

Climate Change Forcing Coastal Communities into Displacement, Livelihoods at Risk

The adverse impacts of climate change are increasingly intensifying both the frequency and severity of natural disasters in Bangladesh. Every year, thousands of people lose their homes and sources of livelihood due to cyclones, storm surges, floods, river erosion, and droughts. As a result, the number of internally displaced people in the country is rising at an alarming rate. Various research organisations warn that nearly 15 million people in Bangladesh could become climate refugees by 2050.

Although the issue has been discussed for years at global climate conferences, effective solutions to address the crisis remain largely absent.

According to relevant sources, the incidence of natural disasters in Bangladesh has increased by 10 to 15 percent over the past three decades, primarily due to the adverse effects of climate change. Recurrent cyclones, floods, riverbank erosion, and salinity intrusion have disproportionately affected coastal communities. Women, children, and marginalised groups are particularly vulnerable. Living conditions in coastal areas are becoming increasingly harsh, with the struggle for survival growing more difficult and exerting a negative impact on the national economy.

In disaster-prone regions, rising salinity levels, along with encroachment and pollution of rivers and water bodies, are forcing many people to abandon their traditional occupations. In search of livelihoods, they are migrating from one district

to another, as well as to major urban centres such as Dhaka and Chattogram. Statistics indicate that around 60 percent of climate-displaced people have migrated to Dhaka, 20 percent to Chattogram, and the remaining 20 percent to other parts of the country.

A recent study conducted by researchers at the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) assessed climate risks in 22 low-lying cities across the country. Titled "Climate Vulnerability and Risk Assessment in Low-Lying Coastal Cities of Bangladesh," the study was published on September 15 in the Journal of Water and Climate Change. The researchers noted that the real impact of climate risks on people's daily lives cannot be adequately measured through numerical data alone.

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), climate change could newly displace approximately 13.3 million people in Bangladesh by 2050. Meanwhile, development organisation Caritas Bangladesh estimates that nearly 26 million people may become internally displaced within the country by the same period. Its report highlights that cyclones, abnormal tidal surges, salinity intrusion, and river erosion are forcing coastal populations to migrate to urban areas, where many end up living in slums under substandard conditions. Nearly 70 percent of slum dwellers in Dhaka were displaced due to environmental disasters.

Journalist and climate activist Shubra Sachin, coordinator of climate awareness and Sundarbans-coastal protection movements, said that climate change is rapidly transforming life and livelihoods in Bangladesh's coastal regions. Frequent disasters, extreme temperatures, unseasonal floods and droughts have made daily life increasingly unbearable. Declining groundwater levels are causing acute shortages of safe drinking water during the dry season, while rising salinity and river erosion are severely damaging agriculture and ecosystems.

He further noted that people from agriculture-dependent areas are migrating to cities in search of work—some alone, others with their families. “This crisis is no longer confined to the poor; even economically stable households are being affected,” he said, adding that the number of climate-displaced people continues to grow. Immediate, effective, and long-term measures are urgently needed to address the escalating crisis.

Experts emphasise that human activities are the primary drivers of climate change. Between June and August this year, hundreds of millions of people worldwide were exposed to extreme heat caused by human-induced climate change, with Bangladesh among the most affected countries. A report by Climate Central found that nearly 34 percent of Bangladesh’s population endured health-threatening temperatures for more than 30 days during this period.

Analysts argue that unplanned urbanisation, wetland encroachment, deforestation, and excessive carbon emissions have placed severe pressure on the country’s environment. While an ideal city should maintain around 25 percent forest cover, no city in Bangladesh currently meets this standard. By prioritising development plans that overlook environmental sustainability, both climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts have become increasingly challenging.