

The Daily Star

Thursday, May 28, 2009

Food, drinking water crisis in the coast

Death toll in Cyclone Aila rises to 155

Star Report

An acute shortage of food and safe drinking water scourges the south-western districts hit by Cyclone Aila, which has left at least 155 people killed and scores missing.

Two days after the Monday's storm, thousands of people were still marooned in remote areas.

Starving and desolate, they were waiting for the government and non-government volunteers carrying out relief efforts with the help of the armed forces.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina last night directed the ministers concerned to step up measures to help the Aila victims.

She also asked them to take immediate steps to repair the embankments and other infrastructures left battered by the cyclone.

Earlier in the day, Food and Disaster Management Minister Abdur

Razzaque said the government volunteers are distributing food and other essentials throughout the coastal districts. Helicopters are being used to send relief materials to faraway places.

People have been facing water crisis as saline water inundated their areas, he said in a press conference at the ministry. So, the government has been distributing drinking water along with foods and medicines.

At least 13 water purifying plants have been set up in the affected areas, the minister said. So far, around 10,000 tonnes of rice and Tk 2.23 crore in cash have been dispatched.

Aila victims, however, give a different picture.

"Almost all people in our union have been affected by the cyclone, but we have yet to see any relief materials," said Mazharul Islam Nani of Golbunis in Golachipa upazila of Patuakhali.

The district administration distributed 155 tonnes of rice and Tk 1.55 lakh among the victims in seven upazilas, but the amount appeared to be inadequate.

Two more bodies were recovered in the district yesterday. The deceased were identified as Roman, 13, of Balaibunia under Golachipa upazila and Kadbanu, 45, of Pangashia in Dumki upazila.

Our correspondent in Satkhira reports: Thousands of people remain marooned in Gabura, Padmapukur, Burigoalini, Munshiganj and Kaikhali unions of Shyamnagar upazila and some places in Assassuni and Tala upazilas. They are struggling with little or no food and drinking water.

"These are hard days. We cannot cook food since there is no high ground to place the stove or any fuel to light it up," said Rohela Bibi of Gabura union.

Many people devastated by Aila were seen waiting on embankments in Satkhira for relief materials.

Our staff correspondent in Khulna reports: Over one lakh people in the district are struggling without food and water.

Chairmen of Koira, Paikgacha and Dacope upazila parishads said they fear outbreaks of waterborne diseases and famine as the water started receding Tuesday night.

Relief operations jointly carried out by the navy and the coastguard, in cooperation with government officials, were insufficient, alleged Dacope upazila parishad Chairman Abul Hossain, Koira upazila parishad Chairman Mohsin Reza and Paikgacha upazila parishad Chairman Rashiduzzaman.

Acute crisis of drinking water prevails in the storm-hit Mongla upazila of Bagerhat where the relief supplied was inadequate.

The port authorities yesterday started providing the destitute with drinking water, but that was not enough to meet the needs of a quarter of the people there, said Chairman of Mongla Upazila Parishad Iddris Ali.

Thousands in Sharankhola and Morrelganj upazilas of Bagerhat face similar crisis of food and drinking water.

Chairman of Soudkhali union Anwar Hossain Panchayet said relief distribution operations were not being carried out properly.

CASUALTIES



Hungry and homeless people throng a boat carrying the army bringing relief materials to Khelpetua village under Gabura Union in Khulna district yesterday, two days after Cyclone Aila hit the coastal areas. Photo: STAR

Of the total deaths in 17 districts, 35 were reported in Satkhira, 35 in Khulna, 26 in Noakhali, 18 in Bhola, nine in Patuakhali, six in Laxmipur, nine in Barisal, four in Narsingdi, two each in Bagerhat, Chapainawabganj, Naogaon and Cox's Bazar, and one each in Natore, Dhaka (Keraniganj), Magura, Rangpur and Lalmonirhat, reported UNB.

According to official figures, the death toll stood at 113 and the number of injured 6,478.

The body count could rise as rescuers and locals are still spotting bodies.

THE DESTRUCTION

According to the food and disaster management ministry's primary assessment, crops on 80,667 acres of land were destroyed and those on 3,09,327 acres were damaged partly.

A total of 33,44,309 people of 588 unions under 76 upazilas were affected by the cyclone. Of the roads, 641.8 km were destroyed and 3,231 km damaged.

A total of 341 institutions were flattened and 1,596 damaged. At least 152 culverts and 813.1 km of embankments were also damaged.

Around 61,440 domestic animals were killed.

"The government decided to repair all the embankments washed away or damaged," said Food Minister Abdur Razzaque who visited Patuakhali yesterday.

Our staff correspondent from Khulna reported that Aila damaged over 18,000 shrimp enclosures in Bagerhat destroying shrimps worth Tk 40 crore. It has also damaged over 7,000 fish farms in the district.

At least 20,297 homes were also damaged.

RESCUE AND RELIEF OPERATIONS

Bangladesh Air Force helicopters transported relief goods and water purification plants to Shyamnagar of Satkhira, Barguna sadar, Kuakata, Patuakhali sadar, Dhalchar and Daulatkhan of Bhola.

Bangladesh Army continued its rescue and relief operations in remote areas of Patuakhali, Satkhira, Khulna and Bagerhat in cooperation with the local administration.

Army medical teams are also providing medical care, says an ISPR press release.

Deputy commissioners, upazila nirbahi officers, and upazila chairmen are also engaged in rescue and relief operations.

The food minister and LGRD Minister Syed Ashraf Islam yesterday visited Barguna and Kuakata, while State Minister for LGRD Jahangir Kabir Nanak visited Kalapara upazila of Patuakhali and Maj Gen Motiur Rahman, GOC of Jessore Cantonment, visited Mirzaganj upazila of Patuakhali and distributed relief materials.

Meanwhile, Brac from its own fund approved Tk 1 crore for the Aila-affected people. It already started distributing food, drinking water and water purifying tablets.

Bangladesh Red Crescent Society is continuing its rescue and relief operations in Aila-affected areas, says a press release.

It already donated Tk 3,60,000 among 8,000 affected families.

It also distributed 16,000 plastic sheets, 16,000 saris, 16,000 lungis, 8,000 jerry canes, 800 tents, 1,60,000 water purification tablets, 80,000 oral saline packs, 16,000 blankets, 8,000 hygiene kits and 16,000 clothes in the affected areas.

Meanwhile, in an emergency meeting of the Awami League (AL) Presidium, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina directed ministers concerned to take all out measures for rehabilitating the cyclone-affected people.

The meeting was held at her official residence Jamuna with Hasina in the chair.

Finance Minister AMA Muhith, Food and Disaster Management Minister Abdur Razzaque were also present at the meeting.

The prime minister directed the finance minister to clear necessary funds, which would be needed for the rehabilitation of Aila victims, AL Office Secretary Abdul Mannan Khan told reporters after the meeting.

He said the water resources ministry has already mentioned that around Tk 200 crore would be needed to repair the embankments.

Hasina also directed party leaders to stand beside the cyclone victims.

Talking to The Daily Star, the food and disaster management minister said many countries and donor agencies including USA, World Bank, UNDP and the European Union have offered assistance for the cyclone victims.

Welcoming the foreign assistance, the minister said the government has adequate food and money to rehabilitate the cyclone victims.