

# The New Nation

Bangladesh's Independent News Source

April 30, 2009

## Climate change impacts -1

### **Coastal fishermen bear brunt of cyclonic storm, tidal surge**

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'It was about 8.30pm. The devastating Sidr was approaching the costal land from the Bay of Bengal. Our courtyard was submerged by water brought by tidal surge. I, along with my pregnant wife Hanufa Begum, 21, and daughter Nargis, 5, started moving to a local cyclone centre for taking shelter. Hardly we moved about 1000 yards when we were washed away by a strong surge about 30fts high and in no time we found ourselves struck on a big rain tree.'

This is the horrible tale of Nanna Miah, 25, a fisherman residing in village Paddar Bhangon at Patharghata in Barguna, a Sidr affected southern district on the Bay coastline, as to how he escaped death during the Sidr.

"My wife (Hanufa) sat on a branch of the tree and I was grabbed a branch of the tree by one hand and my daughter with another. At one stage, the mighty surge washed me and my daughter away and we immediately reached at Ruita area where I felt the ground under my feet. Hours after searching I found my wife at about 3.00am at the same night on that tree without clothes. I covered her with my lungi and I wore a tattered cloth that I found on a branch of the tree. Then we went to the cyclone centre with my wife and daughter that night," Nanna Miah narrated.

David Majhi, 55, of Dakkhinmari under Mongla Upazila in Bagerhat district, severely affected by the Sidr, survived by taking shelter in a channel of the Sundarbans, the most majestic mangrove patch on earth, that also took the fury of the winds and tidal surge and saved the nearby towns of Khulna, Mongla, and Bagerhat from severe devastation of the cyclone

"Boarding on a fishing boat, we 22 fishermen entered the Zafar Point of the Sundarbans for shelter at about 6:30pm. I stood in the jungle by holding a branch of a tree as tidal wave submerged me and washed away the boat. My other co-fishermen also managed to save their lives spending the whole night inside the Sundarbans," David said recalling his survival struggle.

He said around 15,000 fishermen coming from different areas including Mongla, Rampal, Paikgacha, Satkhira, Sandwip, Cox's Bazar, Kutubdia and Moheshkhali had taken shelter in the Sundarbans channels with their trawlers, nets and other belongings. "That's why the death toll was comparatively less," David Majhi, who used to catch fish in the deep sea, observed.

Acting General Secretary of Dubla Fishermen Group Kamal Uddin Ahmed, who is also Unit Leader of the cyclone preparedness programme of Bangladesh Red Crescent Society said he had chased fishermen and fish workers who were not going to cyclone centre leaving their dry fish in different killas (dry fish processing factories) at Meher Ali Char by chasing them with a stick in his hand at about 5:30pm, just before Sidr hit.

"I had to be cruel to them to take them in the cyclone centre where I was the last person to arrive. But before entering the cyclone centre one of my associates was killed on the spot as a branch of a tree fell on him," he said.

Theses are the three sad stories of the saga that hundreds of thousands of people of the costal area faced as the Sidr ripped through the coastline. People like that of Nanna Miah and David Majhi who survived calamities like cyclone and tidal bore are many along the coast.

The Sidr, with maximum wind speed of 280 kilometres an hour, struck the southwestern costal region on November 15, 2007 claiming thousands of lives. Bagerhat, Barguna Patuakhali and Pirojpur were the worst affected districts in the southern coastal belt of the country.

The Ministry of Food and Disaster Management put the overall death toll at 3,363 while the Armed Forces put it at 3199. The figure of missing was officially 871. Some two million people were made homeless as 5,63,877 household had been completely damaged.

The unofficial death toll was, however, around 10,000. Save the Children, an NGO working with mothers and children, estimated the number of deaths at 10,000, while Bangladesh Red Crescent Society said that the number of deaths could be up to 10,000.

None knows how many fishermen or fish-workers were killed by the Sidr.

A fishermen's association at Dublar Char in Bagerhat district claimed that about 3000 fishermen were killed and another 700 were missing from the Sundarbans forest coastal areas alone.

Major (Retd) Zia Uddin, President of the Dubla Fishermen Group, said nearly 30,000 people went to cyclone shelters at Dublar Char on the fateful night, but due to lack of accommodation, around 12,000 people were shifted to different channels inside the Sundarbans mangrove forest. He said most of them were killed in the storm.

The coastal people, about 80 percent of them fishermen or fish workers, had not only lost their near and dear ones but also lost their belongings including houses, fishing boats and nets to the Sidr.

Hanif Majhi, 38, of Muthaipara, Nayanagar area in Patuakhali district lost his father Abdul Hakim, 78, also a fisherman, to the Sidr. He claimed that one of his four sons is now in an Indian jail as he went there floating on the sea during the calamity. Hanif demanded the setting up of a 'Light House' at Kuakata so that fishermen could get the direction of their locality when they return from the deep sea at night.

The fishermen bear the brunt of the natural calamities like cyclones but they do not get adequate support from the government or the NGOs to overcome losses, said Dr Mosharraf Hossain, a Member of Parliament belonging to the ruling Awami League from Sidr affected Sharankhola and Mongla upazilas in Bagerhat district.

Admitting the reality of having of poor communication network and inadequate cyclone centres in the coastal areas, Bagerhat Deputy Commissioner Md Moazzem Hossain said he would take initiatives to help resolve the problems.

Acting General Secretary of Dubla Fishermen Group Kamal Uddin Ahmed said that the Sidr affected people in the coastal areas did not get financial and material support prorata to their losses.

He said none could provide the actual death figure of the fishermen and fish-workers in Dublarchar that comprises islets of Alorkul, Meher Ali Char, Majer Killa, Offcie Killa, Manik Khali, Narikel Baria, Shelar Char and Chaprakhali as most of those living there floating people coming seasonally for temporary employment .

Besides, local people a large number of fishermen go to Surdarbans fishing area from far flung areas like Cox's Bazar, Kutubdia, Moheskhalia and Chittagong to catch fish. Fish workers at Dublar Char also process dry fish, Kamal Ahmed said

Ruhul Amin Majhi, 40, a fisherman at Alipur, Kalapara in Patuakhali, another Sidr affected district, who lost all his belongings to the Sidr, said that he could not bear the education expenses of his second son Alam. Alam could not appear at the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) Examination this year because of my inability to pay his examination dues, he said.

He had built a new house at Number-10 Union, the southwestern-most mainland of the country, leaving his ancestral home. But due to irony of fate the 20-year experienced fisherman lost his corrugated-tin made home, fishing boat and fishing nets in the attack of Sidr. He came back to his parental home and is now struggling to come out the difficulties.

The depressed fisherman regretted that he could neither build a new house for his family nor manage to get government grant for housing due to his failure to provide Tk 500 to a middleman as bribe.

Talking about the devastation of the Sidr, Ruhul Amin said he never experienced such a storm with so strong tidal surge.

"Over one hundred people have been killed in our area alone. Most of them were buried in a mass graveyard at 10-Number Naltona Union," he described.

Mantu Majhi, 44, of Kuakata, a sea beach, Hanif Majhi, 38, of Muthaipara, Nayanagar in the same district also lost their boats, nets and other belongings in the Sidr attack.

Hanif Majhi, 38, who lost his father Abdul Hakim, 78, to the Sidr, said that one of his four sons is now in jail in India as his fishing boat crossed the border due to the strong storm surge and caught by Indian authorities.

Record shows that a cyclone hit Bangladesh at late night on April 29 in 1991 with maximum wind speed of 225-km an hour and the official death toll was 150,000. A severe cyclone hit Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Noakhali and coastal islands on May 24 and May 25, 1985 leaving 11,069 people dead. Another cyclone hit the entire coast of the country on November 12, 1970 claiming 500,000 lives.

Leading environmentalist and IUCN Country Representative Dr Ainun Nishat said these deaths occur because these poor people often ignore weather forecasts even up to level 3 as they have to go for fishing in the deep sea for subsistence or forced to do under compulsion as bonded labourers.

“This is the cause of silent death,” Dr Nishat observed.

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

Source: <http://nation.ittefaq.com/issues/2009/04/30/all0663.htm>