

ISAS Brief

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Cyclone Sidr's Deadly Trail and Bangladesh's Humanitarian Crisis

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Tropical cyclone Sidr, a category 4 storm, ripped through Bangladesh's Southwestern coast on 15 November, costing over 3,500 lives and demolishing houses, crops, and other valuables. Thousands of people in the country are facing a humanitarian crisis. Some remote areas remain impenetrable to the search operators. The Red Crescent fears that the casualties could be as high as 10,000 as many people are still missing in the coastal areas. An estimated one million families are believed to have been affected and thousands of people are living under the open skies. Survivors in the disaster-prone areas are in dire need of food, water, and shelter.

Originating in the Bay of Bengal, packing winds of up to 240 km/h and a tidal surge of several meters, Cyclone Sidr, comes just a few months after floods devastated the northern part of the country.

A massive rescue effort has been initiated by the interim government of Bangladesh that has drawn help from around the world. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) has mobilised tens of thousands of volunteers to provide humanitarian assistance to the survivors. The U.S. Navy ships- the USS Essex and the USS Kearsarge, with over 3,500 marines aboard are en route to Bangladesh to assist in relief operations. The country's donor agencies have pledged over US\$ 140 million for the cyclone-affected people.

However, a ban on political activities under a national emergency has greatly handicapped political parties from disbursing relief through their political networks throughout the country. Traditionally, two major political parties, namely, the Bangladesh Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, are the first to reach to the people during cyclones and other natural disasters.

The early warning systems and shelters have kept deaths far below levels of the deadly cyclones of 1970 and 1991. Thanks to the government and other humanitarian organisations' massive evacuation operations, a total of 650,000 people from low-lying coastal areas found

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shelter just before the cyclone hit the country. However, the devastations caused by cyclone Sidr, the deadliest storm to hit the country in one and a half decades, is staggering in terms of damages to crops, livestock, fisheries and infrastructure.

All parts of Bangladesh are not equally affected by Sidr. However, the whole nation is expected to bear the economic costs of the cyclone. The agriculture sector could pay the highest toll. According to a preliminary official assessment by the Agriculture Ministry, at least 0.5 million tonnes of Aman, a rain-fed rice crop, awaiting harvest have been entirely damaged and the country's total Aman output might fall short of the target by over 1.6 million tonnes this season. The figure could be even higher when reports from all affected areas are available. The monsoon-induced floods in July to September had washed away at least 1 million tonnes of Aman rice which makes up some 41 per cent of the country's total rice production.

The authorities fear that the extent of damage to property, crops and livestock might be over US\$ 1.0 billion. The Red Cross reckons that the scale of its devastation is much more than just what these figures reveal.

The Bangladesh economy which is currently observing double digit inflation largely owing to the current wave of inflation and oil price hike in the international markets is expected to bear additional food cost due to the crop lost. The prices of essentials in Bangladesh are already at an eight year high as food-inflation hit 11.10 (on point to point basis) per cent in September.

Cyclone Sidr has also caused severe damages to the Sundarbans - the world's largest mangrove forest and home to the endangered Royal Bengal Tiger. Acting as a natural barrier it stands between much of southern Bangladesh and the Bay of Bengal. The Sundarbans weathered the main blow of the cyclone, saving thousands of lives by slowing down nature's wrath. According to a primary assessment of the forest department, about one-fourth of the four hundred thousand hectares of forest area of this UNESCO world heritage site has been damaged by Sidr. The environmentalists fear that many tigers and other endangered species had been swept away by the massive tidal wave triggered by the cyclone.

The immediate answer to Bangladesh's woes is food, medicine and water supply. Considering current skyrocketing prices of the food items, the Bangladesh authorities should encourage its donors and development partners to provide food aid rather than cash. In Bangladesh, food represents a large share of total expenditure and constitutes nearly 59 per cent of the total consumer price index.

Secondly, the government should engage the unemployed people in the disaster-prone areas in rehabilitation projects under the food-for-work or similar programmes. Such programmes are desirable for several reasons. Such initiatives will reduce the inflationary pressures. The food-for-work programmes will generate employment and may help in rebuilding the cyclone-hit infrastructure of the country.

Thirdly, the fisheries and the agriculture are the backbone of the country's coastal economy. The Agriculture Bank and other microfinance institutions should relax the interest rate so that the needy can have access to finance.

Fourthly, the forest department should take necessary measures to rebuild the Sundarbans, so it can continue to take on the blow of cyclones as well as can preserve many endangered species.

Bangladesh, which lies between the Himalayan Mountains and the Bay of Bengal in the delta of the River Ganges and Brahmaputra, has had a long history of cyclones. In 131 years, the country has lost 200 million people to 80 cyclones. Climate scientists predict that global warming could bring more natural disasters for Bangladesh, as one-fifth of its areas are barely few meters above sea level.

Nevertheless, the disaster management system in Bangladesh has improved markedly over the years. In 1991, the cyclone Gorky killed at least 143,000 people and left as many as 10 million homeless. The 1970 Bhola cyclone, one of the deadliest natural disasters in modern times, caused the death of half a million people.

Today the country is better prepared to tackle floods, cyclones and other natural calamities. Following the cyclone of 1991 and the 1988 floods, the government of Bangladesh with generous supports from the United Nations, Department for International Development (DFID) and other donor agencies, has adopted a holistic approach to face the natural disasters. The non-government organisations and microfinance firms like Grameen Bank and other numerous organisations who work with the poorest of the poor are also playing a huge role in creating social awareness on natural calamities and climate change.

It is still not very clear whether the wrath of Cyclone Sidr is an outcome of global warming. Coincidentally, the Inter Governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) synthesis report on climate change which was published almost at the same time cyclone Sidr hit Bangladesh reveals that warming of the climate system is unequivocal. If the past is any guide and the climate changes according to scientists' prediction, Bangladesh shall remain a disaster-prone country in the near future. To mitigate the long term impact of climate change, the global communities need to adopt more holistic approaches to save millions of poor people in Bangladesh who are predicted to pay even higher price of climate change even though they are hardly responsible for the emissions of carbon and other green house gases.

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