

Illegal migration in the Indian Sunderbans

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It is expected that due to sea-level rises in the future many millions of Bangladeshis will flee to India, exacerbating further the ongoing disputes between India and Bangladesh. Human security will be the most important agenda item for Indian-Bangladeshi relations in the coming decades.

Environmental crisis and the increasing impacts of climate change in Bangladesh have become important causes of cross-border migration to the Indian Sunderbans Region (ISR) where loss of lands and habitats are the two major issues due to sea-level rise in recent years. The coastal populations are constantly migrating from one island to another in search of food and shelter. There is a steady influx of Bangladeshi migrants into this region who could be termed 'crisis migrants', entering into ISR illegally in anticipation of threats in their own country and eventually becoming trapped by humanitarian crisis.

Frequent floods, tropical cyclones and storm surges have had a colossal impact on Bangladesh's coastal population. Shrinkage of land area, river bank erosion and intrusion of saline waters into the agricultural fields have pushed farmers in search of new lands. These are causing widespread landlessness, unemployment, income disparities and degradation of human habitat. No rehabilitation programmes exist and there is extremely poor participation of the majority of the people in decisions that affect their lives.

Two types of climate-induced migrants are found: 1) Indian Sunderban dwellers constantly migrating from one island to another and 2) rural Bangladeshis infiltrating through the porous border — recognised neither by their government as Bangladeshi citizens nor by India as 'climate refugees'. The Bangladesh government does not stem the flow of migrants and does not take back those identified as illegal migrants. Such forced migration from Bangladesh symbolises the failure of official adaptation to climate change; at present, migration issues are not effectively mainstreamed with Bangladesh's environmental, disaster management or climate change policy, and there are therefore no policies for climate refugees.

Because of the supply of cheap labour from Bangladesh, political parties in the Indian border states encourage this illegal infiltration. However, the humanitarian concerns are

overwhelming for both India and Bangladesh.

People smuggling is flourishing, with a deeply entrenched network on both sides of the border.

Policy recommendations

- The opening of a legal channel of migration may be the most feasible option, allowing entry of migrants and providing them with a pass that would entitle them to receive the minimum wage and other entitlements of Indian workers. Thailand has such Memoranda of Understanding with Burma, Cambodia and Laos that entitle migrant workers in Thailand to receive equal wages and benefits.
- Climate change adaptation requires assessment of vulnerability and proper mitigation planning to minimise the impacts of sea-level rise. In 2005 a Coastal Zone Policy adopted in Bangladesh laid the foundations for the management infrastructure on which better coastal management can be built.
- India must offer humanitarian assistance to these effectively stateless people through bilateral negotiations with Bangladesh. India may absorb some of these crisis migrants or give them the status of refugees.
- India and Bangladesh should work bilaterally to solve this issue. The difficult part for India will be to deal with the Bangladeshis who remain in India. The difficulty also lies in persuading Bangladesh to accept that illegal migration is an issue that needs to be addressed.
- India and Bangladesh should work jointly on climate change adaptation to preserve the world's largest mangrove forest in the Sunderbans.

The issue of illegal migration has embittered Indian-Bangladeshi relations time and again. The global community needs to extend support to climate refugees and assist them in obtaining protected status under international law.

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