

NOTE

Bangladesh Under Water

Anjali Kwatra writes:

Bangladesh will be one of the countries hardest hit by the effects of climate change. It is threatened by rising sea levels and increased flooding and river erosion.

The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicts a rise in sea levels of anything from 9 to 95 cm by the year 2100. A rise towards the top end of this range would leave about 18% of Bangladesh under water.

About 35 million people live in coastal areas and many would be forced to migrate inland as land is swallowed up by the sea.

But climate change could also have an impact inland as floods and river erosion become more severe. IPCC models indicate Bangladesh could experience 10-15% more rainfall by 2030. And as global temperatures increase, more snow will melt in the Himalayas in Nepal and India each summer, running into rivers which flow through Bangladesh on their way to the sea.

Dr Atiq Rahman, executive director at the Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies, the country's leading environmental research group, says: 'Patterns of rainfall and flooding have changed in the past few years. Severe floods used to come once every 20 years, but now occur every five to seven.'

In 1988 and 1998, two-thirds of the country was under water at some point. In 2004, terrible floods left 30 million homeless or stranded.

Floods and erosion plunge people into dire poverty. Mazeda Begum, 35, had lived her whole life in Balashighat, a village in northern Bangladesh, until the river Tista began to erode the land she lived on. For three years in a row her family was forced to abandon their house and build a new shelter further back from the crumbling riverbank.

In 2000, the river finally swallowed their remaining land and they fled by boat. They now live on a raised flood-protection embankment, built by the government.

But without their farmland, on which they grew wheat and rice, they could not earn an income, forcing Mazeda to send her nine-year-old daughter to work as a servant in Bangladesh's capital, Dhaka. 'I had no choice as we could not afford to feed the whole family.'

Mazeda has never heard of the terms climate change or global warming. She has never even been in a car. But it is people like her - already among the most vulnerable - who will be hardest hit by the effects of climate change.

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