

B.1 Bangladesh - 2009 - Cyclone Aila

Overview

Summary

Cyclone Aila struck the south west of Bangladesh and neighbouring districts of India. The storm displaced around 2 million people, most of whom returned to their places of origin and started spontaneous or assisted recovery within a week.

Critically, Aila destroyed more than 700 km of coastal embankments. After five months, over 200,000 people were still living in very basic temporary shelters, unable to return because their homesteads were still under water.

One year later, repair of the embankments was far from complete. As a result of lack of land and funds, there were far fewer reconstruction support programmes than there had been for Cyclone Sidr, and thousands of families remained more vulnerable to future flooding.



Context

The south west of Bangladesh is characterised by low-lying lands protected by embankments surrounded by water. The region is known for the Sunderban national park, the largest mangrove forest in the world, but is also home to families primarily making a living from agriculture, forestry, fishing and shrimp farming.

There are six seasons in Bangladesh - Grismo (summer), Barsha (rainy), Sharat (autumn), Hemanto (cool), Sheet (winter) and Bashonto (spring). In winter, temperatures can fall to 7°C. The main cyclone season starts in March, and is accompanied by higher winds and higher precipitation.

The disaster

Cyclone Aila hit the south western part of Bangladesh (Khulna Division) and West Bengal in India on 25th May 2009. 190 people

were killed by the flooding.

The seawater flooded villages and fields displacing over 2 million people, many of whom were still living in poor conditions on strips of raised land one year later. 100,000 livestock were killed and over 340,660 acres of cropland destroyed. Thousands of kilometres of road were damaged or totally destroyed and hundreds of kilometres of flood protection embankments were washed away.

The response

The key challenge facing families was the destruction of the embankments. Until the embankments were repaired, they would remain displaced, durable housing could not be built and livelihoods could not be restored.

Although some embankments were repaired by communities

themselves or through cash for work programmes, many of the damaged sections required heavy machinery to repair. The scale of these engineering works required intervention by the government.

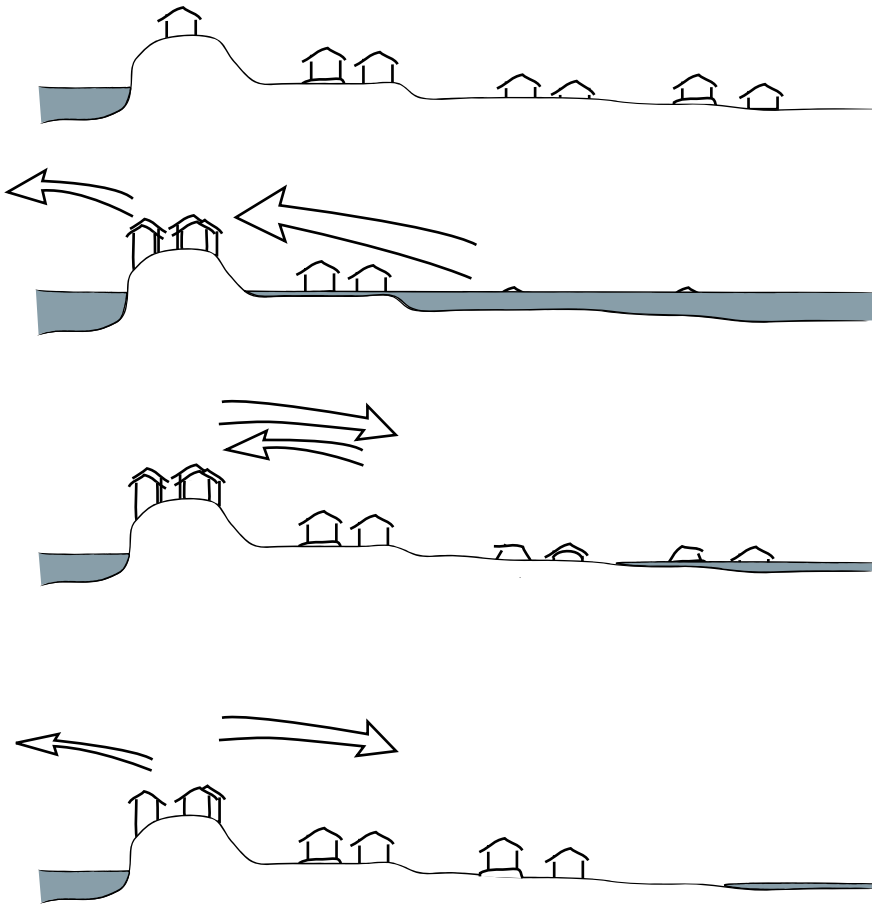
The first phase shelter response was distribution of plastic sheeting and household items. After three months it was clear that the response had been underfunded; some further distributions of plastic sheeting and blankets began as winter approached.

Despite the poor quality of shelter, many families identified that their key needs were for embankments to be repaired and for food, water and livelihoods. However, in the absence of land and funds, projects were limited.

After 5 months, 200,000 people remained displaced.



Embankments were not rapidly repaired, and land remained flooded. Families remained displaced on embankments
Photo Joseph Ashmore



Before the cyclone, people lived on land protected by embankments. Some landless people lived on embankments and beside roads

Immediately after the cyclone many people moved to the roads and the embankments because their land was flooded.

Six months after the cyclone, many embankments remained broken and land was still flooded. There was limited return, and 200,000 people still lived on the roads and embankments. Some returned to their land by night and returned to the embankments at night or during high tides.

Until all of the embankments are repaired, return will be limited. For those whose livelihoods remain badly affected, there will be no other option but to migrate to other areas and the big cities, increasing urbanisation.

Illustrations: Joseph Ashmore



"Many thousands of people displaced by the Aila cyclone, who have now been living in makeshift shelters for the last ten months, are at risk. If the embankments aren't repaired urgently, the humanitarian consequences will be catastrophic. Many families have already been displaced several times since Aila struck and have lost their homes and their livelihoods."

Ambassador Dr Stefan Frowein, the Head of the European Union's Delegation to Bangladesh



Temporary settlements on roads (left top) and embankments (left bottom, right)
Photos: Joseph Ashmore