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Climate change impact-3: Sea level rise, erosion, increase of salinity hitting hard fishermen



People who were evicted by river erosion take shelter on an embankment-cum-road in Tomojuddin of Bhola district. NN photo

Rafiqul Islam Azad

Jorina Begum, 50, along with her family members, is living in a dilapidated hut beside a road on the bank of river Meghna at Tajumoddin in Bhola district, a southern coastal district in Bangladesh.

"We have been living here and there for over 20 years as the river has snatched all of our belongings. We have survived by struggling with natural calamities like storm and tidal surge," the frustrated woman said.

Jorina Begum's family consisting of her son, a fisherman, daughter-in-law, a daughter and a grandson is living at the slope of the Tajumoddin road cum flood protection embankment, that was entirely washed away during the 1970 cyclone leaving around 5,00,000 people dead.

"Jaiga thakle amra ki rastar pashe thaktam? Amra nadibhanga manush jekhane thaki seidai amader thikana (Would we live beside the road if we had a land? We are affected by river erosion and our address is where we live)," Nurunnahar, daughter-in-law of Jorina Begum said.

Not only Jorina and Nurunnahar, hundreds of families live at the slope of the embankment for years. Most of them live on fishing. River erosion has thrown them in abject poverty.

"We had to shift thrice due to river erosion," said Harris Ahmed, 65, of village Darichandpur near Tajumoddin fishery ghat.

Harris Ahmed along with his four-member family now live in a small house built on land belonging to other.

Recalling his memory of 70's cyclone, he said that he lost his 14 relations including his two sons and a daughter.

Harris Ahmed said storms, surge and river erosion repeatedly snatch their belongings including lives and property leaving them in a distress situation.

He said, the government should take measure to rehabilitate the people evicted by river erosion and affected by natural calamities.

Thousands of people Tajumoddin are the victims of river erosion and lead a miserable life. The river erosion, particularly in the coastal area, is increasing due to rise in the sea level and strengthening of current.

Most of the fishermen of the area usually catch Hilsha fish in the river Meghna. They also face financial problem as the government prohibits netting of Hilsha for four months ending this month to protect their breeding.

Abul Kashem, Principal-in-Charge of Abdul Jabbar Colleague, Bhola said the climate is changing steadily causing adverse impacts on the the costal people, most of them are fishermen.

"The fishing community is financially affected as they cannot prepare themselves to catch fish due to change in the season," he observed.

The flood protection embankment in Kutubdia under Cox's Bazar district was severely damaging during the 1991 cyclone claiming about 150,000 people and damage of crops in Chittagong and Cox's Bazar districts.

Morshed Khaled Manik, 27, a local journalist in Kutubdia said houses and crops of vast area are under threat as there is no embankment along about 15kms of the Upazila.

Crops and house are damaged if saline water enters the embankment area, he observed.

Hamidur Rahman Azad, a lawmaker elected from Kutubdia and Moheshkhali constituency said, sea level is rising over the bank and saline water is entering fresh water area posing a threat of coastal erosion and affects agriculture.

"Sea water is being polluted. The sea level is rising day by day. These affect fish production and spell a negative impact on economy and increase unemployment, particularly in the fishing community," he said.

Leading environmentalist Dr Atik Rahman said cyclones getting stronger both in terms of intensity and frequency posing a threat to the lives and properties of the coastal people including fishermen.

Climate change has a number of impacts on coastal fishermen as the salinity changes with sea

level rise, change in eco-system and frequent cyclone destroy households, fishing boats and nets of the fishermen.

There is no reliable statistic of fishermen and fish workers in the 710 km long coastal area, in the extreme south of the country.

Sharif Uddin, an official working with Marine Fisheries Department in Chittagong, however, said that the number of full time coastal fishermen is likely to be around 100,000 and part-timer may be over 10,00,000.

"20 to 25 per cent women are somewhat involved, particularly in dry-fish processing and the number of dependable people on fishers and fish workers may exceed one crore," he observed.

(The story has been prepared under the aegis of CSE Media Fellowships)

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