

Outlook

Bangladesh suffers in silence

A million children face illness or death after double flooding washes away harvest

Lucy Ward in Dhaka

For now, the "hygiene kit" — soap, candles, matches, two mosquito nets and basic clothing — is all that stands between the family of six and disease as this summer's catastrophic monsoon floodwaters finally recede.

"We tried to stay in our home, but it was too dangerous and we had to go to the relief shelter [in a neighbouring school]," says Helena, 27. "People helped each other with food, but our house was destroyed, apart from the roof and one wall. We have moved back and patched up the walls with paper."

The Chaudhurys' village, Velanagar in Narshindi, three hours' drive along rain-damaged roads northeast of the capital, Dhaka, is typical of thousands of settlements battered this year by a double wave of fatal flooding.

In July and August, half of Bangladesh was inundated by rains and river flooding that killed more than 760 people, affected more than 30 million, and washed away untold numbers of homes, roads and vital subsistence crops.

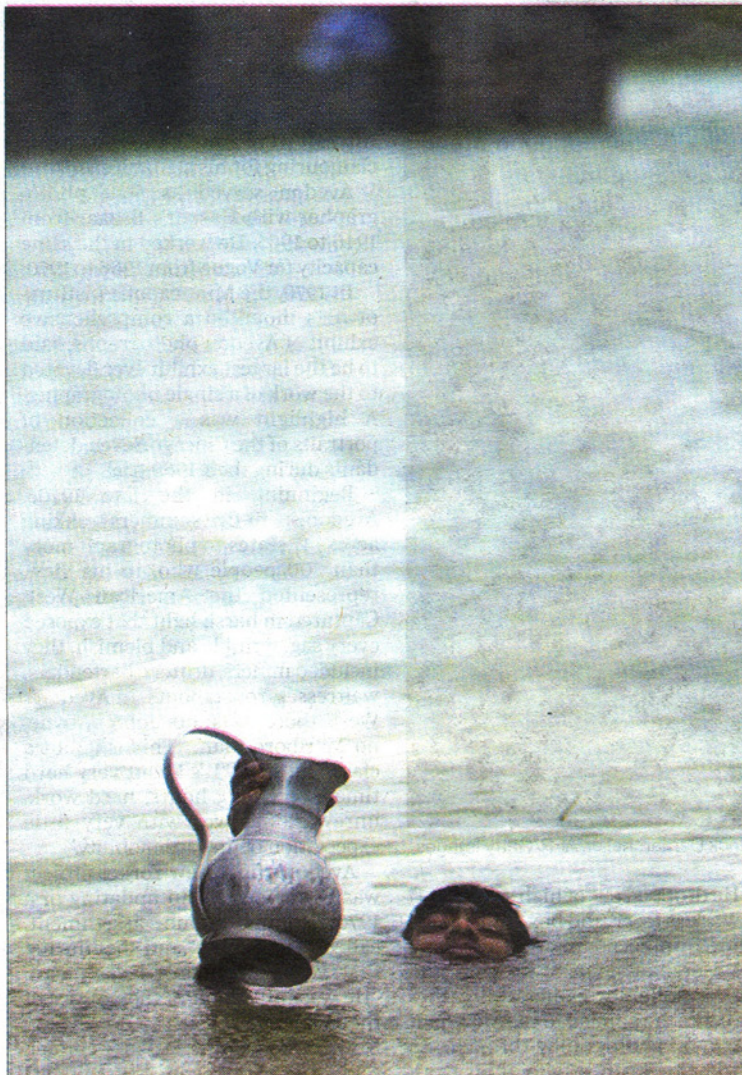
Then last month, as global attention turned to the hurricanes lashing the Caribbean and Florida, and then to lethal flooding in Haiti, Bangladesh endured its heaviest rain in 50 years, inundating the already saturated land and devastating recovery efforts.

While children caught fish in the contaminated metre-deep floodwaters of Dhaka's streets, hectares of aman rice seedlings and other crops planted after the August rains were washed away and hundreds more villages, particularly in the southwest, which had escaped the worst of the earlier floods, were inundated.

Aid agencies warn that the consequences of this little-acknowledged double tragedy are a disaster on a far larger scale than first recognised in a low-lying country wearily familiar with annual flooding.

Unicef and the World Food Programme warn that within six weeks, without rapid medical and food aid, more than a million Bangladeshi children risk acute illness or death through malnutrition. More than 500,000 pregnant and breastfeeding mothers are also seen by aid experts as acutely vulnerable.

The latest UN assessment warns that most areas will need food at least until the aman rice harvest in December, with some requiring much longer support if that crop fails.



Flood facts

- Floods covered half of Bangladesh, killing more than 760 people, directly affecting more than 30 million
- An estimated 8.5m homes were destroyed
- Worst rain for 50 years, with 35cm falling in 24 hours on September 13
- Dhaka government puts cost of repairs to roads, agriculture and industry at \$6bn; the World Bank's estimate is \$2bn
- Rice crops, fish farming and salt production badly affected
- World Food Programme distributing high-energy biscuits to 80,000 children daily for next 10 months

A young boy swims through Dhaka's flooded outskirts in an attempt to take home drinking water

Photograph: Pavel Rahman/AP

In Velanagar, where surrounding fields still lie under sheets of floodwater, hygiene kits funded by the British government and distributed by Islamic Relief will be followed by a fresh round of food rations containing rice, dahl, oil and salt.

"We are expecting a potential famine-like situation in December," says Ahmed Nasr of Islamic Relief. "It could be compounded by the cold when the temperature drops to around 7C during the winter. The children do not have the clothes to protect them, and at least 6,000 families in this area have to rebuild their homes."

Further northeast, at the village of Dakshin Bejora in Thana Madhabpur region, children with bright orange-

and-yellow hair ribbons dance in a primary school that has been rebuilt out of corrugated iron after waist-high floodwaters swept away its woven jute walls.

After abandoning their homes for the worst flooding, the 1,500 villagers have returned to try to nurture their waterlogged crops of rice and jute.

Sitting in a one-room hut, Shirina Akhtar, 25, points to her family's single platform bed, propped up on four bricks in a vain effort to elevate it above the first floods. "At first we hoped to stay here, but we have two small daughters and it was not safe when the waters came so high," she says.

Shirina has taken out a 1,000-taka (\$18) loan from the charity Brac to repair her home with corrugated iron, but must pay the money back from her husband's meagre seasonal income as a farm labourer.

The central government, which drew back from early appeals for international aid, to demonstrate that the impoverished country could cope with floods, is now seeking help to repair some of the \$6bn in damage to agriculture, industry and infrastructure. That will take years to complete.

International donors and governments including the UK, which has given \$45m in aid on top of its \$180m annual development funding, want Bangladesh's ruling coalition to place more focus on flood prevention, including the dredging of rivers and canals to allow better drainage, and better engineering and use of vegetation to shore up embankments. Emergency measures such as building more and better flood shelters — typically in raised school buildings — and investing in more rescue boats are also seen as vital.

Oona King, the London Labour MP whose Bethnal Green and Bow constituency is home to the largest concentration of Bangladeshi people outside the country, said after visiting the flood zone two weeks ago: "It is critical that the government and donors both recognise the double blow of this year's floods, but also the need to build disaster preparedness into everything they do."

Ministers in Dhaka now acknowledge the scale of this year's disaster, but seem torn between resignation and determination to find more permanent solutions. The food and disaster minister, Chowdhury Yusuf, said: "Bangladesh is water and water is Bangladesh; floods are nothing new for us."