environmental disaster is nothing new in Bangladesh. A walk across areas like Kawran Bazar or Panthapath is bound to make you come across people who have been compelled to leave their homes due to some climatic disaster or the other.

It only adds to the roughly 2000 people who travel to Dhaka every day in order to escape poverty and further piles on the pressure. In fact, the migration



Gul-e-Noor and his wife Parvin left their home at the Tanguar haor after the floods submerged their harvest and today, dig roads for a living in Narayanganj

and invest in the fields hoping for a good harvest. However, following the tragedy in March, many decided to leave town.

Muktadir Helal, a 25-year-old, farmer is one of them. He came to Dhaka late last month and is hoping his elder brother, who has been residing in the capital since last year, can help him solve his problem.

“I owe around Tk 15,000 to a moneylender back home and honestly speaking, I can’t go back before I have that money. The flood has changed my life completely,” says Muktadir, who lives at his brother’s house with his son, daughter and his wife at the moment.

“I never really saw a flood destroy so much paddy before. I probably had seen something like this when I was a child, but nothing in recent times. And now I

problem has already persisted for so long now that many have begun to consider it to be a normal phenomenon.

And by normalising the situation, one is actually distancing him or herself from the perennial problems that farmers like Shakhawat and Gule-e-Noor are facing. As a result, we have incomplete embankments at the haors, further torturing the farmers.

But the questions won’t stop coming. For how long will the Shakhawats and Gul-e-Noors continue to suffer? Are we actually doing enough to help them break out of the vicious cycle that they are trapped in? Or will they forever be nomads in a land of rivers.

Additional reporting by Dwioha Chowdhury and Neber Haque