

SECURITY IN A CHANGING CLIMATE: A STUDY ON BANGLADESH

Iftekharul Bashar*

Climate change¹ is increasingly being recognized as a transnational security challenge with the greatest environmental, economic, and security implications². Bangladesh is one of the frontline countries already facing the hard realities of this global phenomenon. Severe climate vulnerability of this country is evident from its record of natural disasters. Such disasters now being triggered by climate change, are finally obstructing the efforts of Bangladesh to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)³. Climate change is a pressing development challenge for Bangladesh in view of the country's

* Iftekharul Bashar is a Research Associate at the Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs.

¹ Climate change is any long-term significant change in the “average weather” of a region or of the earth as a whole. Average weather may include average temperature, precipitation and wind patterns. It involves changes in the variability or average state of the atmosphere over durations ranging from decades to millions of years. These changes may be caused by dynamic processes on Earth, external forces including variations in sunlight intensity, and more recently by human activities. Some scientists predict that climate change will cause severe disruptions, such as weather-related natural disasters, droughts, and famines, which may lead to enormous loss of life. Global warming between 1.6 and 2.8 degrees Celsius over the next three decades would raise sea levels by half a meter.

² Though this recognition and conceptual change is starting to happen, it is not happening fast enough. Some experts say that just as ‘energy security’ is now an accepted and central part of the hard security discourse, so too must be ‘climate security’. Most security threats in today’s world are amenable to some extent to a “hard power” or conventional reaction, and demand may rise for such responses to climate change-related security problems. But the reality is--there is no hard power solution to climate change. Defence and security planners must face a paradox when assessing their responses to the problem. Military planners have shown an awareness of the security implications of climate change. In 2006, for example, the UK Ministry of Defence explained its thinking on the matter to officials from the US Center for Naval Analysis. The US Department of Defense has also published scenarios for the period 2010-30 that examine the potential effects of climate change.

³ The MDGs are eight international development goals that 192 United Nations member states and at least 23 international organizations have agreed to achieve by the year 2015. They include reducing extreme poverty, reducing child mortality rates, fighting disease epidemics such as AIDS, and developing a global partnership for development.

vulnerability to its impacts. The security impacts of climate change in Bangladesh need to be accessed in advance so that Bangladesh do not experience any climate Black Swan crisis. Bangladesh needs to scale up local safeguards to protect the livelihood of the people and at the same time, needs to remain engaged in regional and global cooperation on environment and climate matters. Bangladesh should incorporate climate security in its national security and foreign policy objectives and utilize enlightened climate diplomacy in regional and global forum.

Bangladesh, one of the most densely populated countries in the world, with over 755 people per square Km, has a per capita GDP of USD 380. Over 40 percent of the population lives in poverty. Almost 20 million of its people are extremely poor and vulnerable to natural disasters. With its high population density, low level of development, and low lying deltaic mass, Bangladesh has already been facing a number of natural and man made problems. Natural hazards like cyclones, floods, droughts and socio-economic problems such as poverty, low literacy, poor health delivery systems, high unemployment are some of them. In future Bangladesh may also have to face more adverse impact of climate change and sea level rise.

Bangladesh is striving to become a middle-income country with much reduced poverty. This is a challenge. The current population of Bangladesh is more than 140 million. By 2035, its population could reach 200 million, and the capital Dhaka, the second fastest-growing city in the world, is on track to be home to 50 million by 2050. And with climate change, it's possible that 40% of the country will flood during the monsoon season, compared with 25% today.

Bangladesh ranks one of the most disaster prone countries of the world. The geophysical condition of the country is highly disadvantageous.⁴ This country is already facing consequences of a sea level rise, including salinity and unusual height of tidal water. Bangladesh is particularly vulnerable to climate change given its

⁴ Geographically Bangladesh is located in natural-disaster prone region of Asia. It is situated in the north of the Bay of Bengal. The topical cyclones in 1970 and 1991 were estimated to have killed 500,000 and 140,000 people, respectively. The storm surges are higher in Bangladesh than in neighbouring countries because the Bay of Bengal narrows towards north, where Bangladesh is located. In recent years, general cyclonic activity in the Bay of Bengal has become more frequent, causing rougher seas.

location. As a low-lying delta in one of the highest rainfall areas of the world, Bangladesh is chronically prone to inundation.

People in Bangladesh don't emit much CO₂ and GHG. The per capita annual GHG emission is very low here. According to the World Development Indicators (2006) report of the World Bank the per capita carbon emission from Bangladesh has been 0.3 Mt only, while these were 20.2 Mt and 9.2 Mt per capita for the USA and the UK. The global per capita consumption has been 4.0. Bangladesh emits quite below the global average and thus people of Bangladesh did not create the problem, but are the victims of the global climate problem.

Bangladesh has made significant progress in human development over the past 30 years. Life expectancy has risen from 50 years to 64, population growth has halved and the adult literacy rate has doubled.

But climate change could undo decades of progress. Climate poverty in Bangladesh already is on the rise. Bangladesh is already witnessing a convergence of climate change and poverty that is reducing the ability of poor communities to grow crops, access water and house and feed themselves.

Despite many hurdles much of which came from climatic disasters, the country has achieved an average annual growth rate of 5% since 1990, according to the World Bank. Bangladesh has seen expansion of its middle class, and its consumer industry has also grown. In December 2005, four years after its report on the emerging "BRIC" economies (Brazil, Russia, India, and China), Goldman Sachs named Bangladesh one of the "Next Eleven", along with Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan and seven other countries.⁵

⁵ Goldman Sachs used macroeconomic stability, political maturity, openness of trade and investment policies, and the quality of education as criteria. The N-11 paper is a follow-up to the bank's 2003 paper on the four emerging "BRIC" economies, Brazil, Russia, India and China. The Next Eleven (or N-11) are eleven countries- Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, The Phillipines, South Korea, Turkey, and Vietnam— identified by Goldman Sachs investment bank as having a high potential of becoming the world's largest economies in the 21st century along with the BRICs. The bank chose these states, all with promising outlooks for investment and future growth, on December 12, 2005.