

We must reduce our vulnerability to flood

Signs of resilience as severe flooding tests the nation

The ongoing flood has once again highlighted the need for taking decisive actions to reduce our vulnerability to seasonal disasters. With climate change, our internal river management problems, and unresolved external issues with India exposing the fault lines for a country otherwise known for its disaster preparedness, the time has come for Bangladesh to approach this issue with the urgency that it deserves, especially considering the huge human and economic tolls. Reports coming from the ground are quite alarming: at least 13 lives lost and over 44 lakh people affected in 11 districts as of Friday evening. In other words, over 887,000 families remain marooned, with about 77 upazilas under water.

The Feni and Cumilla situations remain as dire as before. In Cumilla, the collapse of an embankment on the Gumti River has left about 500,000 people stranded. People in other districts are also facing severe challenges. Despite all that, one reason to be hopeful about the direction in which Bangladesh is going at present is the spontaneous response of people to help with the aid and rescue efforts. Besides government initiatives in collaboration with the military, coast guard, and emergency services, private platforms and student volunteers have come up in large numbers, reflecting the nation's solidarity at this moment of crisis. They are working with considerable challenges, including the lack of electricity and communication disruptions, with a large number of people in flood-hit districts still disconnected.

That said, we must turn our focus to what's causing the severe flooding and how to reduce our vulnerabilities. Since August 19, the country's eastern region has experienced extremely heavy rainfall for three consecutive days, the highest in 53 years. This, combined with upstream flooding and the narrowing of water drainage paths in Bangladesh, has rapidly deteriorated the situation. This was compounded by inadequate early warning systems. A critical factor in this is the lack of warning about upstream water flows from the Indian authorities, which experts say has exacerbated the situation. Effective cross-border water management and better coordination with India are essential to improve our response. The Joint River Commission and the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC) have a huge role to play in this regard, which they must do.

In addition to cross-border river issues, encroachments and blockages in Bangladesh's river systems are another major concern. The estimates given by the NRCC about river encroachers show how the latter have encroached river land across the country, exacerbating the impact of flooding. Going forward, we must bring these encroachers to book and improve water flow in our rivers. A comprehensive approach to flood management is necessary. This includes restoring natural river channels, addressing encroachments, and strengthening regional cooperation and the effectiveness of relevant institutions to prevent future disasters.

A step in the right direction

Enforced disappearance commission must provide answer, justice

We welcome the interim government's decision to establish a commission to investigate all the cases of enforced disappearance in Bangladesh. The government also seems on track to sign the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, making the country answerable to international forums. These moves mark a clear departure from the Awami League government's policy of denial, misrepresentation, and inaction on this issue.

Through these efforts, the country can finally expect some clarity on something the very existence of which was repeatedly rejected by the previous regime. The families of those who were disappeared, mostly critics and political rivals of the Awami League, can finally hope to get justice and closure. According to rights organisation Odhikar, at least 708 people were victims of enforced disappearance between 2009 and 2024. Although many have since returned, at least 158 are still believed missing, according to Mayer Dak, a platform for the families of victims of enforced disappearance. Meanwhile, those who returned did not, until recently, speak up about their experience in fear of further retribution.

After the fall of Sheikh Hasina, several victims were released from the secret internment facilities, including what is popularly known as Aynagar. This gave many hope that their loved ones might still be alive in one of the other 23 facilities apparently run by the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI). The challenge now is to ensure transparency and accountability in the investigative process without the interference of political and security entities that stand accused of committing the crime. The decision to appoint a person with the rank of a High Court judge as the head of the commission—and members with prior experience of working on prevention of enforced disappearances—is a step in the right direction, but they must be empowered enough to do their job right. The chief adviser's recent meeting with Mayer Dak has raised hopes of establishing justice for the victims.

As the legal framework of the commission is being drafted, we would also urge the government to create provisions to prevent future governments from exploiting security agencies to commit such heinous crimes—not just enforced disappearances, but also extrajudicial killings and custodial torture—for political purposes. For that, it is not enough to just bring to justice those involved in these gross violations of human rights. It must pursue reforms to insulate security agencies from the corrupt influences of politics and politicians, and end the culture of impunity for their crimes.

Revolutionary changes needed to deal with floods



Dr S Nazrul Islam is the founder of Bangladesh Environment Network (BEN) and the initiator and vice-president of Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (BAPA). He is also the former chief of development research at the United Nations and a visiting professor at the Asian Growth Research Institute (AGI) based in Japan.

S NAZRUL ISLAM

Much of eastern Bangladesh is under water right now. The flood-affected areas extend from Sylhet in the north through Cumilla, Feni and Noakhali to Cox's Bazar in the south. People need help and it is encouraging to see that the students and young people, together with others, have engaged themselves with the relief work.

Global, regional, and national drivers have all combined to create the current flood disaster. The global driver is embodied by climate change, one of whose effects is the increase of the frequency, scope, and intensity of extreme weather events, including untimely and excessive rainfall. The main cause of the ongoing flooding is excessive rainfall in India's Tripura state as well as in Bangladesh. Climate change is also causing sea-level rise, which slows down the passage of river water to the sea, thus aggravating and prolonging flooding. In the coming days, this may play a significant role in Feni and Noakhali districts, which are close to the sea.

The regional drivers are rooted in the fact that about 90 percent of the water that flows through Bangladesh's rivers originate outside—mostly in India. Almost all the water from the torrential rain that fell in Tripura (about 330mm in just two days of August 20-21) came to Bangladesh through Gumti, Khowai, Feni, Muhuri, Manu and other rivers and added to the rainwater that fell inside Bangladesh to cause the flooding. Some water also came from the reservoir (about 60 sq-km) of the 30-metre-tall Dumbur Dam that India has constructed on the Gumti River, about 120 kilometres from the Bangladesh border. Some reports suggest that gates of this reservoir were deliberately opened to release water. The Indian high commissioner to Bangladesh, however, maintained that the release was an automatic process, triggered by the reservoir's water level exceeding a certain limit. Be that as it may, there is no doubt that water, released from the reservoir, added to the volume of water that caused the flooding.

This is another example of the increasingly man-made character of flooding in Bangladesh, i.e. flooding caused or aggravated by decisions made by the operators of the dams and barrages that India has built on

its rivers. For political reasons, it approached India as a supplicant and allowed it to do whatever it wanted with the rivers, with little resistance offered. Yet, just as Bangladesh depends on India for river flows, India also depends on Bangladesh for easy access to its seven northeastern states. In 2013, the Bangladesh Environment Network (BEN) put forward the "transit in exchange for rivers" formula, under which India would restore the natural flows of the shared rivers and, in exchange, Bangladesh would grant India transit and transshipment facilities to access its northeastern

states. BAPA and BEN have also been urging the Bangladesh government to sign the 1997 UN Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses, which forbids a country from intervening in shared rivers without the consent of other co-riparian countries. We hope that the interim government, with a renowned environmentalist in charge of the water ministry, will lose no time to sign the 1997 UN convention and use it in negotiations with India under the "transit in exchange for rivers" framework.

Of course, national (domestic) drivers are the ones over which Bangladesh has the greatest control. In this regard, the current floods further vindicate the necessity of moving away from the Cordon approach towards the rivers, which Bangladesh has been following since the 1950s, to the Open approach. While the former

approach strives to constrict rivers (by constructing embankments) to their channels only, the latter one allows rivers to overflow onto the floodplains during the rainy season. This allows floodplains to serve as an additional passage for river water to move to the sea and for sediment to be deposited on floodplains, raising their elevation. Under the Cordon approach, the opposite happens: the elevation of floodplains cannot increase, while sediment gets deposited on river beds, raising their level. Consequently, after some time, the riverbed reaches an elevation that is higher than that of the

adjoining floodplains. The Gumti River embankment illustrates this perverse outcome. In many places of Cumilla district, the riverbed has a higher elevation. One can easily imagine the catastrophe that can result if the embankment breaches in such places—as seen when the embankment collapsed in the Burichang upazila in the early hours of yesterday, flooding several villages. About five lakh people are now marooned in the area.

Once the immediate tasks related to the relief and rehabilitation necessitated by the floods are dealt with, the interim government will have to make a clean break from the Cordon approach and make the Open approach the official policy. The mindset of the personnel in all water-related agencies has to change. Instead of a money-making business of politicians, bureaucrats, engineers, and contractors, water development has to



Global, regional, and national drivers have all combined to create the current flood disaster in Bangladesh. The photo was taken in Burichang, Cumilla on August 23, 2024.

PHOTO: NAHID MAZHAR

approach strives to constrict rivers (by constructing embankments) to their channels only, the latter one allows rivers to overflow onto the floodplains during the rainy season. This allows floodplains to serve as an additional passage for river water to move to the sea and for sediment to be deposited on floodplains, raising their elevation. Under the Cordon approach, the opposite happens: the elevation of floodplains cannot increase, while sediment gets deposited on river beds, raising their level. Consequently, after some time, the riverbed reaches an elevation that is higher than that of the

adjoining floodplains. The Gumti River embankment illustrates this perverse outcome. In many places of Cumilla district, the riverbed has a higher elevation. One can easily imagine the catastrophe that can result if the embankment breaches in such places—as seen when the embankment collapsed in the Burichang upazila in the early hours of yesterday, flooding several villages. About five lakh people are now marooned in the area.

Once the immediate tasks related to the relief and rehabilitation necessitated by the floods are dealt with, the interim government will have to make a clean break from the Cordon approach and make the Open approach the official policy. The mindset of the personnel in all water-related agencies has to change. Instead of a money-making business of politicians, bureaucrats, engineers, and contractors, water development has to

A tolerant society must respect differing opinions



Laila Khondkar is an international development worker.

LAILA KHONDKAR

The dean of Harvard Kennedy School sometimes meets students—usually a group of seven or eight—over breakfast or lunch to have discussions. There is no specific agenda; students can express their opinions or suggestions on any matter. Over a year ago, I had the chance to have such a discussion with the dean over lunch as I was studying there for a mid-career course. During our lunch, the dean listened to everyone, took notes, responded to questions, and said he would raise some of the issues that were discussed with other faculty members.

Whether everyone can openly express their opinions on political and social issues also came up in our discussion. The dean commented, "It is believed that most of the teachers and students at Harvard Kennedy School support the Democratic Party. That's why the supporters of the Republican Party here are usually reluctant to share their own opinions." He added, "It hurts both the Democrats and the Republicans." The dean was interested in having more students supporting the Republican Party so that discussions and debates could be more diverse and meaningful.

A professor who taught exercising leadership once told us, "Talk more with those with opinions different from yours. Try to understand their perspectives." His suggestion was simple. If someone says something completely contrary to one's thoughts, instead of reacting strongly, one should express interest and say, "Tell me more about it." This inquisitive mindset can lead to effective communication and generate new learning.

Listening to others does not mean agreeing with them, but acknowledging that different opinions exist and seeking to understand them is crucial. But is it actually happening? Harvard Kennedy School, like other places in the United States, has what is called the "cancel culture." If someone says or does something that others find "unacceptable," the tendency to boycott or isolate them is called "cancelling." According to some analyses, cancel culture has provided an opportunity for marginalised members of society to voice their opinions. Others believe that it narrows free speech and makes debates impossible. However, almost everyone agrees that the cancel culture has grown with the expansion of

social media. As a result, many people are afraid to express their thoughts, especially if they don't conform to the views of the majority.

In Bangladesh, are we interested in knowing and understanding everyone's perspective on an issue? Can we have a constructive debate on anything—be it politics, social change, sports or entertainment? Or does it turn into an argument in no time?

Someone may have a different way of thinking from us about society and politics and their way of living, but that does not mean that they are "wrong." Has the internet liberated us mentally, or are we living in a bubble with like-minded people? Many people are constantly expressing their views on all sorts of social, political and cultural issues in private chats or on social media. But is there a real exchange of ideas?

I have observed that many people in our society suffer from confirmation bias, which means they only believe in evidence that confirms their existing views and disregard other information. However, it is important to maintain an open mind, challenge various ideas and also get challenged by others. Having candid conversations is intellectually stimulating and is a sign of maturity.

Extreme polarisation has happened in different parts of the world, making debates challenging. In any society, there has to be a space for many kinds of discussions to look at an issue from all perspectives. Unfortunately, that space seems to be shrinking every day. The rise of populism has contributed to a situation where rhetoric is more

important than sound reason and evidence. The ability to critically examine an issue and not jumping to quick conclusions remains critical if we are to become responsible members of a tolerant, democratic and inclusive society.

Last year, I had an opportunity to visit the ancient Agora of Athens. This place was at the centre of public life in Athens; from trade to legislation—everything was done here. A professor of political philosophy explained that in Athens, questioning and debates were encouraged, and welcoming foreigners and their ideas was normal. Many of Athens's famous philosophers came from other cities, and they enriched the ancient city. Another Greek city, Sparta, however, was the opposite. There was no place for foreigners, and dissent was not tolerated. Are many countries in the world becoming Sparta? In that case, is that not a serious threat to democracy?

If we start a discussion with the attitude of clinging to our opinions, it does not get us very far. Prof Julia Minson of Harvard University proposed an approach so that people can have open, meaningful conversations, termed HEAR: i) hedge your claims (i.e., do not express opinions too blatantly); ii) emphasise agreement; iii) acknowledge other perspectives; and iv) reframe to the positive. The point is to respect others' opinions. In building an inclusive, democratic society, tolerance is paramount, and it is particularly important to give space to opposing views. Are we creating an environment in our society where reason prevails?