



Risks increase, initiatives don't

Open drains, canals pose more threats ahead of monsoon

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ARUN BIKASH DEY

Accidents and casualties caused by open canals and drains are still fresh in the memories of port city residents. Yet the situation has not seen any significant improvement. Many canals and drains are left open, posing a threat of further accidents.

The city is gripped with even more panic as monsoon approaches.

While visiting different areas of the city last week, this correspondent found several canals and drains unguarded and filled with plastic waste.

During the visit, retaining walls were not seen in many canals and areas, including Jamal Khan, Chatteshwari Road, Chaktai Khal in Chawkbazar Phooltola, Chashma

Khal in Sholashahar and Osmania Khal in Kalurghat.

The issue is not a recent one. Accidents have been occurring at regular intervals over the years. Shilbrata Barua, a retired government official from Hathazari, slipped and fell into a drain while going to a wedding ceremony in Bakalia on July 3, 2017. On June 9, 2018, a child named Al Amin fell into a drain in the Amin Jute Mill area of the city.

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On August 25 last year, a vegetable trader named Saleh Ahmed (50) slipped and drowned in the rapid flow of drainage water in Muradpur. He was not found.

The issue came to the fore of all discussions when 19-year-old university student Sheherin Mahmud Sadia died after falling into a drain at Agrabad intersection of the city on September 27 last year.

After her death, a bamboo fence was made to guard the drain, which was replaced by a brick wall blocking the footpath. It is yet to be known who built the wall. None of the authorities concerned admitted to building it.

On December 7 last year, 10-year-old Kamal Uddin fell into a drain at Sholashahar Railway Station area. His body was recovered three days after he went missing. The drain is still left unprotected.

Even on April 15 this year, divers of the fire service rescued a woman from Osmania

canal in Kalurghat.

"I still remember Sadia's death. It keeps haunting me," said Taslima Akter, a student of Chittagong College living on Chatteshwari Road.

"We are in constant fear of such accidents, especially during the monsoon. I would like to request the authorities of Chattogram City Corporation (CCC) to take immediate steps to protect the canal," she added.

"The authorities concerned cannot avoid the responsibility of such deaths. They did not take any step to prevent the accidents," said town planner Subhash Barua.

According to CCC officials, there are 57 canals -- measuring 161 kilometres in total -- and 765 kilometres of drains in the city. After Sadia's death, CCC conducted a survey of risky spots around drains, canals and footpaths last year. After the survey, a total of 5,527 risky spots were identified, measuring up to 19 kilometres.

However, works on safeguarding the risky spots have allegedly seen little progress, said CCC sources, adding that over 70 percent of works are yet to be completed.

Contacted, CCC chief engineer Rafiqul Islam said works for installing slabs over open drains and building retaining walls by the canals are ongoing.

"Slabs have already been installed over 25,000 square feet of drains, while retaining walls have been built for 15,000 square feet of risky canals so far," he added.

This correspondent could not contact CCC Mayor Rezaul Karim Chowdhury as he was abroad.



'Rain or shine, our woes linger on'

ARUN BIKASH DEY

Residents of West Bakalia (ward 17) in the port city are the worst sufferers of waterlogging during monsoon every year.

Not just the rainy season, many living beside different lanes and by-lanes in the ward suffer due to waterlogging even in the dry season.

Take the instance of Ujir Ali Shah by-lane in Rahattarpool area. Several hundred families living in the area seemed quite happy when this correspondent visited the area last week, as they said water just receded from their waterlogged road and they could move freely.

"Filthy water overflowing from the drain submerge the road now and then," said Sheikh Md Ledu, a local. "Rain or shine, the alley remains underwater."

Many do not want to live in this area, and some have already given their notice to leave the neighbourhood, said Ledu, owner of a four-storey building in the area.

Arif Ahmed, another resident, echoed him. "The ground floor of many buildings on the lane went underwater during the rain, influenced by cyclone Ashani, last week," said Tripti Dutta, a local. "Many people, especially the children, have been suffering from diarrhoea and enteric diseases since then."

"My two-year-old daughter has been suffering from diarrhoea for five days," she said.

Pushpal Barua, another resident, said he has been suffering from skin diseases as he had to walk through the filthy water quite often. "We have informed the authorities, but the situation has not changed."



Prof Dr Serajul Islam, former head of dermatology at Chattogram Medical College Hospital, said due to the filthy water, people are at risk of suffering from skin diseases including itching, eczema and scabies.

Contacted, Shahidul Alam, councillor of ward-17, said his ward is in one of the low-lying areas, where waterlogging is a common scenario during monsoon.

Asked about the sufferings of residents in Ujir Ali Shah by-lane, Shahidul said it all started just a year ago when Chattogram Development Authority (CDA) started making temporary embankments in canals as part of implementing a mega project to address the waterlogging issue.

"As temporary embankments have been made in canals, drain water cannot recede rapidly, and so water overflows from the drains," he said. "Not only the residents of Ujir Ali Shah by-lane but people of many other areas have also been suffering for the same reason."

He said he will speak to CDA about the matter.

CDA chief engineer Kazi Hasan Bin Shams could not be contacted for comments, despite repeated attempts.

Temporary dams, prolonged sufferings

SIFAYET ULLAH

Temporary dams in the canals made by Chattogram Development Authority (CDA) as part of implementing a mega project to address waterlogging in the port city have worsened the waterlogging problem.

Locals alleged that there was no waterlogging in their areas before the dams were built in the canals. But now, all it takes is a little rain to inundate different areas.

Mohammed Yousof, a resident of Bahaddarhat area, said, "We have been suffering from waterlogging since a dam was set up in the canal."

At a recent coordination meeting, Rezaul Karim Chowdhury, mayor of Chattogram City Corporation (CCC), demanded the removal of the dams. According to sources, the mayor repeatedly appealed to the CDA in this regard.

During a recent visit to the bank of Chashma canal of the port city, this correspondent saw that multiple dams have been set up in the canal from Sholashahar area of the city to Bahaddarhat.

According to CDA data, there are 56 canals in the port city, but work is underway in 36 canals under a

project to mitigate waterlogging. CDA is implementing the Tk 6,000-crore project in association with the army.

But the project implementing agency does not have an accurate estimate of the number of temporary dams in these canals.

Asked, Lt Col Shah Ali, director of the project, said, "They started removing the dams from the canal before monsoon."

Though the time of the project, launched in 2018, got an extension of two years in 2020, the authorities will need two more years to complete it, as 60 percent works of the project has been completed so far. But he

claimed that work to implement the project, which remained hamstrung for a year due to multifarious problems, including the coronavirus outbreak, is going on in full gear now.

Delwar Majumder, former president of Institution of Engineers, Bangladesh (IEB), Chattogram Centre, said when it rains, the city's water cannot drain into the canals because of the dams. As a result, even during light rain, water accumulates up to the knees in different areas.

"The canal dams should have been removed before monsoon to save people of the port city from waterlogging," he added.



More costs, more time, more troubles

MOHAMMAD SUMAN

Costs and deadlines of four ongoing projects to mitigate the waterlogging issue in Chattogram -- worth Tk 11,000 crore -- have been extended multiple times. However, the sufferings of the port city dwellers have increased with them.

Several government audits have revealed that projects were undertaken without development project proposals (DPP), feasibility studies, correct designs and compliance with the city master plans.

According to Chattogram Development Authority (CDA) sources, a meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ecne) approved the largest project -- worth Tk 5,617 crore -- in August 2017. The project was scheduled to be completed by June 2020. However, it was extended by two phases to June 2022.

Meanwhile, only 65 percent of the work has been completed by April this year. The third extension of the project till December 2023 is awaiting Ecne's approval and will increase the cost by 70 percent, at an estimated Tk 9,526 crore.

The DPP prepared by CDA revised the costs at Tk 10,420 crore, while Ministry of Housing and Public Works revised it to Tk 9,526 crore.

According to an audit report published in July 2021 by the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED), the project was approved without proper feasibility study and coordination between the implementing and consulting firms.

The report states that the actual cost was much higher than the estimate because the DPP lacked a "practical work plan" for different project components.

Another Tk 2,310-crore CDA project, involving the construction of a road from Karnafuli to Kalurghat Bridge, is about to miss its deadline.



When Ecne, in August 2017, approved the project, the deadline was fixed at 2020, which has been extended till June 2022.

At least 8.55 kilometres of roads and embankments, regulators and pump houses are being constructed on the opening of 12 canals. Currently, 10 sluice gates are being constructed with a progress rate of only 56 percent.

CDA officials said that the deadline was extended due to the changes in the regulator design in the middle of the project.

Project Director Rajib Das said, "The construction of five sluice gates at Chaktai and Rajakhali canals is almost complete. We hope to complete the rest by June this year."

Another project, undertaken by Chattogram City Corporation (CCC) to excavate a canal from Baroipara to Karnafuli river in 2014 was supposed to end by December 2018.

Seven years have passed since the initiation, and CCC could not dig a three-kilometre long canal, due to complications in acquiring lands.

CCC itself revealed that the project has seen only 12 percent progress.

Recently, Ecne approved the increase in the budget from Tk 328 crore to Tk 1,373 crore and extended the deadline till June 2024.

CCC Chief Engineer Rafiqul Islam said, "The work was stalled as we could not acquire the lands required. It will resume shortly, as we have received the budget, and works are underway to acquire the lands."

Meanwhile, a Tk 1,620-crore Water Development Board (WDB) project was approved in 2019, with a plan to build 23 regulators in the estuary of 23 canals along Karnaphuli river to ward off tidal water, along with an 18.96-km flood wall.

The project has already missed its deadline of December 2021. WDB could not start the work even in 2022 due to Chattogram Port Authority's (CPA) objections because of obstacles to port activities.

Project Director Lt Col Kabirul Islam said, "At present, the project is at a progress rate of 15 percent. A new design has been prepared, consulting the port authority, and hopefully, works can start soon."

Calling out the wrong implementations of the projects, architect and town planner Zarina Hossain said, "CDA developed a realistic 20-year masterplan, which all these projects have overlooked."

"The government has not held relevant agencies, such as CCC and CDA, accountable and failed to ensure professionalism on their part," added Zarina, also general secretary of Forum for Planned Chattogram.