

My House Underwater

by Rasheda Begum

I used to have a house, about half a kilometer away from the shore in Khudiar Tek in the island of Kutubdia. Unfortunately this was washed away by the devastating cyclone in 1991.

Watering Whole.
The island of Kutubdia, now only down to 37 square kilometers from 250 square kilometers a century ago, continues to sink.

Photo by Hilme Kabir

My neighbours and I had to move farther to a safer place. So I built a hut beside an embankment that was three kilometers from the shore.

At that time, I decided not to withdraw too far, given my affection to where my house used to be even as I knew that the sea will drown everything someday.

Like my neighbours, I have always felt this unexplained horror over the thought of fleeing to an unknown destination. I guess this fear is based on the fact that unlike men, our movement as women has always been restricted. A man can easily decide what to do and where to live. Society does not permit us to act like a man.

This has been my reflection since I left my ancestral and braced the reality that the rest of the family members will always be in a greater state of insecurity. I always asked myself: what kind of work would I find to feed my family?

In the next five to six years, I observed that the sea was coming closer and closer, gradually swallowing the landmass and

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advancing towards my hut. The waves became furious especially in spring when waters overflow to the embankment.

As we continued to be flooded, I decided to move to the interior part of the island. Unfortunately I failed to get any place where I could build a shelter for my three daughters and son. It did not take a while before the sea swallowed all our belongings including a piece of land.

In 2007, we left the island and settled in an urban slum called Kutubdia Para, that is situated at the outskirts of the sea resort town

of Cox's Bazar. The place severely lacks civic amenities and services. Here we face an even more distressing situation. Everyday, I had to think of how I would be able to feed my family.

My children and I are employed as daily labourers at the local fish processing and drying businesses that are seasonal in nature. This also means being in an extremely unhygienic working environment. I am constantly worried for my three grown up daughters because there is no rule of law for the poor, especially for slum dwellers. ■

Void from the View. The tourist resort town of Cox's Bazar has hosted scores of climate refugees from Kutubdia. However, these refugees who have already been deprived of their homes, property and even their cultural life in Kutubdia, are restricted to the town's urban slums, far from the vantage points for vistas like this.

Photo by Ziaul Hoque from Wikimedia Commons

Climate Change Refugees

by Asia Pacific Movement on Debt and Development

Over the decade, a new term has entered the lexicon of policy makers and the media: climate change refugees or climate change induced forced migrants. The First Assessment Report of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) noted that the greatest single impact of climate change might be on human migration. This 1990 report estimated that by 2050, 150 million people could be displaced by climate change and its related phenomena such as desertification, increasing water scarcity, floods and storms. Current estimates are at 200 million people globally.

In Bangladesh, climate refugees would reach 30 million or one in every seven people in the country would be displaced by climate change.

Migration from the coastal areas to the urban slums has been increasing, clearly showing the links between global warming and sea level rise. Such link was quite evident in the migration of around 20,000 people from Kutubdia, a south eastern island to the resort town of Cox's Bazar. Kutubdia used to have an area of about 250 square kilometers but in just a century, its size has been reduced to 37 square kilometers. With the ongoing erosion because of the stronger and bigger waves, the island continues to sink.

Displacement due to environmental degradation is nothing new in Bangladesh. For years, people have been moving from the rural areas to the urban areas because of disasters that result to land erosion and the destruction of people's livelihood. Most displaced individuals and families end up settling in urban slums or refugee camps, where quarters are too close together, sanitation poor and food supply and livelihood opportunities insufficient.

Certainly the impact of climate change on the low-lying coastal island must not be underestimated. But there is a risk that solely focusing on climate change obscures other social changes that provide a more realistic explanation of why people act in particular ways, including whether they stay on their fragile homestead or seek to migrate elsewhere. An alternative approach is to acknowledge the role of climate change in exacerbating existing social, economic and environmental pressures.

International Campaign on Climate Refugees' Rights (ICCR)

We call for a new legal framework for climate refugees to realise their social, political, cultural and economic rights.

Many developing countries of the global South are facing serious catastrophe due to climate change. Hundreds and thousands of people from these developing nations have already been displaced and millions more will be displaced if appropriate measures are not taken today. The current rate of climate change is rapidly increasing due to excessive carbon emissions, with more frequent and extreme droughts, flooding, cyclones and sea level rise at life-threatening results.

All of these consequences not only pose mortal danger but also lead to the destruction of the means of livelihood which sustain millions of people in the global South. Recent studies show that around 30 million people from the coastal areas of Bangladesh, 300,000 from the Maldives, 10 million from Vietnam, 10 million from Mediterranean Egypt and 600,000 from Guyana will be displaced due to loss of land as a result of climate change effects.

According to the First Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC AR1) in 1990, around 150 million people could be displaced by climate change by 2050. A study conducted by environmentalist Norman Myers claimed an estimated 25 million people were displaced in 1996. This figure is predicted to double by 2010 and reach 150 million by 2050. However, the 2006 Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change and the 2007 Christian Aid report estimate the displacement of 200 million and 250 million people, respectively, due to climate change by 2050.

Human migration, however, is only one impact of climate change (IPCC AR1).

According to the African Union, political upheavals, conflicts and natural disasters have left the continent with 12 to 14 million displaced people. However, the consequences will be much more severe than have been estimated as one of every 45 people globally, will have been dislocated due to climate change by 2050.

There has been little effort by the developed nations to address the issue of climate refugees, which is a dire consequence of climate change. No policy measures or international legal regime have been enforced for the protection of the human rights of climate refugees, despite the fact that hundreds and thousands have already become victims of climate change.

The Geneva Convention of 1951 narrowly defined the term "political refugee." However, complex developments and changes have significantly shifted the global arena and consequent redrafting and redefining of international law must follow. Climate refugees should not be treated as "political refugees." Similarly, while Article 13 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, states that the United Nations (UN) must take proper measures to realise peoples' rights to the freedom of movement within and between state borders, a separate Safeguard Protocol (SP) should be framed to address climate victims under a rights and justice framework.

The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and International Organization for Migration (IMO) have also reached no resolution for climate refugees. It has yet to be properly considered how climate change victims and survivors will be strategically recognised and addressed based on the principles of human rights and justice. Under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), adaptation and mitigation measures to some extent talk about the necessities of relocating people from danger-prone areas to safe locations.

African leaders recently ratified a convention on the protection of the continent's internally displaced people, refugees and returnees, billed as the first of its kind worldwide. The convention calls on member states to provide special assistance for displaced people with special needs, including the elderly as well as prevention of forced displacement.

We observe that there is still a lack of awareness among communities, civil society organisations and groups. There is a lack of coordination among departments of the developing and developed countries to mitigate the effects of the climate change crisis. We believe there should be more actions on the ground as well as at the policy level to resolve the climate crisis. The international community must provide assistance to these vulnerable people of climate-induced displacement under a new framework of reparations, not as part of regular development assistance (ODA).

Climate victims have contributed least to climate change, yet are paying the most. They are victims of global injustice caused by unequal and undemocratic global architecture. They should have the social, political, cultural and economic rights to demand that they be settled in a dignified manner as Natural Persons.

International Campaign on Climate Refugee Rights (ICCR) is committed to work on raising more voices in realisation of the rights of climate refugees while promoting further activism at the ground and policy levels through research, identification of climate refugees, tracking of climate change financing and advocating for reparations for climate refugees. ICCR is also committed to deepening the understanding of its member constituencies and communities along with all stakeholders. Currently, Bangladesh Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Senegal, Kenya, Ghana and El Salvador have all become members, and it is open to receive more members who are interested and want to be involved.

To join and support the ICCR, please contact Ahmed Swapan Mahmud, Convenor, ICCR at iccr.secretariat@gmail.com, ahmed.swapan@gmail.com. For the full version, please visit the Voice website : www.voicebd.org.