

BANGLADESH: FLOODS AND RIVER EROSION

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The Disaster

Overview •

After a three-week hiatus during which the rainfall situation has somewhat moderated, serious river erosion is again underway, due mainly to water run-off from the severe flooding in Assam, India. It is estimated that more than 100,000 families have lost their homes, largely in northern Bangladesh. Much of the northern and eastern parts of the country is under 30 to 60 cm of water. While this is considered not so serious, any new heavy rainfall in the country and, more importantly, fresh inflows of water from India, represent a most dangerous threat.

Severe infrastructural damage was caused by the floods of 1998. Last year's inundation has left little time to repair the situation and thus, the effect of this year's rains and run-off from India are particularly severe on weakened river embankments.

Economic damage due to a massive loss of the main rice crop in northeast and northwest Bengal is very serious, worse than in previous years as the rains started six weeks early. Re-planting has been practically impossible in the inundated areas. Damage to other crops has also been considerable. Indigenous coping mechanisms are thus being strained to (and sometimes beyond) their limits.

Northern Bangladesh •

The run-off from the rain in northern and north-eastern India, and in Nepal, is destined to flow through Bangladesh, mainly along the courses of the Teesta/Brahmaputra/Jumuna (TBJ), Ganges/Padma and Meghna rivers. Erosion in the TBJ system in Northern Bengal is especially severe, with some 100,000 families (according to media reports) displaced in the

Lalmonirhat, Nilphamari, Kurigram, Rangpur and Gaibhanda Districts. These people, often having lost everything, are living in crowded, unsanitary and unsafe conditions.

Other Impending Disasters •

Rivers in spate have seriously weakened the embankments of major river systems; the most serious of which is probably at Chandpur where a breach in the Meghna embankment would mean the flooding of around 100,000 families. The Gumti embankment in Comilla, which broke last year and displaced 13,300 families, is also vulnerable.

A recent survey of the Sylhet Division showed that perhaps 70% of the four Districts was under water, but to a non-threatening depth. However, several days of heavy rain would raise the depth of flood water to a height which would cause serious loss of houses and the consequent displacement of hundreds of thousands of people.

The heaviest rains in Bangladesh and water run-offs from India are expected around the end of July. It is possible that many other parts of the country may also face disaster at that time.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

The operational framework for action to counter the effects of flooding has been distributed, and three Information Bulletins and an Interim Bulletin have been issued. Operational planning is under constant review to accommodate the evolving situation. Liaison continues with the government, local and international NGOs, donors within the country and, via the Federation, concerned PNS in the Movement.

The following flood situation surveys have been recently undertaken:

<i>Where</i>	<i>Federation</i>	<i>BDRCS</i>	<i>Dates</i>
1. Chittagong Division	Rel Del, Rel Officer	Rel Asst Dir	20 - 24 June
2. Sylhet Division	Rel Del	Rel Asst Dir	28 - 30 June
3. North Bengal	Rel Officer	Rel Dep Dir	1 - 4 July
4. North Bengal	HoD	SG	5 - 8 July
5. Chandpur	Rel Del	Rel Dir	7 July

In addition, the Japanese and German Red Cross bilateral delegates undertaking field trips have given input to the overall situation. Information from the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS) units continuously comes into the national headquarters and the Federation delegation. The BDRCS, with its long history of Disaster Preparedness through Cyclone Preparedness and Community Based Disaster Preparedness, is experienced in collecting information at the unit level and overcoming the difficulties in communication. The national headquarters and the Federation delegation are collating this data to identify areas that are particularly prone to disaster and fine-tuning relief plans in the constantly changing situation.

The primary purpose of field visits is to assess the current situation in terms of threats and readiness, but the assessment teams are also taking the opportunity to further motivate

BDRCS volunteers and to build the relief capacity of the local units, specially those with new and inexperienced Executive Committees.

Needs

The BDRCS has not yet requested financial assistance for those affected by erosion. However, the predicted serious flooding might necessitate for an Appeal. Rapid donor response, in that case, would enable the BDRCS/Federation to react and support the affected population in the shortest possible time. Pursuant to the Tokyo Declaration of 1996, in case of a truly massive disaster, highly trained human resources from the regional Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies could also be requested to assist.

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