

Bangladesh: “workers are not responsible for climate change but we are the ones losing everything because of it”

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Altaf Hossain’s life has been shaped by the repeated struggles he has faced ever since his village was swallowed by the mighty Meghna river in the southern Bangladeshi town of Mehendiganj in Barishal District. Although the 55-year-old carpenter has always managed to earn enough to survive, he has not been able to rise out of poverty because he has repeatedly had to start over from scratch.

“I was born and raised in a well-to-do family of farmers and fishermen. We had homes and land. But large boats now move over what was once my neighbourhood,” Hossain says as he finishes working on a wooden door at a construction site in the Jatrabari area of the capital city Dhaka, over 250 kilometres away from his hometown.

Every year, millions of Bangladeshis are adversely affected by unusually frequent extreme weather events like storm surges, intensified cyclones, flash floods, and droughts. Like Hossain, tens of thousands of people find their homes, livelihoods and lives washed away in the floods that submerge large swathes of Bangladesh, or when the riverbanks and coastlines erode. Some move to neighbouring India or to the Gulf countries in search of work, but most become internal migrants, mainly moving to Bangladesh’s congested cities to eke out a living.

According to World Bank data, [Bangladesh’s rural population](#) fell from almost 95 per cent of the population in 1960 (when it was still known as East Pakistan) to just 62.5 per cent in 2019. Meanwhile [the total population has exploded](#), from 48 million in 1960 to an estimated 163 million today. But rural or urban, it is working-class people who are on the front lines of climate change.

According to the [Global Climate Risk Index 2020](#), between 1999 and 2018, Bangladesh ranked seventh in the countries worst affected by extreme weather events. Of the top seven countries, only Myanmar and the Philippines suffered a bigger death toll than low-lying Bangladesh.

In addition, by 2050 as many as 13.3 million Bangladeshis could be forced to migrate because of intensifying climate impacts, according to [a 2018 World Bank report](#).

Unlike most low-wage workers in Bangladesh, Hossain is a member of a trade union – the Nirman Sramik League – which is a part of the Bangladesh Free Trade Union Congress (BFTUC). Thanks to the union, construction workers like Hossain get a daily wage of about 850 Bangladeshi taka (US\$10), which is considerably more than the average income of workers in the informal economy. But in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, finding regular work has been difficult. Hossain says he earned next to nothing for almost six months this year because of the Covid-19 restrictions.

He fears that with the increase in extreme weather events in Bangladesh, finding regular work may get even harder. “We are not the ones responsible for the rising temperatures, but we are losing everything because of it. We have to organise and demand changes,” says Hossain.

Turning just transition from words into action

Repon Chowdhury, the secretary general of the BFTUC, tells *Equal Times* that the workers who migrate from the countryside and coastal areas to escape the worst impacts of climate change simply encounter new problems in the cities, such as substandard living conditions and poorly paid, dangerous work. “In the cities they are also exposed to extreme pollution and have to work for long hours in the scorching sun. This can lead to heatstroke and other consequences, but the casualties go unnoticed.” Protecting these most vulnerable of workers is a challenge. “People in desperate need of work tend to accept poor working conditions and are in a weak position to negotiate for better wages,” Chowdhury says.

“Workers forced to transition [from rural to urban areas] mostly rely on friends and family for information and other types of resources to find new jobs,” says Professor Syeda Rozana Rashid of the international relations department at the University of Dhaka. Rashid was the lead researcher of [a recent Solidarity Center/USAID study](#) on the links between climate change, economic activities and internal migration in Bangladesh. “Very few newly displaced people become members of any trade union and they have a very low level of understanding about climate change and how it impacts their own livelihoods,” she adds.

Awareness about climate change among trade unions used to be low until quite recently, admits the BFTUC leader. “Unions used to think that climate change was not a labour issue or that trade unions didn’t have a role to play [in the climate justice movement].” That position has shifted to some extent, thanks to the seminars, workshops and other events organised by the national union centre in recent years. “We have been able to somewhat reduce the gap in the communication between the government and labour organisations,” Chowdhury says. BFTUC has also invested in educating its members about just transition, particularly as it relates to occupational health and safety (OSH). “We encourage workers to engage in dialogue with their employers and policymakers [about safer working conditions].”

Since 2011, Chowdhury says that the BFTUC has been committed to providing the government with research on the impact of climate change on workers’ lives, livelihoods, OSH and social protection. Union leaders have also worked to establish a culture of holding national and sector-specific dialogues on environmental and industrial issues.

But when it comes to putting these ideas into action, BFTUC’s work is constrained by several limits, including the lack of social dialogue between the government and trade unions on climate issues, poor collaboration between trade unions and the wider environmental movement, and financial constraints. “Even though the workers in Bangladesh are the people whose lives have been upended by climate change, the government’s climate funds [*editor’s note: Bangladesh has [two national climate funds](#), the Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund, and the Bangladesh Climate Change Resilience Fund. The latter is donor funded*] has nothing for them. We have been trying for years to change that. But our interventions are limited. We are still far from our goal.”

Trade unions have not been directly involved in developing Bangladesh’s climate policy, however, the BFTUC is advocating for the inclusion of just transition principles across all climate-related government policies. “We are lobbying and campaigning to get the mechanism of just transition

integrated into the national agenda so that trade unions can participate in workplace dialogues. We want to achieve that in the next three years,” says Chowdhury.

Bearing the brunt, needing international support

Under the terms of the Paris Climate Agreement, Bangladesh has a commitment to reduce its carbon emissions by between 5 and 15 percent by 2030 in the power, transport and industry sectors. The country also has an action plan for adaptation and mitigation measures. In June, the BFTUC wrote a letter to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina calling for new measures in Bangladesh’s updated nationally determined contributions (NDCs) on reducing carbon emissions (which are due to be updated by 31 December 2020) to “provide support for skills, retraining, and redeployment for affected workers”. The letter, seen by *Equal Times*, also called for further research into possible new areas of green job creation, research into the socio-economic impacts of a just transition, increased mechanisms for the transfer of technology from countries in the Global North to the Global South, and responsible investment through mandatory sustainable practices and employer-worker dialogues about just transition.

The people of Bangladesh are amongst the least responsible for the emission of earth-warming gases into the atmosphere. “Bangladesh creates less than 1 percent, 0.3 percent to be exact, of CO₂ emissions,” says Ainun Nishat, professor emeritus at the Centre for Climate Change and Environmental Research at Dhaka’s BRAC University.

Even if Bangladesh reduces its emissions to net zero, the difference will be minuscule in the global context, he says. “What Bangladesh should focus on is saving its people from the adverse impacts of climate change because they will be one of the worst, if not the worst, sufferers.”

For that reason, Chowdhury says that industrialised countries have an obligation to assist Bangladesh with climate mitigation and adaptation measures. “We need funds for research into new technologies. We must employ the displaced people in safe and environment-friendly occupations.”

Floods this year occurred for an unusually long period and engulfed over one-third of the country by July, affecting five million people, according to the National Disaster Response Coordination Centre. Croplands were ruined and vital fishstock and livestock was washed away. “This might be followed by a drought. We exported food last year. But this year we are having to import food. It’s taking a massive toll on the economy,” says Professor Nishat. “We suffered three major cyclones in one year. These events are getting worse. We need to take steps to cope with this.”

Professor Nishat says that there are funding provisions in the Paris Agreement to help countries like Bangladesh introduce mitigation measures, but “the world is not giving us the support that it owes us.” He admits the situation is not helped by Bangladesh’s challenges in capacity-building and financial transparency, but he says that sustainable solutions must be urgently implemented. The 130 million Bangladeshis caught between Covid and one of the worst years of climate emergency don’t have time to waste.

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