

Almost a decade had passed before Abdul Mannan returned to Soudkhali this year. His ancestral village in the Sharankhola upazila in Bagerhat was one of the areas worst affected by the ravages of cyclones Sidr and Aila. During the super-cyclone Sidr in 2007, Abdul's younger brother, his father and mother were swept away and their bodies were never recovered. With the donations he received at the time, Abdul had built a new home with the surviving members of his family.

"The government officials promised that they would build a stronger embankment to protect us, for which they acquired many lands. But those were all false promises," says an aggrieved Abdul.

There was little respite for Abdul's 's tormented family as just two years later, his home was washed away again by Aila. The silver lining around the blackest of clouds was that there were no casualties as the family took refuge in a cyclone shelter. However, with the embankment that had been previously wrecked by Sidr and not having been repaired, cyclone Aila wreaked havoc on Soudkhali. Abdul's family, along with hundreds of others in the area, lost all their belongings during the cyclone.

For Abdul, the series of catastrophes were too much to endure further. As a seafaring fisherman, he had incurred debts of around Tk 20,000 to his *mohajons* who used to lend out fishing nets and trawlers. Abdul paid off the debts with the donations he received after Aila and—like many of his neighbours—decided to move to Dhaka with his wife and two children.

"We boarded a launch from Morrelganj launch terminal. Around 100 people went to Dhaka with me from Soudkhali that day [in 2010]," recalls Abdul.

"My wife and I worked in a garments factory in Narayanganj and while at work we kept our children at a neighbour's home. My daughter was around seven-eight years old and my son was five. One day, after returning from our work, we found that our daughter was missing. We informed the

local police and all the people we knew but we found no trace of our daughter," says Abdul.

Facing frustration and untold heartbreak from every quarter, Abdul left Narayanganj and moved to Dhaka's Kadamtoli area, where he got a job as a rickshaw-puller. "Now I don't allow my wife to go to work anymore. She takes care of my son. But with only my income, it is becoming increasingly difficult to live in Dhaka. This is why I returned to my village after eight years to my ancestral land," says Abdul.

However, what Abdul found upon his return left him shocked and speechless. During Sidr and Aila, only his home had been washed away by the strong current. Now, after eight years, he found that huge chunks of land from his village had disappeared under the mighty Baleshwar river due to severe erosion of its banks. Abdul could not believe his eyes that where once he and his ancestors raised their families, there were now only turbulent streams of the Baleshwar. And the embankment that was supposed to be built more than a decade ago lay ruined just as it was after Sidr.

Unlike Abdul and many of the climate refugees, at least 1,800 fishing families are still living in Soudkhali village, dangerously exposed to river erosion and seasonal cyclones. All the families live along the coastal embankment destroyed by Sidr and Aila. In many places, even the embankment had been devoured by Baleshwar's relentless advance.

The only sign of government activity visible in the coastal embankment

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RUINED BY CYCLONES, DEVASTATED BY NEGLIGENCE

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN



The advancing Baleshwar River has already wiped out a large portion of Soudkhali village; during the upcoming monsoon, the river will again wreak havoc on the destitute fishing villages

DISASTER



A typical fisherman's house in Soudkhali village, Sharankhola, Bagerhat.



These poor fishermen have been given a week to dismantle their houses.

DISASTER

RUINED BY CYCLONES, DEVASTATED BY NEGLIGENCE

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improvement project area was the ongoing eviction of the poor fishermen. These fishing families used to live on the banks of the Baleshwar river in ramshackle shanties, most of which are made of bamboo or wooden posts roofed by the leaves of nipa palm or corrugated sheets. The crumbling mud walls and damaged roofs bear testimony to their extreme poverty. These fishermen have been instructed to shift their homes within a week of receiving compensation, but payments they received were nothing short of a mockery in the name of compensation.

percent of the total amount they received." When asked why they had to pay tax on compensation he replies, "It has been deducted from the compensation amount according to the government's order." Biswas also admits that except this compensation package, they have no further plans for the rehabilitation of the embattled and displaced villagers.

Habibur Rahman, Project Director, Coastal Embankment Improvement Project, Bangladesh Water Development Board, echoes the statement about the absence of further plans to rehabilitate the evicted fishermen.

"This project is funded by the World Bank. They didn't allocate any budget for rehabilitating the evacuees. We have only



From this bank Abdul Mannan's home was located 100 yards inward towards the Baleshwar river.

PHOTOS: ANISUR RAHMAN



These eroding earthen mounds are some of the few remnants of the embankment ruined by cyclones and river erosion.

Compensated, but as vulnerable as before

While dismantling his thatched hut, Md Sohrab Hossain reveals how they got compensation from the Bagerhat district office. "Most of us received Tk three to four lakh based on the amount of our land. However, we had to spend at least Tk 50,000 to receive the money. From gatekeepers of the office to the officers who issued the money, all of them took bribes from us," says Sohrab.

Evacuees like Amanul and Sohrab had to make the 80-kilometres trip to Bagerhat district headquarters over weeks to receive compensation. Tapan Kumar Biswas, deputy commissioner, Bagerhat district, denied any claim of corruption in his office during the payment of the compensation. He claims: "They only had to pay VAT, which is 15

one-time compensation packages for them. They have to arrange their accommodation with the compensation money," argues Habibur Rahman.

Nevertheless, the compensation money, even if there was no bribery, was too little to buy any property even in the remotest corner of the nearby villages. These fishermen are all entangled with loans which they have to pay as soon as they receive some money. Again, owing to their profession, they cannot afford to live too far from the river. So, the choice they were compelled to make leave them no less vulnerable than they were on the crumbling, disappearing banks in Soudkhali. They had to shift their homes to the fragile edges of the Baleshwar, sandwiched between the embankment and the river. They are now extremely susceptible to being washed away by the

constant river erosion or by seasonal cyclones. Once again, during every high tide, their homes and courtyards will be flooded in knee-deep water.

"We have nowhere to go. We know that any day our homes can be wiped out. We may be killed if another cyclone strikes this year. But where can we go?" asks Amanul, Sohrab's neighbour, who was building a hut on the bank of the Baleshwar.

Nothing comes free for these poor, oppressed families. Even when it came to building huts in this desolate, endangered area they had to agree to a contract with the local union council chairman and the members loyal to him. According to the contract, they have to pay Tk 10,000 per year or else be evicted

will also require a huge budget," says Tapan Kumar Biswas.

Deprived of any assistance and evicted because of the embankment project, these poor villagers deem this project no less harmful than any cyclone, a project that ironically was conceptualised to protect them. Just like those disasters, the embankment project has eaten up their homes and left them destitute—at the mercy of nature.

According to the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB), the coastal embankment improvement project was passed in 2013 and the construction work started only in January 2016. The BWDB officials state that it took two years to select consultants and contractors for the project and one more year to acquire



Evicted from their ancestral home, this fisherman family is building a mud hut on the narrow strip of land sandwiched between the embankment and the Baleshwar river.

by the chairman's men.

When contacted, Lincoln Biswas, Upazila Nirbahi Officer of Sharankhola says: "I have recently joined this office. Nobody informed us about these allegations. We shall take legal action if we receive such allegations of extortion."

However, it is not actually correct that these fishermen have absolutely no place to go. When a river erodes one bank, it naturally deposits silt on another bank and through this process, huge chunks of fertile chars (tracts of land surrounded by the river or ocean) often develop on the Baleshwar river. However, these lands, which could easily be utilised for rehabilitating those who lost their homes due to river erosion, ultimately fall prey to the land-grabbers. Lincoln Biswas says in this regard: "We tried to distribute the land among the affected people once; we called them through local politicians and local freedom fighters but none of them turned up."

On the other hand, according to the fishermen, it is because of the threats of the local politicians that they never think of settling in the chars which are much coveted for their fertility. The Deputy Commissioner of Bagerhat also states that there is no plan in the near future to rehabilitate these families in the chars. "Chars in the Baleshwar river are highly disputed lands. First, we need to assess whether those are within the boundary of Khulna Division or in Barisal Division. There are also legal complexities. We had taken plans to rehabilitate the evacuees in the chars. But it will take time and it

land and hand over the compensation.

"Currently, the construction of polders is going on in full swing. We shall finish the work by June 2020," asserts Habibur. However, in Soudkhali, we found no sign of construction equipment or any signs of construction work except some fragile earthen mounds that were constantly being eroded by river tide and strong winds.

BWDB also does not have any specific plans to protect these families from river erosion in the intervening period. "In case of any incidence of river erosion, we shall take measures on an emergency basis such as reinforcing the banks by installing sandbags," says Habibur. However, he also states that they may also evict the fishermen from their current location once again. "These fishermen are actually illegal occupants. They have no right to live near the banks as they have received compensation. If they build their homes in the areas designated for the embankment, we shall evict them because building any establishment in these areas is prohibited," he says.

In this bleak situation, hundreds of families like Abdul's are fleeing from coastal villages like Soudkhali to urban areas and populating the city slums. Devastated by frequent natural disasters and abandoned by an insensitive bureaucratic and political system, these destitute fishermen of Soudkhali have no place to call their own in this 'developing' country.

The writer can be contacted at shahnawaz.khan@thedailystar.net