



Bangladesh Facing Serious Problems Due To Climate Change, Caritas Head Says

Bangladesh

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Bangladesh is under siege due to the effects of man-made climate change, according to Benedict Alo D´Rozario, executive director of Caritas Bangladesh.

D´Rozario, 52, recently returned from the "UK-Bangladesh Conference on Climate Change: Bangladesh Facing the Challenges," held on Sept. 10 at the Royal Geographical Society building in London. The United Kingdom and Bangladesh jointly hosted this conference.

According to media reports, Mirza Azizul Islam, adviser to the Bangladesh government's Finance Ministry, led a 39-member delegation to the conference. He proposed a multi-donor trust fund to mobilize money from the world community to support the country's efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

As head of Caritas Bangladesh, the social wing of the Catholic Church in this Muslim-majority country of 150 million people, D´Rozario can claim to already be dealing with the consequences of climate change.

Caritas runs emergency relief programs for people affected by cyclones, floods and droughts, and has set up cyclone-warning systems and shelters. It also works in disaster preparedness and adaptation such as through water management.

D´Rozario joined the organization in 1987. In 1991 he became assistant director of the Caritas Development Institute, the training wing of the organization, before becoming the director of Disaster Management. He obtained a Ph.D. in Development Studies from Bath University in Britain in 1998, with his dissertation on the work of Caritas Bangladesh.

He was appointed a member of the Rome-based Pontifical Academy for Life in 2000 and became a member of the Bangladeshi bishops' Episcopal Youth Commission in 2001.

D´Rozario was appointed executive director of Caritas Bangladesh on July 1, 2005.

In the following interview with UCA News on Sept. 29, D'Rozario talked about the outcome of the London conference, climate-change issues and the role of Caritas in adapting to and mitigating climate change:

UCA NEWS: What key issues did the London conference address, and what did it achieve?

Benedict Alo D'Rozario: The key issues of the UK-Bangladesh Climate Change Conference were mitigation, adaptation, technology transfer and worldwide resource mobilization to assist Bangladesh in adapting to climate change. The outcome of the conference includes the signing of an agreement that the UK will provide 75 million pounds (about US\$130 million) over the next five years to implement Bangladesh's plan for adapting to climate change.

In addition to that, the Bangladesh government also announced it would spend US\$45 million of its own in the first year, from January to December 2009, for tackling climate-change issues. Another outcome is that Bangladesh and the UK decided to work together to create a fund for Bangladesh so that it may take appropriate and sustainable adaptation measures to face climate-change issues.

An international board was formed during the conference to manage and oversee the funding and [other matters] in relation to climate change. Apart from representatives from Bangladesh, UK and World Bank, the conference also came to a general agreement that representation on the board will also include Bangladeshi civil society and NGOs. Through this participation, Bangladesh will have a chance to play an effective role in implementing realistic project funding with local management.

What problems did the meeting highlight, stretching over what time frame?

The UK-Bangladesh meeting claimed a number of problems would affect Bangladesh. These include: increasingly frequent and severe tropical cyclones, with higher wind speeds and storm surges leading to more damage in the coastal region; sea-level rises leading to submergence of low-lying coastal areas and saline water intrusion up coastal rivers and into groundwater aquifers, reducing freshwater availability; damage to the Sunderbans, the world's largest mangrove forest; and drainage congestion inside coastal polders (low-lying areas), which will adversely affect agriculture.

[Climate change also] is causing riverbank erosion, resulting in loss of homes and agricultural land to the rivers. In addition to that, Bangladesh will also see lower and more erratic rainfall, resulting in increasing droughts, especially in the drier northern and western regions of the country.

Over what period of time will these happen? These affects are already taking place. Overall temperature has increased by 0.7 degree centigrade over 50 years. The numbers of floods and cyclones as well as their intensity have increased. More coastal-belt areas are inundated during the high-tide period.

Who is claiming these problems are due to climate change?

Through its Ministry of Environment and Forest, the Bangladesh government is claiming these climate change affects. The bases for these claims are different studies and assessments conducted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Bangladesh Meteorological Department, Bangladesh Water Development Board, Integrated Water Management, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, and the Bangladesh government's Department of Environment.

Is Bangladesh already suffering effects of climate change?

There are number of symptoms. Already we are witnessing that it is raining when it is not supposed to rain. The seasons are not like what they were. For instance, this year it rained from January until September, when it used to be from April to August.

Previously, the number of [meteorological] depressions in the Bay of Bengal stood between 50 and 62 times annually, whereas in the recent years this number stands between 70 and 80. This September we had three depressions in the bay.

Another symptom we see during high tide is that the coastal belt area in Khulna Division goes under five to seven feet of water, whereas this used to be between two and five feet.

Caritas is a large NGO, but small in terms of the scale of this challenge. What can it do?

Bangladesh is one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world and will become even more so as a result of climate change. Floods, tropical cyclones, storm surges and droughts are likely to become more frequent and severe in the coming years.

These changes will threaten the significant achievements Bangladesh has made over the last 20 years in increasing incomes and reducing poverty, and will make it more difficult to achieve the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals).

The poor people including women, children, and disabled are the most vulnerable groups, who will suffer most. As a development organization Caritas works mostly for the poor and disadvantaged groups in society. So, Caritas has an opportunity to work for the poor in terms of adaptation issues.

Caritas has started doing the following: increasing the resilience of vulnerable groups, including women and children, through development of community-level adaptation, livelihood diversification, better access to basic services, and social protection and scaling up. For example, it has started adaptation programs in drought-prone and saline-prone areas, floating-crop cultivation, crab cultivation, etc.

It plans, designs and constructs urgently needed new infrastructure to meet the changing conditions expected with climate change. For example, cyclone and flood shelters, coastal and

river embankments, and water management systems, urban drainage systems, river erosion control work, etc.

Caritas Bangladesh has a joint research program with the Bangladesh Center for Advance Studies and the London-based International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED). Caritas' research aims to link climate change with the poor and vulnerable, and with health, for instance, disease incidence, nutrition, water and sanitation. These linkages are important in order to identify possible intervention to increase the resilience of the poor and vulnerable households to climate change.

In collaboration with the government, Caritas is building a "green wall," a reforestation program planting mangrove trees along the shoreline.

The organization is also building the capacity of its staff to undertake international and regional negotiations on climate change. Regional and international cooperation is essential in order to build necessary capacity and resilience.

How will Caritas' role in addressing climate change fit in with its disaster prevention and relief programs?

Climate-change adaptation and disaster-risk reduction have very similar aims in terms of seeking to build resilience in the face of hazards. They both focus on reducing people's vulnerability to hazards by improving methods to anticipate, resist, cope with and recover from their impact.

So better linkage between climate-change adaptation and disaster-risk reduction could result in reduction of climate-change losses, and increase effectiveness and sustainability of both adaptation and disaster-risk approaches. It would also ensure the more efficient use of financial, human and natural resources.

Some skeptics claim global warming and climate change are natural phenomena, not manmade problems.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) understands the science of climate change. Through the IPCC Fourth Assessment it has been clearly demarcated that climate change is fully human-induced and there is no confusion. They claim the average global temperature has risen by 0.7 degree centigrade and will rise a further 1.8-4 degrees centigrade by the last decade of the 21st century.

I think human activities and behavior are primarily responsible, through the rapid rise in emission of greenhouse gases into our atmosphere primarily through the burning of fossil fuel, for example oil, coal, gas, etc., the prime sources of energy.

How did you get started in relief work?

After completing my study at Dhaka University in 1982, I joined the Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace. In 1985, I was offered a Holy Cross scholarship at University of Portland, Oregon, U.S.A., for my further preparations to continue my work at the Justice and Peace Commission.

However, when I returned to Bangladesh in December 1986 after completing my study, then-Archbishop Michael Rozario of Dhaka and Holy Cross Father Richard Timm, the Justice and Peace Commission's secretary then, decided that I should work with Caritas Bangladesh.

I worked in different capacities at Caritas. I came to emergency relief in 1999. Meanwhile, from 1995 to 1999 I earned my Ph.D. in Development Studies on Sustainable Peoples' Organizations from Bath University, England.

After completion of my Ph.D., the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Bangladesh decided that my position at Caritas would be director of the Disaster Management department. I think all this is God's plan.

What are the most difficult challenges in your work? What are the most rewarding?

One of the difficult challenges for us is that in Bangladesh the need is huge but our resources are limited. So, it's a challenge, quantity verses quality. When we try to work more, there is the possibility that quality will go down.

Often we lose our best workers maybe because of the low salary. Sometimes some decide to leave the country for a better future or security or for their children's future! To minimize these challenges, we are providing ongoing capacity-building and conducting motivational seminars and reflection sessions.

One of the most rewarding things for me was what an 88-year-old Cyclone Sidr-affected man told me with blessing from his heart. When I was on the way to see our rehabilitation work for Sidr victims in Morelganj, the old man was blocking our road insisting he should talk with me.

Our people tried to calm down him and requested him to talk with them, but the old man said he wanted to talk with me. When I came down from the car and went to him, he told me he had been waiting on the road for three-and-a-half hours to see me.

He told me that because of our re-excavation of a six-kilometer-long canal, now he is able to bathe every day. Now he has water to use after using the toilet. The man told me that before the excavation he could hardly bathe once a week! He prayed and blessed me.

I came to know that the villagers of 11 villages sat in prayers separately and asked for blessings for Caritas.

What can be done on a national level to address Bangladesh's many problems, and how can the Church help?

There are proven means to help the people to overcome different situations. For examples, rainwater reservation could be used in households and in agriculture for salinity resilience.

We are also introducing alternative crops to cultivate in the saline-prone coastal areas. Suppose, in saline water, rice cannot be grown but crabs are reared. Crab cultivation brings quick return in cash for the community. We are also introducing floating vegetable cultivation by making floating stages on water. And chickens are replaced with ducks, which community people can easily rear, as ducks can thrive even in saline water.

There are some proven means that the government could think to replicate nationally.

The houses we are giving to the community are stronger than previously, with a view to protect them as much as possible for strong winds. Previously, we built the largest number of cyclone shelters -- 225 in the coastal belts of the country. Those saved thousands from the recent cyclones. We are in the process of constructing 35 more besides constructing 7,300 houses for Cyclone Sidr victims.

Caritas is also building green walls by planting trees to save the community from different disasters like the cyclones and tidal surges.

Caritas International and CIDSE have planned a global advocacy called Poverty and Climate Justice with a view to help the countries at risk of being hard hit by the affects of climate change. They are planning to support people of these countries, including Bangladesh, for improving livelihood to protect and save themselves.

[Editor's note: Brussels-based CIDSE is an alliance of 16 Catholic development organizations from Europe and North America. Its English name is International Cooperation for Development and Solidarity.]

The Church and Caritas International could build awareness among people to change their behavior so that less greenhouse gases are produced. If people spend less, carbon-dioxide emissions will be lower and the atmosphere will be saved.

I would like to mention that Caritas International and CIDSE are already working together on poverty reduction and climate justice.

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