

Fast-moving floods in Sylhet raise alarm

Tens of thousands plunged into a crisis as flooding intensifies

The Eid holiday has not been the joyful experience that people in Sylhet and neighbouring areas had probably expected it to be thanks to the evolving flood situation there. The region was just beginning to recover from the flash flood that hit on May 29 and lasted until about June 8. But any relief experienced was short-lived, as a second wave of flooding has hit the region amid Eid celebrations after torrential rains combined with onrush of water from upstream India. Reportedly, large parts of Sylhet and Sunamganj districts have been inundated, affecting lakhs of residents. With a forecast of continued rainfall over the next two days, the situation is likely to worsen further.

Sylhet is particularly vulnerable. According to the district administration, 21 out of the 42 wards in the city have been flooded. Additionally, floodwaters have entered 102 unions in all upazilas of the district, inundating a total of 1,323 villages. The situation in Sunamganj is no better, as major rivers in the two districts continue to swell. With many vital roads submerged, and neighbourhoods under knee-to-waist-deep water, life has come to a standstill. Power outages and communication disruptions could further complicate the situation. Many are predicting a repeat or even exacerbation of the devastating flood Sylhet had experienced in 2022. Driving this fear is the fact that in the first 18 days of this June, Sylhet recorded more rainfall than the entire month of June in 2022. The total rainfall by the end of this month might exceed 2,000 millimetres, according to an estimate, setting a new record.

We don't need a reminder of the sufferings that this may result in. The authorities are doing what they can to help the affected but, clearly, they need to do more, both short-term and long-term. Beyond Sylhet, there are risks of flooding in a number of districts in Rangpur, Mymensingh, Barishal and Chattogram divisions. June, thus, is increasingly becoming a month of hardship caused by rains and mountain runoff. This is a challenge that goes beyond regular flood preparations, and with typical safeguards like embankments and polders too prone to damage, we must consider our long-term future. There is an argument, increasingly pertinent, about whether relying on what worked in the pre-climate-change era can stand up to the more intense flooding seen these days. Should we continue to try containing the formidable rivers and deltaic nature of Bangladesh through often-fragile structural defences, or should we go for a blended approach that balances the restorative and destructive powers of floods through proper adaptations?

We must explore these questions, and pursue solutions, with a more open mind. Right now, the priority is to respond properly to the fast-moving floods, particularly in Sylhet division, and minimise damage and suffering. The authorities must ensure that those stranded by water receive shelter, food, and drinking water.

We can't afford to lose UAE labour market

Govt must deal with irregularities in overseas recruitment

After the recent freezing of recruitment of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia, the possibility that job opportunities in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) might also be shrinking for our citizens is quite worrying. Losing a market like the UAE, from where we received the highest amount of remittance in the first 10 months of the ongoing fiscal year, would deal a severe blow to our remittance inflow, not to mention the many thousands whose lives rely on it.

According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, after Saudi Arabia, the UAE has the largest base of Bangladeshi migrant workers. In fact, more than 17 percent of our migrants are employed in the UAE, as per an estimate by the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET). Between July 2023 and April 2024, we received more than \$3.65 billion in remittance from the UAE—the highest from any destination country. Meanwhile, workers in Saudi Arabia sent \$2.16 billion during the same period.

However, employers in the UAE are reportedly growing reluctant to recruit Bangladeshi workers due to fraudulent activities on our end, raising the chances of us losing a strong source of foreign currency. According to industry insiders, some unscrupulous manpower agents and agencies have been abusing a post-Covid provision enforced by the Gulf country that allows workers to enter the country on a tourist visa and then convert it to work visa through the recruiters. This has led to many workers getting cheated and stranded in the UAE with no work. Employers, too, don't want to risk getting fined for recruiting illegal workers.

It is a familiar story: fraudulent activities by agencies led to Malaysia freezing recruitment of Bangladesh workers, too. Over the past several years, many issues regarding overseas recruitment have been flagged and irregular activities regularly reported, with demands for appropriate remedies, yet the authorities have done little in this regard. Their inertia is leading us towards the potential loss of another key labour market, especially at a time when we need the precious dollars to replenish our dwindling reserves. It is, therefore, high time the authorities stopped dilly-dallying, and did what's necessary to overhaul our overseas employment sector by getting rid of rampant corruption and mismanagement.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



'Jaws' released in theatres

On June 20, 1975, Steven Spielberg's thriller Jaws was released in theatres, and it was a huge success, essentially creating the genre of summer blockbusters.

Is the budget just another attempt at 'youthwashing'?



M Niaz Asadullah is Southeast Asia Lead of the Global Labor Organization, Fellow of IZA Institute of Labor Economics, Visiting Professor of Economics, University of Reading, UK, and Professorial Fellow, North South University. He can be reached at m.asadullah@reading.ac.uk

M NIAZ ASADULLAH

The recently proposed budget has been disappointing for job seekers, especially the youth. People expected allocations favouring jobs and quality education for young people, yet the announced national budget fell short in both aspects.

According to a recent citizen survey entitled "New Government, National Budget and Citizens' Aspirations" conducted by the Centre for Policy Dialogue, three top priorities were decent jobs (22 percent), quality education (17.5 percent) and social protection (12 percent). Among those who prioritised decent jobs, almost half wanted reduced unemployment, while one-third wanted increased job opportunities. This year's budget didn't reflect these priorities.

This is all the more surprising considering that the Awami League's 2024 election manifesto listed "ensuring job-oriented education and employment for youth" as the second most important focus. Moreover, one of this year's election campaign slogans was "The Power of Youth—Prosperity of Bangladesh." A decade ago, the 2014 Election Manifesto of Awami League also made bold claims that, "illiteracy will fade away, educated and trained human resources will abound, [and] unemployment will be reduced to zero with crores of young people getting employed."

In fact, in the last 15 years, more than a dozen plans, policies, acts and rules have been introduced concerning the youth. The National Youth Policy 2017, National Skills Development Policy 2011, the Seventh Five Year Plan 2016-2020, the Expatriate and Overseas Employment Policy 2016, and the Overseas Employment and Migrants Act 2013—all have acknowledged and addressed the issue of youth employment. The A2i project has promoted the idea of the smart youth of Smart Bangladesh while the Department of Youth Development of the Ministry of Youth and Sports also has published a supplementary report entitled "Smart Youth, Prosperous Country, Bangabandhu's Bangladesh." Since January 2020, we have also adopted a specific plan of action for the implementation of the National Youth Policy 2017.

So why does a pro-youth budget still remain elusive? One explanation might be "youthwashing."



VIUSAL: TEENI AND TUNI

Speech writers and political event organisers are more than happy to make lofty pro-youth promises and encourage youth participation for the sake of good publicity and annual reports. Yet when it comes to delivering on promises, they are missing in action.

Youthwashing is on the rise. Take for instance the 2024 election manifesto of the Awami League. It painstakingly catalogued the government's achievements in youth development—over 13 million young individuals were provided with skill development training and close to a million young people are engaged in self-employment. We are told that, owing to various motivational programmes, training, self-employment projects, youth loan schemes, and poverty alleviation initiatives, there is a sharp decline in the unemployment rate from 6 percent in 2009 to 3.6 percent in 2022.

Yet, the reality is that the majority of our unemployed population is between 15 and 24 years old. Not only does Bangladesh have a double-digit youth unemployment rate of over 10 percent, the rate of people not in education, employment, and training (NEET) is also nearly double the global average of 21.7 percent.

According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics data, the share of youth aged 15 to 24 years who fall into the NEET category has increased from 28.9 percent in 2017 to 39.88 percent in 2022. Paradoxically, university degree holders also continue to suffer

from a high rate of unemployment. But this is not a new phenomenon. A 2014 comparative study jointly conducted by the British Council and the Economist Intelligence Unit reported that nearly five out of every 10 graduates in Bangladesh were unemployed against approximately three out of 10 in India and Pakistan. Given the high NEET rate,

political campaigns?

Or is youthwashing only a symptom? Perhaps the broken interlinkage between education and employment despite the propaganda of youth power as the driver of prosperous Bangladesh is reflective of a more fundamental gap in policy making, i.e., the lack of credible and accountable political leadership.

That said, youthwashing is not unique to Bangladesh. Similar to exploiting the green agenda for popular publicity and rhetoric, politicians in authoritarian regimes are increasingly exploiting young people's voices but doing so in a performative way while de facto paying little attention to them, or failing to act on concerns raised by this group. But this practice is likely to be particularly costly for Bangladesh given that our first demographic dividend window will close between 2030 and 2042. Youthwashing must be resisted as a strategy for political elites to cover up underinvestment in education and employment.

Globally, the youth has had a long legacy of facilitating social transformation processes through active involvement in democratic uprisings. Future-focused movements such as fighting climate change have also attracted young voices who are collectively campaigning to save the planet and protect their future. Recognising their transformative potential, international development partners are also supporting concrete measures for youth policy development to facilitate young people's access to rights and social opportunities. The UN, too, recognises youth action as key to SDGs such as Quality Education, Decent Work and Economic Growth, and Reduced Inequalities. Given this recognition, young people must collectively bargain for their future and hold governments accountable for delivering jobs and quality education.

Bangladeshi policymakers, therefore, must not underestimate the youth's ability for public action, as evidenced in the nationwide protests demanding fair, quota-free access to public sector jobs in 2018. At a time of gradual democratic backsliding worldwide, the growing practice of using young people as popular propaganda tools must be challenged. Politicians must be held accountable for their election-time promises of reducing youth unemployment. We must not forget that young people are the main stakeholders of the Smart Bangladesh Vision 2041 as well as the Delta Plan 2100. It is time for them to take charge of the public campaign for the formulation of a "national youth budget" as well as a national strategy for youth employment.

WORLD REFUGEE DAY

A call for true solidarity with the Rohingya community



Hasina Rahman is country director of The International Rescue Committee.

HASINA RAHMAN

This month, UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, published its flagship Global Trends Report, which has not brought any immediate hope to the world. The report published on June 12 in Geneva found that forced displacement rose to 120 million in May 2024, marking the 12th consecutive annual increase—a result of ongoing crises and newly emerging and evolving conflicts. The figure would make the global displaced population equivalent to the 12th largest country in the world, around the size of Japan. One in every 69 people, or 1.5 percent of the entire world's population, are now forcibly displaced.

This is nearly double the one in 125 people who were displaced a decade ago. The increase to 117.3 million at the end of 2023 constitutes a rise of 8 percent, or 8.8 million people compared to the end of 2022—and is a continuation of the year-on-year increases over the last 12 years. When every day, more people are

facing forced displacement globally, the world's attention is rapidly shifting from one crisis to another. And unfortunately, globally, the focus on the Rohingya crisis is fading. It has been seven years since the massive influx happened in 2017 and the Rohingya community was forced to flee their homes and leave their country—Myanmar—to come to Cox's Bazar for safety and survival. Since then, they have been enduring dire conditions in the camps. The entire population depends on relief and food aid. Young people are facing challenging situations, spending their time idly without quality life experiences. We can't imagine how their lives are in the camps. In the last couple of months, around one million Rohingya have endured extreme heat waves, two fire incidents, and a cyclone. During the fires, many lost their shelters and had to live under the open sky. During the heat wave, they lived in tarpaulin shelters.

Besides these disasters, women and adolescent girls are experiencing difficult day-to-day realities. More than 80 percent of them face gender-based violence by their intimate partners. Child marriage is prevalent. They have limited access to justice and very often do not seek it. The safety and security situation in the camps is inadequate. Women and girls constantly live in fear.

A few days ago, I met Ramicha, a young girl in the Rohingya camps who loves creating henna art. When her neighbours ask her to apply henna, she feels happy to adorn the hands of young girls and women. She loves being appreciated for her art. Like Ramicha, over 400,000 children are living in the Rohingya camps. Despite the lack of things to do, children have found many ways to continue to laugh and live.

The Rohingya camps are examples of how, despite significant efforts from the Bangladesh government and international community, it is still far from sufficient to meet the basic needs of displaced people. The global scenario is not any better than this. This is the situation in which the world will observe World Refugee Day on June 20, 2024. This year's theme, "Solidarity with Refugees," calls for actionable support beyond mere words. Solidarity means keeping our doors open, celebrating their strengths and achievements, and reflecting on

the challenges they face.

We urge the global community to truly demonstrate solidarity with the Rohingya community, who are facing very difficult challenges every day in refugee camps.

International stakeholders, the philanthropic community and private sector actors should increase financial aid to these people so that more sustainable and impactful support can be provided. While food, health care, safety, and fundamental rights must be provided, we must prepare them for the next phase of their lives. Education, livelihoods and skills development are crucial now to develop the young Rohingya population so that when they voluntarily return to their country, they will have the suitable skill sets to contribute economically and socially. Recently, the conflict inside Myanmar has reached a new height. These conflicts are bringing countless human tragedies, and it must be brought to an end. The global community should put more effort into ending this conflict and bringing peace to Myanmar so that all the displaced people can return to their homes and live safe and dignified lives.

By taking these tangible steps, the global community can move beyond rhetoric to enact meaningful changes, embodying true solidarity with refugees and honouring their resilience and contributions.