

# My House Underwater

by Rasheda Begum

*I used to have a house, about half a kilometer away from the shore in Khudiar Tek in the island of Kutubdia. Unfortunately this was washed away by the devastating cyclone in 1991.*

**Watering Whole.**  
The island of Kutubdia, now only down to 37 square kilometers from 250 square kilometers a century ago, continues to sink.

Photo by Hilme Kabir

**M**y neighbours and I had to move farther to a safer place. So I built a hut beside an embankment that was three kilometers from the shore.

At that time, I decided not to withdraw too far, given my affection to where my house used to be even as I knew that the sea will drown everything someday.

Like my neighbours, I have always felt this unexplained horror over the thought of fleeing to an unknown destination. I guess this fear is based on the fact that unlike men, our movement as women has always been restricted. A man can easily decide what to do and where to live. Society does not permit us to act like a man.

This has been my reflection since I left my ancestral and braced the reality that the rest of the family members will always be in a greater state of insecurity. I always asked myself: what kind of work would I find to feed my family?

In the next five to six years, I observed that the sea was coming closer and closer, gradually swallowing the landmass and

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advancing towards my hut. The waves became furious especially in spring when waters overflow to the embankment.

As we continued to be flooded, I decided to move to the interior part of the island. Unfortunately I failed to get any place where I could build a shelter for my three daughters and son. It did not take a while before the sea swallowed all our belongings including a piece of land.

In 2007, we left the island and settled in an urban slum called Kutubdia Para, that is situated at the outskirts of the sea resort town

of Cox's Bazar. The place severely lacks civic amenities and services. Here we face an even more distressing situation. Everyday, I had to think of how I would be able to feed my family.

My children and I are employed as daily labourers at the local fish processing and drying businesses that are seasonal in nature. This also means being in an extremely unhygienic working environment. I am constantly worried for my three grown up daughters because there is no rule of law for the poor, especially for slum dwellers. ■

**Void from the View.** The tourist resort town of Cox's Bazar has hosted scores of climate refugees from Kutubdia. However, these refugees who have already been deprived of their homes, property and even their cultural life in Kutubdia, are restricted to the town's urban slums, far from the vantage points for vistas like this.

Photo by Ziaul Hoque from Wikimedia Commons

## Climate Change Refugees

by Asia Pacific Movement on Debt and Development

Over the decade, a new term has entered the lexicon of policy makers and the media: climate change refugees or climate change induced forced migrants. The First Assessment Report of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) noted that the greatest single impact of climate change might be on human migration. This 1990 report estimated that by 2050, 150 million people could be displaced by climate change and its related phenomena such as desertification, increasing water scarcity, floods and storms. Current estimates are at 200 million people globally.

In Bangladesh, climate refugees would reach 30 million or one in every seven people in the country would be displaced by climate change.

Migration from the coastal areas to the urban slums has been increasing, clearly showing the links between global warming and sea level rise. Such link was quite evident in the migration of around 20,000 people from Kutubdia, a south eastern island to the resort town of Cox's Bazar. Kutubdia used to have an area of about 250 square kilometers but in just a century, its size has been reduced to 37 square kilometers. With the ongoing erosion because of the stronger and bigger waves, the island continues to sink.

Displacement due to environmental degradation is nothing new in Bangladesh. For years, people have been moving from the rural areas to the urban areas because of disasters that result to land erosion and the destruction of people's livelihood. Most displaced individuals and families end up settling in urban slums or refugee camps, where quarters are too close together, sanitation poor and food supply and livelihood opportunities insufficient.

Certainly the impact of climate change on the low-lying coastal island must not be underestimated. But there is a risk that solely focusing on climate change obscures other social changes that provide a more realistic explanation of why people act in particular ways, including whether they stay on their fragile homestead or seek to migrate elsewhere. An alternative approach is to acknowledge the role of climate change in exacerbating existing social, economic and environmental pressures.