



A woman wades through clogged tidal water after the cyclone Sitrang in Kalapara, Bangladesh on October 25, 2022 | Photo: Munir Uz Zaman, AFP

CLIMATE REFUGEES IN



18/12/2024

BANGLADESH

In 2024, flash floods severely hit eastern Bangladesh, impacting 5.8 million people across 11 districts, including Cumilla, Feni, and Noakhali. Over 500,000 were forced into emergency shelters, as entire regions became inaccessible due to submerged roads. These floods destroyed 339,000 hectares of crops, disrupted livelihoods, and caused the closure of more than 7,000 schools, affecting the education of around 1.75 million students.

BANGLADESH GEOGRAPHIC SITUATION

The Belgian political scientist Alice Poncelet described Bangladesh as a "country made for disasters due to its specific geographical characteristics and its current and anticipated vulnerabilities to climate risks" (A. Poncelet, 2010). Its geography and socio-economic conditions make it one of the most at-risk countries for climate change impacts.



Bangladesh: Eastern Flash Floods 2024
Situation Report No. 02 (As of 30 August 2024)

Low-Lying Topography. Bangladesh's average elevation is just five meters above sea level. A one-meter rise in sea levels could submerge one-fifth of the country, potentially displacing 30 million "climate refugees". Around 80% of its territory is floodplain, with 20% flooded annually.

High Population Density. With 173 Million People living in an area of 147,000 square kilometers, Bangladesh has a population density of over 1,333 inhabitants per square kilometer, making it the world's most densely populated country outside microstates like Monaco, Singapore, and Bahrain (S. Goulard, 2017). Rapid population growth (1.22% in 2024) adds to the challenges.

Widespread Poverty. Extreme poverty affects 18.7 % of the population, with nearly half lacking formal education. This increases vulnerability to social and environmental challenges.

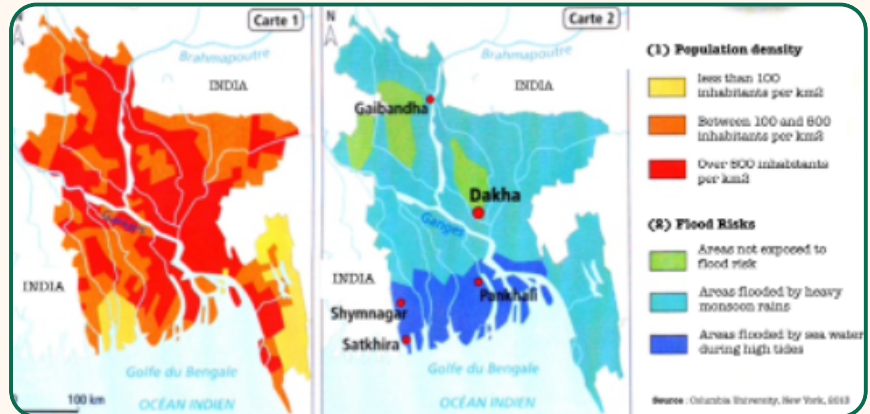
Dependence on Agriculture. About 60% of Bangladeshis rely on agriculture, which is highly sensitive to climate conditions. Cyclones like Sidr (2007) and Aila (2009) have destroyed vast swathes of crops, displaced hundreds of thousands, and worsened food security. Key crops such as rice and potatoes are increasingly at risk due to rising temperatures, soil salinity, and tidal influences.

Water scarcity is another critical issue. Cyclone Aila (2009) rendered local ponds unusable due to saltwater intrusion, leaving residents dependent on government aid for drinking water (K. Kartiki, 2011).

CONSEQUENCES OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Bangladesh faces worsening climate-related challenges such as rising sea levels, cyclones, floods, and droughts. These issues particularly threaten the densely populated coastal areas, which are prone to flooding, erosion, and saltwater intrusion. Protective measures like embankments and cyclone shelters are often insufficient.

Frequent climate disasters have led to significant agricultural losses, affecting rural livelihoods and food security. For example, a study showed that 37% of rural households lacked sufficient food in the previous month. Such hardships are driving migration, as many people leave farming areas in search of better living conditions. In my opinion, addressing this issue requires urgent global cooperation to mitigate climate change and support sustaina-



ble farming practices, as well as providing aid to vulnerable communities. Migration linked to climate change is a growing concern. Short-term, local migrations often follow floods, while prolonged droughts result in long-term migration. These movements disrupt entire communities by breaking down social and economic networks. By 2050, climate scenarios predict 3 to 10 million internal migrants in Bangladesh (Cambridge University).

Bangladesh's vulnerability to climate change underscores the urgent need for adaptive measures to mitigate its impacts on livelihoods and communities. It is crucial to prioritize investments in climate-resilient infrastructure and policies that support both affected communities and displaced populations.

MIGRATIONS PATTERNS IN BANGLADESH

Internal Migration.

Climate-related migration in Bangladesh primarily involves internal movement. Migrants tend to relocate to northeastern regions such as Sylhet, Dhaka, and Chittagong, which are less affected by droughts and floods. Conversely, southern districts near the sea and arid western areas experience significant population declines as they are the most vulnerable to climate impacts.

However, cities like Dhaka (the capital city), already overpopulated, will need to prepare for increased migration by providing jobs, housing, and adequate infrastructure. Meanwhile, vulnerable rural areas require adaptation measures, such as flood management and agricultural support, to reduce large-scale displacement.

External Migration.

In addition to internal migration, many Bangladeshi migrants move to India due to cultural and linguistic similarities. India has long hosted Bangladeshi migrants, with nearly 10 million seeking refuge there during Bangladesh's 1971 independence war. However, India's pro-nationalist policies have created hostility toward Muslim migrants. Since 2016, Hindu, Christian, and Jain Bangladeshi migrants have been granted Indian citizenship, while Muslim migrants (who make up about 90% of refugees) are excluded and often face deportation. Between 2014 and 2017, India deported approximately 1,750 Bangladeshi migrants.

Natural disasters tend to trigger local rather than international migration, often involving wealthier individuals rather than the poor. Poorer and more vulnerable populations are less likely to migrate long distances due to high costs and economic uncertainty. These findings challenge the common narrative that climate disasters primarily drive large-scale international migration of impoverished populations.

Legal and social challenges

Bangladesh lacks a clear legal framework to protect refugees. The country is not a party to the 1951 Geneva Convention, which, in any case, does not cover climate-displaced people. Local conflicts over limited resources highlight the fragility of the state and social cohesion.

International support

International aid to Bangladesh is often insufficient and focused on short-term solutions. The country advocates for financial support from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), a global treaty adopted in 1992, to assist less-developed nations like Bangladesh in tackling climate-related challenges (K. Kartiki, 2011).

Agricultural strategies

To address climate and food crises, the Bangladeshi government promotes private agro-businesses, greater investments in seeds, fertilizers, equipment, and the use of hybrid and genetically modified crops to enhance food security. However, this approach is risky in the context of climate change. These policies benefit transnational seed and agrochemical corporations rather than local farmers.

To counter these risks, i think it is essential to empower farmers and communities to protect their livelihoods by promoting access to seeds and sustainable practices. Food sovereignty, which prioritizes local control over agriculture, offers a better alternative to current agricultural policies. For example, the local NGO GK supports sustainable farming by hiring engineers and agricultural technicians to improve harvests and encourage chemical-free home gardening. In the Sundarbans region, GK has also built sand-based water filtration systems to purify arsenic-contaminated groundwater and installed simple latrines to improve sanitation (A-M. Chartier, 2022).



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