

Caritas Helps to Hold Back the Desert

Caritas is looking for ways to bring hope to families

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This Bangladeshi farmer's field is one of the many hit hard by drought

Vast tracts of northwest Bangladesh are in danger of turning into desert after withering bouts of prolonged, severe drought. As many as 100,000 hectares of arable land have gone barren, resulting in the loss of a million tonnes of crops.

"We can't grow crops because there's so little rain and the drought extends over months. We need to travel miles just to collect drinking water," said Paulina Tudu, 36, a tribal Santal Catholic housewife.

Tudu is from the Barindra area which covers the Rajshahi, Chapai Nawabgonj and Naogaon districts. Here, drought now prevails for seven months of the year or more; one report claims that at least 43 percent of the country is at risk of desertification.

This would affect millions of people in the north west region, many of them tribal Catholics like Tudu. One of them, Lily Ekka, cited another disastrous consequence of the drought.

"Because no crops grow here for lack of water, many people are moving to other districts for a living," she said. "Eventually this creates problems for the family, especially children because their studies get disturbed."

Caritas Bangladesh (www.caritasbd.org) is now hard at work, looking for ways to alleviate the problem and bring some hope to the affected families. Arook Toppo, a Caritas Rajshahi program officer, agrees with local estimates that "without taking proper measures to combat the drought, the area could turn into desert in the next fifty years."

Recent reports from the Bangladesh Meteorological Department share his prognosis. In 2010 the country witnessed its lowest rainfall in 15 years with 47,000 millimeters, compared to 56,000 mm in 2009 and 66,000 in 2008.

Experts say the depletion, like increasingly frequent storms and cyclones, is yet another product of global climate change.

Caritas has developed a number of strategies for fighting back. "Besides planting thousands of trees ourselves, we're encouraging people to plant trees themselves and follow drought adaption methods," said Toppo.

"We're also introducing drought-tolerant crops and rainwater preservation for drinking. To help with that, we've excavated ponds so we can reserve water for irrigation and fish cultivation. And we've set up water tanks and purification systems for drinking and other domestic uses."

"Finally, from time to time we hold awareness programs that explain the vulnerability and show how to adapt to drought. And we're promoted livestock rearing as an alternative living for people."

This Report collected from Union of Catholic Asian News <http://www.ucanews.com>.