

# Comment & features



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## On the climate change front line

*If the scientists are right, Bangladesh will be one of the countries to suffer most from global warming, reports Louise Gray*



Asma doesn't know much about global warming but she knows what it is like to burn her fingers every day making bangles for other people to wear. The 10-year-old was sent to work after flooding forced her family to move from a low-lying island on the Ganges to the slums of Dhaka.

Sosi hasn't heard of climate change either, but he can tell you what it is like to lose everything in a terrifying torrent of water. And Hasina, who is living on one meal a day after her home was destroyed in a cyclone, just wants to know that she will be able to feed her baby tomorrow.

These Bangladeshis are living on the margins, their aim not much more than survival, yet, in a week's time, they and others like them will be the centre of attention as world leaders meet in Copenhagen to discuss climate change.

Chronic poverty, weak government and lack of resources are behind many of the problems of Bangladesh and other developing countries. On top of that, Bangladesh lies on the Ganges delta and has always suffered floods. But, according to scientists, charities and non-governmental organisations, global warming is set to make life significantly worse for millions of people in similar situations around the world.

In Bangladesh, aid workers describe climate change as a fact of everyday life, "like the traffic in London". The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) says the region is the most vulnerable to global warming and the World Bank has described Bangladesh as the most "climate vulnerable in the world".

This week, the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR) warned that by 2100, as polar ice melts, sea levels will rise by almost five feet (1.4m). This is more than double previous estimates, and for Bangladesh it could be catastrophic.

Britain's Department for International Development (DFID) has warned that a fifth of Bangladesh could disappear if sea levels rise by more than one metre. This would destroy crops and



DAHOPE/PHILINA

livestock, spread disease and leave an estimated 30 million people homeless.

The aftermath of Cyclone Aila, which hit Bangladesh in May, gives an idea of what this might look like. Four million people were affected by the storm and hundreds of thousands lost their homes. In the flooded delta south of the port of Khulna, thousands are still surviving on a narrow embankment that is the only high point for miles around. Their only help is from aid agencies such as Save the Children.

Sitting outside her makeshift bamboo hut, Hasina Begum, 23, says she survives on one meal of rice and vegetables a day and is worried for her two-year-old son, Mizan, who has already been to hospital with diarrhoea this year. Children are also in danger of dysentery, mumps and scabies because of the living conditions.

Sosi Bhuson, 52, a handsome man reduced to wearing a dirty blanket against the wind that whips off the sea, is the spokesman for the community. He says this used to be a "well-to-do" area, but the crops

will fail this year and maybe even the year after that, because of the salinity in the soil.

The IPCC estimates that production of rice might drop by 8 per cent and of wheat by 32 per cent over the next 40 years, as temperatures rise in Bangladesh. Farming prawns for export to countries such as Britain is a possible alternative, but the farms destroy the environment and provide little income to the local community.

Inland, at the madrasa, the old men complain about the weather. But this is no small talk. They tell of a catastrophe: the weather has turned against them, the crops have failed and the cows have stopped giving milk.

Only Allah knows why. Their greatest fear now is that the community will die out; already, their grandchildren are leaving for the cities. Many of the families moving into the overcrowded streets of old Dhaka from flood-prone areas are forced to send their children to work in order to make enough to survive. Save the

**Victims of the weather: Hasina Begum and her two-year-old son. She is surviving on one meal a day and living in a makeshift hut after her home was destroyed in a cyclone**

Children estimates that almost five million children, like Asma, are working in Bangladesh in balloon factories, aluminium plants and chocolate factories.

The British Government is taking a keen interest in the situation, not only for humanitarian reasons. After all, where will displaced people go in the future? In Bangladesh, there could be between 50 and 100 million people currently living in coastal zones who will need to move by 2080. While most will move within the region, some may go abroad.

Perhaps we should just accept that it is impossible for people to live comfortably on a massive flood plain that is gradually being overwhelmed by the sea. But the Netherlands is also well below sea level and Japan suffers a high number of natural disasters, yet both manage to thrive.

Bangladesh is never going to be like either of these countries, but its government is confident that it could become far more resilient to climate change. The British taxpayer is already spending £126 million a

year in Bangladesh. On the remote Biswas char in the Patuakhali area, British aid has helped to rebuild hundreds of homes devastated by 2007's Cyclone Sidr.

The basic houses have mud floors and an outside latrine, but are a vast improvement on the temporary shelters people had been living in. Crucially, they are on raised plinths, meaning they will be protected if the sea returns. The lush paddy fields are a world away from the devastation in the Aila-affected zones: families in the area have been given seeds for more saline-resistant crops and ducks instead of hens; a cyclone shelter doubles as a school and children have lessons on what to do in another storm.

Saleemul Huq, a member of the IPCC and adviser on climate change to the Bangladeshi government, admits there is a danger that all the world's problems are blamed on climate change. But he asks the sceptics to look at what is happening in Bangladesh - and to consider the thorny problem of "global justice".

Bangladeshis have one of the

lowest carbon footprints per head in the world, at 1.1 tons a year, compared with 29 tons for the average American and 15 tons for Britons, yet they are suffering the most from global warming.

"It is time for rich countries to accept their responsibilities in terms of reducing emissions and providing assistance to developing countries that did not cause the problem but are going to suffer the consequences," says Huq.

At Copenhagen, the rich world will be asked to provide support for countries such as Bangladesh to adapt to climate change. Poor countries have said they will need an annual fund of around £250 billion to develop green technologies such as solar power, while also building sea defences and other infrastructure, but no rich country has yet been willing to come close to that figure.

Not only will there be problems persuading taxpayers to part with yet more cash during the recession, but questions will also be asked about how money will be distributed in countries still struggling with corruption.

Even in Bangladesh, where the government is considered to be leading the world in the fight against climate change, there are problems. Money put aside for adaptation has not been spent simply because the country does not yet have the capacity to mend infrastructure, such as the broken dam that caused the flooding of Sosi and Hasina's homes.

For Chris Austin, head of DFID in Bangladesh, Britain's position is clear. He says the Government has a duty to help poor countries develop, not only for humanitarian reasons but for strategic benefit. This is particularly true of Bangladesh, which is not only an important source of manufacturing and manpower but is nestled between two potential new superpowers, China and India.

"Even if you are sceptical about climate change, you have to admit that Bangladesh is in the front line in terms of vulnerability to weather patterns and poverty," he says. "We can do a lot to address this through reducing poverty and adaptation."

Mr Austin says that tackling climate change through a tough deal in Copenhagen is not only an opportunity to help countries like Bangladesh, but will benefit Britain by reducing poverty around the world. It would also reduce the chance of "climate change refugees" coming into our own country, as well as the risk of warfare and terrorism driven by food and water shortages.

"This is something we are going to have to deal with all the time in the future," he says. "We cannot just patch things up every time someone's house is destroyed and just wring our hands every time people die. We have to have a long-term permanent plan for dealing with climate change and we have that opportunity at Copenhagen."

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