



PHOTOS: SHEIKH NASIR

Nature's revenge

Flood got furious this time as waterbodies filled up for years

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PINAKI ROY, DWOHA CHOWDHURY AND MINTU DESHWARA

For around a month now, all four districts in the Sylhet division have been enduring floods with the water receding slowly from many areas and thousands left to suffer.

About 45 thousand people in the division are still in 662 shelter centres as of Wednesday, and the Eid, needless to say, brought no joy for them.

"My home is still submerged and I am living in the shelter centre with my family. For weeks, I have got no work and don't know how to repair my damaged home. Our Eid joy has been washed away by the floodwater," said Abdur Noor of Jabda village in Moulvibazar's Kulaura upazila.

Strong currents of floodwater have damaged around 1 lakh houses while more than 63 lakh people are affected and still in distress.

Rozina Begum, of Bashkala village in

recording heavy rainfalls, the highest in over 100 years," said Prof AKM Saiful Islam of Institute of Water and Flood Management at Buet.

Major rivers and their tributaries in Bangladesh have no capacity to contain such a huge volume of rainwater, which caused massive flooding in north-eastern and northern regions of the country, he added.

Experts observed that the only exit point for the floodwater, the Meghna river at Bhairab, also lacks the capacity to allow such a huge volume of floodwater to pass.

Dr Ainun Nishat, professor emeritus at Brac University, said, "The water flow of the Surma is obstructed near Bhairab, where the river is called the Kalni. For the last few years, even vessels cannot operate in the river during the lean period."

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Dr Adil Mohammed Khan, executive director of Bangladesh Institute of Planners said, "The flood took a serious turn during this monsoon as the water retaining capacity of the haor region has been reduced significantly."

Recently Dr Adil presented a study report at a seminar that reveals most of the water bodies in 373 haors -- which used to have water in dry season -- got filled up due to natural causes or human activities.

Based on satellite images, the study found that the haor area lost almost 40 percent of dry season wetlands from 1988 to 2006. The rate of changing wetland into built-up areas was even faster and filling up of some waterbodies reached up to 87 percent by 2020.

Two Buet graduates, Injamul Haque Refat and Maria Mehrin, conducted the study on land cover changes in haors of Bangladesh analysing satellite images taken in 1988, 1994, 2000, 2006, 2013 and 2020 of 373 haors.

"While analysing satellite images, we found that in 1988, there were waterbodies across around 3,100 sq km in the dry season but the area was only 399 sq km in 2020," said Refat.

"We have found different concrete structures including roads, houses and other establishments in those areas," he added.

What locals say also supports their findings.

Kawsar Ahmed, a boatman of Bashtala village in Chhatak, said, "They constructed a road to connect Chhatak and Dowarabazar upazilas right through the haor. It was awaiting inauguration but the floodwater washed away it in several places."

Meanwhile, the landslides on open-cast mines and the razing of hillocks in India's Meghalaya led to filling up of rivers, creeks and haors.

For example, Pochashol Beel of Tangar Haor in Sunamganj has been filled up in recent years due to the landslides in the Meghalaya hills, locals claimed.

In the last year alone, at least 400 acres of land, mostly farmland, has been covered with sand, said bordering locals of Tahirkhola upazila in Sunamganj.

Indigenous rights leader Andrew Sholomar, a resident of Rajai village in the upazila, said: "Visiting the hills in Meghalaya, I saw mining of stone, limestone and coal going on, causing landslides there."

Sharif Jamil, general secretary of Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon, said, "As a result of the mining in Meghalaya, the ecosystem of haor is being severely impacted. Even the uranium mining there is also affecting the haors. This must be stopped through bilateral talks."

"Moreover," he added, "a modern framework is necessary to manage all the transboundary rivers of Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna basins when the Joint Rivers Commission is failing."



Sunamganj's Chhatak, said, "The flood washed away my home, and now I am living on a culvert with my family. We cannot afford to rebuild it and don't know how to return to the life we had before."

But why did such a devastating flood strike the region?

"We have seen both Bangladesh and upstream states of Meghalaya and Assam and western Himalayan regions of India

bottleneck at Bhairab. So, the water coming down from upstream is receding slowly."

The entire haor region is comprised of 373 haors spreading across 8,58,460 hectares of area, or 8,584.6 sq km, in seven districts -- Sunamganj, Sylhet, Habiganj, Moulvibazar, Netrakona, Kishoreganj and Brahmanbaria.

Vast stretches of haor area remain submerged for roughly 6-7 months of the year during the monsoon.



'Haors are no longer haors'

Says environmentalist Sharif Jamil in an interview with The Daily Star

Q. What is happening to our haors (the vast wetlands in the country's north-eastern region) and how has that impacted the flood situation?

A. Haors are no longer haors. While visiting the areas, you will see many embankments, crop protection dykes and roads that have been constructed. But nowhere, the water-based networks of the haors have been considered.

As a result, many small rivers have died, and there are no links between small rivers and big rivers in many places. Thirteen thousand kilometres of roads have been constructed in Sylhet and Sunamganj where the LGED [Local Government Engineering Department] did not



maintain hydrology. Now most of them [the roads] are damaged, and some are obstructing the floodwater [from receding].

Q. What else causes the slow receding of floodwater?

A. Another important factor is that all the water goes to the Meghna, but the construction of three bridges at Bhairab created a bottleneck. So, the water coming down from upstream is receding slowly.

Q. Many condemn the filling up of rivers as a key reason behind the flood situation and demand their dredging. What is happening with the rivers of the upper Meghna basin?

A. If the natural flow of water continues in the river, it will eventually dredge itself. But that's

If the natural flow of water continues in the river, it will eventually dredge itself. But that's the problem with 46 transboundary rivers and creeks from India. All these rivers and creeks have narrowed down after entering Bangladesh while it was supposed to be otherwise. This is because India built barrages or implemented hydraulic projects on almost all rivers upstream.

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As a result, these waterbodies no longer have regular flows, resulting in siltation, and in the absence of water, parts of rivers are being encroached amid poor monitoring.

Q. We have a Joint Rivers Commission with India. How are they failing?

A. The Joint Rivers Commission barely sits in meetings while they are obliged to hold a meeting twice a year. Moreover, these meetings bring no fruitful results anyway due to the lack of proper study and willingness.

The Ganga, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna -- all these rivers flow to the Bay of Bengal. Like the Nile or the Rhine rivers, these rivers must be managed together by all five countries concerned. A modern and new framework is needed now.

Q. How important is it to have a proper management approach for haors?

A. Haors are formed as a result of tectonic depression, so the water flows down from the upstream fast and then finds no way to be carried away down to the Meghna basin.

The problem will never go away until we change our attitude towards haor management. We just consider paddy as the only cash crop, while aquatic resources are not being considered.

As many people's livelihood depends on the development initiatives and many villages developed in the process, an overnight change is not possible.

A combined plan is necessary that will implement changes gradually through proper planning.

Ultimately, we must come out of the commercial approach and adopt a free-flowing ecological approach.

[Interviewed by Dwoha Chowdhury]