

15 YEARS OF CYCLONE AILA

It lashed once but changed lives forever

DIPANKAR ROY, *Khulna*

On this day in 2009, cyclone Aila lashed the coastal belt of Bangladesh, leaving behind a trail of destruction that affected about 3.9 million people.

The cyclone left 190 people dead and 7,100 injured, killed 100,000 livestock, destroyed crops across 350,000 acres of land, damaged all 39 polders of Khulna, Satkhira and Bagerhat districts completely or partially, breached 684 kilometre of the total 1,651 km embankment, and left 109 of the total 639 sluice gates unusable.

Today, 15 years later since Aila unleashed its fury, hundreds of families who became homeless overnight are still living on embankments in a destitute condition in Dakope and Koyra upazilas of Khulna.

They lived through permanent displacement, prolonged struggle, and persistent adversity to remain afloat.

Satyajit Roy, 38, of Channirchak village under Dakope, is one of them.

Somehow, he had managed to survive the cyclone with his parents and wife, but they lost their home and eventually ended up on the embankment of Dhaki river.

The family of four has been living in a two-room shack measuring 10 feet by 8 feet with a mere four-foot height for the past one and half decade. The risk of having this last bit of shelter swept away by the river's tide any day is ever present.

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Even after losing everything to cyclone Aila, hundreds still live dangerously close to the river, vulnerable to erosion. Many of them had to relocate and restart more than once due to river erosion, and it seems as if there is no end to their plight, partly because of climate change, and mostly due to indifference of the authorities concerned.

PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN



Woman found dead in N'ganj

OUR CORRESPONDENT,

N'ganj

Police yesterday arrested a man after his wife was found dead in Sonargaon, Narayanganj.

The body of Salma Akter, 30, mother of two children, was found next to a pond near her house in Bhattapur area, said police.

Her husband, Md Rupchan, was arrested in connection with the incident, said Md Mohsin, inspector (investigation) of Sonargaon Police Station.

Salma's brother, Md Ripon, alleged that his sister was murdered following a family dispute.

The body was sent to the morgue of Narayanganj General Hospital for an autopsy. The reason behind the death will be known after the autopsy report, said Inspector Mohsin.

Two children drown in Patuakhali

OUR CORRESPONDENT,

Patuakhali

Two children have drowned in separate incidents in Kalapara upazila, Patuakhali recently.

Yesterday, an 8-year-old child named Rahat drowned in a pond while bathing with some of his friends in the waterbody around 1:00pm.

Rahat, son of Md Masum Khan, was taken to a health complex, where he was declared dead.

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Water crisis worsens in rural Chattogram

FM MIZANUR RAHAMAN, *Ctg*

Residents of different rural areas under 15 upazilas in Chattogram are grappling with an acute crisis of water.

Around 24,055 tube wells in the upazilas have become dysfunctional as the groundwater level has depleted significantly amid the ongoing hot spell.

People are being compelled to collect water, often untreated and contaminated with arsenic, from different other sources.

Heavy industries and small factories have long been extracting groundwater with high-power submersible pumps to meet their huge daily production needs, locals alleged.

This has led to the depletion of the groundwater level significantly, results in water crisis during dry season every year, they added. Sometimes no water is found even at 250-350 feet depth underground.

Among the 15 upazilas, there are around 300 large and small factories in Sitakunda alone.

"Most tube wells at our village are not working. We are collecting water from people who have personal deep tube wells," said Subhasish Acharya, a resident of Raozan's Kadalpur union.

The situation in Banshkhali is different. While some tube wells are working, the water is highly saline and unusable.

Sifadul Islam from Khankhanabad union in the upazila, said, "We collect water usually from ponds in the area for our daily needs."

According to the January report of the Department of Public



At least 24,055 tube wells in 15 upazilas of Chattogram became dysfunctional due to depleted groundwater level.

PHOTO: STAR

Health Engineering (DPHE), Chattogram district has a total of 100,423 tube wells. Of these, only 76,368 are currently functional. Moreover, the groundwater table has been declining by two-five metres every year.

According to DPHE officials, in many areas of the Banshkhali, Lohagara, and Patiya upazilas, the groundwater table has depleted so much that water can only be found after digging 600-700 feet deep.

In the areas under Sitakunda and Mirsarai upazilas, the situation is even worse, the report added.

The DPHE had installed 350 tube wells in Charkanai, Hulain,

Panchria, and Habilasdwp villages under Habilasdwp union of Patiya upazila to alleviate water crisis for around 30,000 residents. However, these tube wells became dysfunctional soon afterwards due to rampant extraction of groundwater by eight industrial establishments in the vicinity.

After the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Society filed a writ petition in this regard, the court declared the union a "crisis area".

Palash Chandra Das, executive engineer of DPHE in Chattogram, said, "The gap between the extent by which groundwater is being

extracted and replenished is huge." "Currently, water is unavailable in most manual tube wells installed a long time ago, thereby increasing dependency on deep tube wells. Once the monsoon comes, the water level will rise to alleviate the crisis. Until then, we have to wait as there is no immediate remedy," he said.

"A deep water pump can meet the water demand of up to 100 families. Such pumps are now being used to irrigate croplands as summer is the peak time for cultivation. Also, increasing use of deep tube wells by factories has made it a challenge for us," Palash added.

Mymensingh's traffic woes deteriorate

OUR CORRESPONDENT, *Mymensingh*

The traffic mismanagement in Mymensingh has continued to deteriorate, with no visible improvement since the city ranked 9th in the list of the world's slowest cities last year, said city dwellers.

After being upgraded to a city corporation in 2018, Mymensingh's population doubled, but its roads have not been improved or widened yet. This, alongside a significant increase in the number of vehicles plying the roads, has culminated in severe traffic congestion across the city.

"The authorities concerned are yet to come up with any viable plan to curb traffic congestions in the city, while the situation keeps worsening over time," said Nazrul Islam Chunnun, convener of Jonouddogh, Mymensingh, a citizens' platform.

"The city roads need widening to tackle the onrush of vehicles, including battery-run auto-rickshaws, which increased manifold in recent years," he added.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- » Concerted initiative
- » Widening roads
- » Freeing footpaths
- » Stopping unregistered vehicles

Nurul Amin Kalam, secretary of Mymensingh Nagorik Andolon, urged the authorities concerned to conduct drives and come up with a masterplan in this regard.

Shibbir Ahmed Liton, secretary of Poribesh Rokkha o Unnayan Andolon, said, "The unbearable traffic congestion on the city roads is largely due to the huge number of illegal battery- and CNG-run auto-rickshaws plying the roads, while trucks and lorries are often parked, occupying a significant part of most roads."

In his 23-point election manifesto, the newly re-elected Mymensingh city mayor Ekramul Haque Titu had placed priority on improving the city's traffic situation.

He pledged to take urgent steps to set up modern traffic system with available manpower taking experts' opinions.



The residents are waiting to see Titu's actions after he takes office as mayor next month.

According to Waliul Islam, head assistant at licence department of Mymensingh City Corporation, there are around 18,000 licensed batter-run easy bikes, rickshaws and rickshaws in the city. However, various other sources estimate the total number of these vehicles to be around 30,000, a significant fraction of which are unregistered.

Contacted, Syed Mahbubur Rahman, traffic inspector in Mymensingh, said the city roads need urgent widening for smooth vehicular movement as there has been no such road development work in the past 30 years.

"Also, the issuance of licences to new battery-run vehicles has been halted since 2020, while the licences of about 2,000 battery-run rickshaws were cancelled in the last two years because they were not renewed on time," he said.

"If the city roads and important intersections are widened, footpaths are freed from illegal occupation, and unregistered vehicles are prevented from plying the roads, then it will ease the traffic situation significantly. To this end, a concerted initiative involving the administration, police and civil society members is necessary," Mahbubur added.

Last year, Mymensingh ranked ninth on the list of 20 slowest cities in the world, according to a study published by the US-based National Bureau of Economic Research.

Litchi price soars as yield dips

Growers, traders point at heatwave

AHMED HUMAYUN KABIR TOPU, *Pabna*

As litchi has started coming to the markets in Pabna, the price has soared following a poor yield this year due to the heatwave.

Pabna is one of the country's biggest hubs of popular, delicious seasonal fruit.

Since mid-May, litchi growers across the district have been harvesting their produce in full swing. However, most of them ended up with yields much lower than expected.

The long hot spell damaged much of the litchi buds in the trees. However, the high demand for the fruit in the market led to a rise in the price of litchi.

Visiting markets in Pabna, this correspondent saw litchis being sold at Tk 270-280 per hundred this year, while usually the price remains around Tk 200.

Pabna is expected to see a business worth Tk 1,000 crore with the fruit this year, according to growers and traders.

"Seeing the trees with ample buds, I bought 300 trees for Tk 12 lakh, expecting a return of Tk 15 lakh, with a harvest of 5-8 thousand fruits from each tree. However,



as harvest began, the marketable yield has been much lower, around 1,500-2,000 fruits from each tree," said Md Faruk, a trader from Awtapara village under Pabna's Ishwardi upazila. "To retain my cost, I need to sell each 1,000 litchi for at least Tk 2,500," he added.

Md Ratan Miah, a litchi trader from

Brahmanbaria, echoed him.

In the previous years, one could buy each 1,000 litchi for around Tk 1500, he added.

Visiting numerous orchards in the district, this correspondent saw a huge amount of litchi damaged due to the heat as well as while harvesting.

Earlier, rains at the end of winter had caused damage to litchi buds, and then the hot spell damaged the buds and unripe fruits further, which lowered the yield this year significantly, said Sajahan Ali Badsha, a leading litchi producer and also an adviser to Bangladesh Krishak Unnayan Society.

"If the temperature rises past 35 degrees Celsius, it adversely affects litchi production. This year, we had temperatures soaring past 37-38 degrees Celsius, which dried up the fruits on trees," he said.

"The total yield might be around 350-400 crore pieces of litchi this year, which is expected to be sold for a total of Tk 800-1,000 crore," Badsha added.

Md Shah Alam, a development officer of the Department of Agricultural Extension in Pabna, said around 4,721 hectares of land in the district was brought under litchi cultivation this year, including over 3,000 hectares in Ishwardi upazila alone.

"We are expecting a total yield of 50,000 tonnes of litchi even after the poor production," he added.