

## A first-hand look into DEVASTATION

As the water recedes, revealing the scars it's leaving behind, fresh anxieties surface. River erosion is worsening in many of these areas.

MASHFIQ MIZAN with S DILIP ROY back from Kuriaram and Gaibandha

Is it a vast river, or a habitable land?

This is the question I kept asking myself while travelling to Kurigram, a district in northern Bangladesh, as my train passed through one submerged land after another.

The answer came in glimpses -- like rooftops peeking through the water and submerged Shaheed Minars

hinting there was a school here once. This year's floods in northern Bangladesh have been the worst in recent memory, particularly hitting remote areas of Kurigram and

The suffering of those living near

even before river erosion peaked, hundreds of homes have submerged by flood waters.

Meanwhile, many stayed back in partially submerged houses as moving to shelters with families and livestock from remote areas is often

The residents face a multitude of crises -- food shortages, lack of pure drinking water, and so on.

## MAROONED IN KURIGRAM

Upon reaching Kurigram, I requested my colleague to take me to the most remote areas affected by the flood.

We reached Ulipur, some 19km

further north from Kurigram. In the first week of July, the



Many had to take shelter on an embankment in Ulipur of Kurigram.

everything.

in the terminal and boarded a small and nothing else. The river has taken engine-driven trawler.

Then Momin bhai, our weathered boatman, steered his engine-driven vessel into the heavy current.

The sun beat down mercilessly, and within 30 minutes, I, miles away from my comfort zone, began to feel the heat.

As far as the eye could see, there was water, an endless flow of it.

Just a few months ago, this would have been dry land, the sandy canvas of the chars.

"Such are the lives of char dwellers,"

Momin said. The journey took on an eerie, haunting turn when submerged rooftops or the skeletal remains of tin-shed buildings started poking

through the water now and then.

There were people here just a month ago, Momin explained the obvious.

other signs of life appeared

sporadically: like a lone figure casting a net, in what would have been lush green fields a month

prior. A small boat overtook us, steered two children, maybe ten or twelve years old. Their faces, etched with

After crossing Gabur Char, Gujimari Char, Hawker Char, Babur Char, Jolengar Guri and other places on our way, we anchored our boat in Fakirer Char in Begumganj union.

weeks. "Come, please sit?" "See our

sufferings." "We have no one except welcomed us in Fakirer Char.

his wife, Hasina Begum. They are a family of seven.

We parked our bike beside a shop only had a lungi when we rescued him

"What's the point of talking to you? Can you provide us with food? Will clothes and food reach us?" Abdul Rashid confronted us.

He was sad and angry; he had just lost his two houses due to the flood.

After a few minutes, Rashid calmed down and took us on a boat to see where his house once stood.

His wife Hasina and two children accompanied us. After rowing for a few minutes, he stopped and pointed his fingers at what seemed like a mighty river and said, "There lay two of my houses."

A mosque, a madrasa, and more nearby homes completely disappeared in the water, while others remained partially submerged.

Shafigur Rahman of the same char also lost his home in the flood. He has taken shelter in a relative's house, where 26 people from four families have taken shelter in a single room.

This was a common scenario in any house without water in it.

As we left the char, people gathered outside our boat and waved us goodbyes. Some even offered us guavas and other fruits from their trees. Such are the people of these chars, humble, kind, and resilient.

The devastation the flood left behind was almost similar in other char areas.

## DESOLATION IN GAIBANDHA

We also visited the Phulbari upazila in Gaibandha later to see the situation there.

Here, at the Syedpur Primary School, hundreds took shelter with their livestock.

As many as seven families have been staying here in a single room.

We met Hajera Khanom, a 63year year old who sought refuge in a primary school from Shatarkandi Char. She said she faced a loss worth Tk 1 crore due to submerged crop fields and damaged homes.

In Hatudanga area on the bank of the Brahmaputra embankment, I saw at least 12 families sheltering alongside livestock under the open sky. Polythenes set up with bamboo poles was all they had to shelter them

from rain and sun. Shahidul Islam, 60, had been living there under a shed alongside his 32 cows. He said he didn't go to the shelter because there were no rooms for his cattle.

Others shared similar sentiments. Then we went to Balashi ferry ghat and sailed on another enginedriven boat towards the remote chars. The scene was similar to Kurigram: water everywhere, no trace of life, abandoned houses in ruins.

In Rasulpur Char, about half an hour from where we started, we saw some signs of life. There, we met Hazrat Ali. His home was submerged under waist-length water.

He, along with his family and livestock, had taken shelter on higher ground. They cooked on boats and had been living like this for at least 15 days, with no sanitation and a lack of clean drinking water.

## WHAT AUTHORITIES SAY

Ulipur's Begumganj Union Parishad Chairman Bablu Mia told The Daily Star, "Around 5,500 families in our union have been affected by floods. Only 500 flood-affected families have received government aid, with each

family getting just 5kg of rice." In previous years, the flood situation lasted for 8-12 days, but this year it started on July 2 and may continue for another week, he said.

Buraburi Union Parishad Chairman Asaduzzaman Khandkar said, "Around 4,000 families in our union have been affected, but only 300 families have received government relief."

District Relief and Rehabilitation Officer sources said 37 000 families in 55 of 73 unions in Kurigram's nine upazilas have been affected by the

They have distributed 1,476 tonnes of rice, Tk 45,35,000 in cash, and 21,330 packets of dry food.

In previous years, 27,500 families were affected in 2023; 33,200 in 2022; 35,600 in 2018 and 52,000 families in

Kurigram Deputy Commissioner Mohammad Saidul Arif said this vear's flood is worse than the last 5-6 years. "The situation has been improving since Saturday (July 13) as the Brahmaputra water level is

decreasing," he said. According to Gaibandha Deputy Commissioner Kazi Nahid Rasul, 36,207 families in four upzilas and 26 unions of the district have been affected.

As the water recedes, revealing the scars it's leaving behind, fresh anxieties surface. River erosion is worsening in many of these areas.

The relentless rivers now threaten to claim the remaining scraps of land these communities cling on to. The spectre of displacement looms large, a constant reminder of their very existence.

Skin diseases, a consequence of prolonged immersion in floodwaters, have also become commonplace. The lack of clean drinking water further complicates the situation, increasing the risk of water-borne diseases.

These people need government's help and attention. And they need it now.



Holding a pitcher, a woman wades through waist-deep water in Gaibandha in search for pure drinking water.

As we left the char, people gathered outside our boat and waved us goodbyes. Some even offered us guavas and other fruits from their trees. Such are the people of these chars, humble, kind, and resilient.

rivers and on chars (landforms created by sediment deposits) has been largely unseen due to the remoteness of the affected areas.

month to witness the crisis firsthand. Kurigram, a district 378km from Dhaka, is almost like a village surrounded by rivers.

About 14 rivers from India enter Bangladesh through Kurigram. Additionally, two more transboundary rivers flow through this district.

Most of Kurigram's remote upazilas lie on the banks of these rivers.

For the northerners, every monsoon brings significant flooding. But 2024 has been particularly brutal. The Teesta, Brahmaputra, and Dudhkumar rivers have flown above danger level for weeks, inundating the remote chars and mainland.

Losing homes to the rivers is nothing new for people in the north. However, it usually occurs due to river erosion after flood water recedes.

Rarely are homes washed away by the flood water itself. But this year,

Brahmaputra had surged as high as 80cm above the danger I reached Kurigram earlier this

level at Hatiya point of Ulipur, submerging many villages and chars. The Teesta, Dharla and Dudhkumar rivers were also overflowing. More than 20,000 people were

> marooned, and over 25 primary schools were closed in this upazila alone. We drove to Anantapur ghat in

> Hatiya union of Ulipur. This terminal, located on the mainland, had also been under water during this year's flood, a first in at least six years, according to locals.

We met Badsha Mia, a 55-year old with despair etched all over his face. A rickshaw-puller in Dhaka, for Eid, only to get trapped by the

Badsha had returned to his village flood. For 10 days, his home had been partially submerged, and his family was suffering from various skin diseases.

a maturity beyond their years, held a stoicism that mirrored the desolate landscape.

Almost everyone we talked to on our way said this was the worst flood in six years and their homes had remained submerged for at least two

Allah." These are the voices that There, we met Abdul Rashid and

One of the villagers took us aside and said, "You must talk to him. He