

## Recent floods lay bare our vulnerabilities

### Authorities must implement climate-resilient policies

As waters slowly begin to recede in the aftermath of heavy rains and flooding in Chattogram division over the past week, we are only just coming to terms with the devastation left in its wake. Thousands of people are still without drinking water and electricity. Residents who were forced to evacuate their inundated neighbourhoods have returned to find their homes irreversibly damaged. The destruction of belongings and property means their livelihoods have also been put at risk. At least 282 kilometres of major roads have been damaged, as well as several parts of the under construction Chattogram-Cox's Bazar rail line, meaning the Tk 15,000 crore project is now likely to be delayed.

By all accounts, it seems it will be a long time before there is any return to normalcy. According to reports, locals are still being forced to subsist on dry food and are struggling to find drinkable water. On top of that, mobile networks continue to be patchy in certain areas, making it all the more difficult to ensure that help reaches the most hard-hit. In the face of such hardship, we must ask: given that heavy rains, flooding and erratic weather patterns have become regular occurrences in the era of climate catastrophe, could the authorities not have been better prepared to deal with this most recent devastation?

We do not believe these latest events can simply be written off as just another case of extreme weather. For years, experts have warned against the environmental destruction of the hill districts, arguing that rampant deforestation, hill-cutting and the destruction of rivers and canals will make the area more vulnerable to disasters. Despite any number of pledges and climate plans, very little has been done to combat environmental degradation, and we have seen far too many cases of influentials profiting from it instead.

We have witnessed the same apathy in terms of water-logging issues. During the latest floods, at least 40 percent of Chattogram city was submerged. Over the years, relevant authorities have held numerous meetings and come up with many plans to deal with this regular waterlogging, but failed when it comes to implementation. The fact that in the last six years, only five out of 40 sluice gates that would have allowed for better water flow at canals have been built is testament to this.

The recent floods have painted a clear picture of what will continue to happen if we fail to implement policies to protect the environment and build greater climate resiliency. The authorities must act before it is too late.

## Green milestone for RMG industry

### But more needs to be done to achieve real sustainability

At a time when the world is racing against the clock to curb the catastrophic impacts of climate change, with a shift towards greener economies and sustainable development, it is heartening to find that the RMG sector in Bangladesh is also keeping in step with the changing times. The industry has reached a new milestone after two more factories received LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification from the United States Green Building Council (USGBC) for their green initiatives, raising the total to 200. According to industry leaders, although only 18 factories have secured this recognition so far this year, there are likely to be more such milestones to look forward to, since as many as 500 are awaiting certification.

The importance of such sustainable initiatives cannot be stressed upon enough. This year, we experienced one of the worst heatwaves the region has seen over the last century, which are now being followed by flash floods and landslides. Climate scientists have warned time and again how such extreme weather events are a result of the climate breakdown and will only get worse if the world does not come together to create carbon-neutral economies. Given the dire situation we are in, while green initiatives are a step in the right direction, having only 200 green buildings out of 4,000-plus RMG factories across the country is simply not enough.

While such green factories could potentially contribute to global competitiveness, Bangladesh must also be tuned into the conversation happening around the environmental impacts of fast fashion. In June this year, the EU's environment chief declared that the age of under-regulation was over since the environmental waste created by this industry was "absolutely unacceptable," and there is a growing movement to shift towards ethically made and environmentally friendly apparel.

It is time for our RMG industry to turn its attention to this movement as well. This will require the industry actors to go beyond green factories to reduce waste, use resources more efficiently, and pay living wages to RMG workers. In all of this, global fashion brands must also play their part if we are to truly create a sustainable RMG industry.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Does anyone care about us?

I am sick and tired of the incompetencies of our authorities. What do we pay taxes for if we have to get marooned by waterlogging every time it rains? What have the authorities been doing all these years if they haven't learnt how to manage floods in a historically flood-prone country? On top of that, we have a massive dengue outbreak going on. Despite two decades of handling this disease, it seems the authorities have learnt nothing. Enough is enough!

Amina Bari  
Chattogram

# What caused the catastrophic floods in Chattogram?



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MD DELWAR HOSSAIN MAZUMDAR

Floods are not new in Chattogram. The coastal city's low areas are just 2.5-3 metres above sea level, whereas the usual height of high tide is around five metres there. But in recent years, floods have become more bothersome than before, disrupting public life. In the past, we had a lot of ponds and other water bodies in the city. During high tides and heavy rain, water used to get drained into those water bodies, and during low tide it would be drawn back to the sea through canals and rivers. But as the population grew and the city got urbanised in an unplanned way, canals and rivers were encroached and the city coverage expanded. Now excess water from rain and tide cannot be absorbed by the soil and water bodies, nor can it flow down the natural drainage system. On top of that, with the increased population, the city creates more waste, which is dumped in the canals. The hills have been encroached upon as well, so they are more vulnerable to erosion. Then there are the effects of climate change, so we now have higher tides and more intense rainfall.

Back in 1995, a detailed regional master plan had been formulated for the city, which had predicted such a situation occurring in the near future. It pointed out what should be done, and exactly where canals were encroached at that time. But, unfortunately, no one took the initiative to implement the 1995 plan. However, a few years ago, our prime minister showed concern for the situation in Chattogram, and consequently, the Chattogram Development Authority (CDA) formed a master plan, which was approved by Ecne. But the CDA lacked the capacity to implement the new master plan at the time. There was criticism regarding the viability of the plan's many aspects as well. Following that, the prime minister acknowledged that there were problems, and formed a high authority committee chaired by the LGRD minister. We don't know how effective that committee was, but after a while, the project was handed over to the army. But the army, too, was not completely prepared for a drainage project of this scale at that time. Meanwhile, we kept pointing out that there were inconsistencies and a lack of cooperation. Some of them were addressed, and the rest were left out.

As per historical accounts, there



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Life came to a standstill as Chattogram got inundated due to heavy rainfall over the last few days.

were 104 canals in the city, but in this master plan, only 57 canals were pointed out and the CDA started working on 36 of them. They claimed that they did not get enough funding from the finance ministry, so the contractors did not complete their work. The authorities say that almost 60-70 percent work of the project has been done. But the result we get is zero.

First of all, tidal regulators were supposed to be constructed to control tidal waves. But they are not functional at all. Some of the regulators now have structures, but there are no gates, which is worse than those that have no structures at all – because the half-made regulators create obstructions.

Then the CDA claims that they have dredged the canals, but where is the soil then? And while building retaining walls on the canal banks, they dumped a large quantity of excess soil back into the canal and used some soil to construct roads.

the contractors would collect that sediment and use them elsewhere. There are no silt traps installed yet.

We couldn't build tide regulators, or ensure water drainage through canals, and we're letting sediment come down the hills and get mixed up with our waste and obstruct the drainage channels. They are saying that almost 70 percent of the work is done. My question is: which part of the drainage system is actually functional?

It's true that what happened this year – the unusually high tide and heavy rainfall – would still cause the floods even if the current projects were complete. But we could have mitigated the devastating impact.

The waterlogging problem in Chattogram city is not unsolvable. There are many coastal areas in the world, which are lower than the mean sea level. But their governments used hydrology engineering to turn that water problem into an asset. Some even used this to develop tourism.

must develop a manual for the logistics, and human resources for its operation and maintenance. And the city corporation must have access to the necessary resources and funding for maintenance. There should be clear guidance and regulations to prevent waste dumping into the canals. All 104 canals must be reclaimed. There should be high lift pumps ready so that in case of heavy rainfall, the water can be mechanically removed. There should be regular drainage rehearsals, just like firefighting drills. And before every monsoon, there should be routine checks if every aspect of the system is prepared.

If all these are done, and done immediately, I believe we can have a sustainable drainage solution for Chattogram. Effective results are possible even before the next monsoon season. But if we fail to do that, all the taxpayers' money and their trust in authority will be washed away with the floodwater.

## INTERNATIONAL YOUTH DAY

# Help young people steward green transition

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**FARAH KABIR and NAZMUL AHSAN**

International Youth Day is observed annually on August 12 to draw attention to the concerns of young people around the world. This year, the theme is "Green Skills for Youth: Towards a Sustainable World." Young people are related to climate change in multiple ways. Research shows how climate change and extreme weather affect physical and mental health of the youth, leaving them with a certain level of pessimism. Yet, they have come together to advocate for climate justice, acting as stewards for the future. It is very much about their right to life and dignity.

The participation of youth in politics and movement is not new, given the urgency of their collective issues. Youth are the driving force of change, not only on the political front, but in every social, economic and environmental aspect. According to the United Nations, by 2030, as many as 57 percent of the world's population will be under 30 years of age. We are fortunate to live in a time when the population comprises so many young people. According to the 2022 Bangladesh census, 56.77 percent of the total population is under 30

years old. It is more than 64 percent when considering below 35 years, if we calculate the upper age limit for a young person in line with our National Youth Policy (2017).

Young individuals do not fall into a single category; they are diverse. Given the urban-rural divide, gender inequality, and numerous other socioeconomic differences, there is a significant gap among the youth in terms of accessing education, healthcare and other public services. As this year's International Youth Day highlights the importance of young people having access to green skills, regardless of any exclusions or marginalisation, it begs the question: how will Bangladesh ensure equality in providing green skills to its young people for a sustainable world?

The current demographic landscape in Bangladesh and worldwide presents a massive opportunity to alter the development discourse through the strength, vigour and creativity of young people. Additionally, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that the UN adopted in 2015 present an exceptional opportunity to establish a new global standard that is more sustainable and environmentally friendly. Protecting the planet from anthropocentric effects and excessive exploitation of natural resources was one of the core justifications for the SDG adaptation. The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has warned that if human civilisation does not behave sensibly towards nature and the environment, the consequences will

be catastrophic. The global population now stands at over eight billion, whereas it was only 1.2 billion in 1850, in the pre-industrial era. According to experts, our planet is exhausted by maintaining the supply channels for the unrestricted consumption of its population.

This is a timely reminder to foster the shift towards a new economic and consumption pattern and a new green deal, which is the very message of the 2023 International Youth Day. It will also be crucial to attaining the SDGs by 2030 as well as fostering climate justice. There is no alternative to making our world greener and more sustainable, as promised by global leaders and demanded for decades by civil society and young people worldwide. Although the SDGs were adopted in 2015 and are at the halfway point of their mandate, no considerable progress has been made during this time. Instead of supporting SDGs, global resources are being redirected to back mercenaries in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war.

The theme for this year's International Youth Day, therefore, holds significant relevance as it explores the concept of transition and the potential contributions of young individuals behind it. Simply put, green skills are the knowledge, abilities, values and attitudes needed to live in, develop and support a sustainable and resource-efficient society. A successful shift, however, is not just dependent on "skills for the future" and "skills for green jobs." Young people need to take on leadership roles with the necessary

skills and enthusiasm. Moreover, transition under the leadership of young people requires acquiring technical knowledge supported by governments, developing broader collaboration, transferring technology to Global South, and giving the young people a space to become global citizens. Transition is an issue that requires behavioural changes among the younger generations and others.

The world is currently going through a critical passage; on the one hand, it is experiencing frequent and severe disasters as an outcome of climate change, and on the other hand, it is experiencing sluggish implementation of the SDGs due to inadequate financial allocation and the absence of partnership development. If the expected transition does not make any progress, the implementation of the SDGs and its relevant goals, such as affordable and clean energy (SDG 7), responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), and taking climate action (SDG 13), will be dumped. The situation is similarly pertinent in Bangladesh, and it provides insights about whether we are ready to provide green skills to our young people and support them to lead the transition towards a more sustainable and greener world. Are we creating an enabling environment for those who want to take the lead? Are we allocating resources to this endeavour? This is the time to explore all these questions – not just for our young people, but for our country and for this planet.