

Bangladesh: Surveying the post-Sidr situation

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Keywords: Bangladesh, Cyclone Sidr, The poorest of the poor, Japan-Bangladesh Cultural Foundation

In November 2007, Cyclone Sidr (category 4) struck the south and south-western coastal areas of Bangladesh. In the span of mere moments, the 4.57M tidal wave washed away thousands of lives, paddy fields and millions of houses. As usual, the most affected were the poorest of the poor. The devastation was extensive and will take a long time to tackle. About 2.6 million Bangladeshis across nine districts are still in need of emergency assistance. The estimate for damaged livestock could reach at least 1.25 million, and the area of damaged crop land is 810,000 hectares. At this stage, loans for rehabilitation and fertilizers for the farmers are crucial.

According to the UN, food, shelter and cash are the top priorities at this time, along with better sanitation, drinking water, prevention of water-borne diseases and electricity and livelihood assistance. The government is prioritizing the obtainment of budget support for food imports, rebuilding houses and other long-term needs.

Many international and national aid agencies have extended helping hands in support of the victims. Although Bangladesh's chief adviser claims that the situation is under control and that disaster management

has been tackled successfully, field-level reports and data yield contradictory statements. The Japanese Government has already declared itself united with Bangladesh in efforts to tackle the catastrophe by offering assurances of assistance in rebuilding houses in some of the worst-affected areas. Recently, the Japan-based NPO Japan-Bangladesh Cultural Foundation (JBCF) also distributed relief materials in Sidr-affected areas. JBCF distributed rice to the affected people in the Mongla seaport and monetary aid to the schools in the Shoronkhola village of Bagerhat, the region that suffered the brunt of the impact. Millions of dollars have been donated from different countries, which is being handled primarily by the Army, the TNO (Thana Nirbahi Officers), and local leaders. While the army is allocating funds properly, JBCF and other activist organizations have reported, on the basis of field observations, that mishandling in fund allocation exists on the part of other groups. The rehabilitation progress is sluggish as well. Given the prevailing circumstances, the distribution of a handsome sum to each affected family seems more practical than awarding just small incentives.



Figure 1. The area of the poorest of the poor affected by Cyclone Sidr.

Sidr caused much harm in various ways, *e.g.*:

1. Due to this cyclone, the sea temperature in the Bay of Bengal has changed, triggering a decline in the fish population and concomitant damage to the economy.
2. It washed away many trees, endangering the forest resources and, in the long run, the economy.
3. The dams are broken. Hence, if disaster strikes again (a yearly routine during the monsoon season), the situation will be yet more dire.
4. The sea water has been mixed with the ground water, resulting in a lack of drinking water.

The government already exhibited a distinct lack of foresight in refraining from importing foods in the wake of the last flood, and in its failure to curb the price-hiking of daily essentials. Moreover, the government and aid agencies have been criticized for not delivering funds to the worst-affected areas. Therefore, careful and more unified and harmonized political movements are now necessary for the effective management of disaster relief and economic reforms.

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