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Indian islanders seek jobs, husbands outside sinking Sundarbans

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MOUSUNI ISLAND, India (AlertNet) - Families living on India's Sundarbans islands, part of the world's largest mangrove forest, are seeking husbands from the mainland for their daughters as they see no future for them at home.

Some are also sending their children away to work, as climate change and a lack of local development make it harder to survive.

The 10,000 sq km Sundarbans - a UNESCO World Heritage Site along the northeast coast of India and southwest coast of Bangladesh - are suffering worsening floods due to rising seas and subsiding land in the delta. The absence of government policies to help a growing population adapt has left the 4 million inhabitants of the 48 islands on the Indian side of the Bay of Bengal struggling to make ends meet.

In a recent survey by the Jayprakash Institute of Social Change, an NGO based in Kolkata, the nearest city to the region, 75 percent of families in the Indian Sundarbans said one or more family members had migrated to look for work. About a fifth said they had sent their children to work as migrant labourers.

For young women, marrying men from the mainland is another way of coping - even if it comes at a premium.

"We are trying to find a groom from the mainland for our daughters - we are even ready to pay a higher dowry," said Sahara Bibi, a 48-year-old resident of Mousuni, an island and village in South

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24 Parganas district. The mother of four has two teenage daughters, and wants to find husbands for them as soon as possible.

"There is no point in sending them to school - it takes over two hours with crossing rivers and walking. What's the point as they have to be married off anyway?" she added.

Life in the Sundarbans was already tough, due to insufficient roads and transport, limited access to power, a shortage of schools and healthcare services, and the poor state of many dwellings. Worsening erosion and climate-related challenges are making it even harder.

"They do not have a choice today as all sources of livelihood are dwindling; erosion is eating up land and their homes," said Asim Mondol, a school teacher in Lahiripur village in Gosaba block. "As they lose their plots of land ... farmers have no choice but to become fishermen or learn a new life skill. The threat of submergence and doom is palpable."

DISAPPEARING LAND

Land is being lost in the Indian Sundarbans at a rapidly increasing rate. Between 2000 and 2008, it disappeared at a rate of 8 sq km per year, compared with 4 sq km per year between 1930 and the beginning of this century.

Sea level rose by up to 12 mm each year at some observation stations between 2002 and 2009, far higher than the global average of 3 mm. The sea surface has also warmed by 0.5 degrees Celsius per decade, much more than the global average of 0.06 degrees per decade.

Land subsidence is a major contributing factor, but it only accounts for sea-level rise of up to 5 mm/year, experts say.

"There is little doubt that the Sundarbans is showing clear signs of being a victim of climate change, and at a much faster rate than most other parts of the world," said Sugata Hazra, head of the department of oceanography at Jadavpur University, which has been monitoring the region for the past two decades. "The data clearly show a sharp upward trend in sea-level rise, sea-surface temperature increase, land loss and increase in extreme weather events," he added.

Warmer sea-surface temperatures are making rainfall patterns more complex and erratic, causing problems for agriculture, the dominant source of local livelihoods. Crop yields have also been declining because of rising soil salinity over the decades, which is increasing economic hardship.

On top of this, fish catches have reduced dramatically - in part because of climatic changes - aggravating poverty further. Data from the University of Calcutta shows a rising level of heavy metals in fish due to increased pollution. And, as the water temperature changes, some species like the Indian mackerel have moved into deeper waters, making them harder to catch.

'ENDLESS WAIT'

Given the difficulty of earning a living in Sundarbans villages, they are starting to empty of sons, of daughters and of men of working or marriageable age. Those left behind are mainly children, wives and the elderly.

A shortage of economic opportunities in smaller towns in the region and even in Kolkata forces men to travel to far-flung parts of the country in search of work, including Kerala, about 3,000 km away.

To accommodate the new working patterns of migrants, local festivals have shifted as families can only reunite during the monsoon season, between June and August. Many male migrants work in the construction sector as unskilled labourers, and the monsoon is the only time the industry takes a break, allowing them to come home.

Ironically, these are the most inhospitable months to live on the islands. "Even walking on the muddy soil is difficult. It is a precarious situation as we have to go without food if it rains hard and supplies (which have to be transported in by boat) don't come. But that's the only time when the entire family gets together. The rest of the year is an endless wait," said Sahara Bibi from Mousuni.

Durga Puja, a major Bengal festival that traditionally brings relatives together in September and October, is now losing its significance. "There is no question of holidays in the post-monsoon period and winters - work is in full swing and no one is allowed leave," said Sahara's 19-year-old son, Md. Shazahan. "There is no Christmas or Eid for the people here either," he added.

NO GOVERNMENT HELP

The damage wrought by Cyclone Aila, a super-strength storm that hit the region in May 2009, helped spark the current exodus. But longer-term changes it caused to the local ecosystem have made rehabilitation difficult.

Sea water flooded into fields during the storm surge, and even after three years of reasonably

good monsoon rains the soil still remains saline and uncultivable in many areas.

A **report from the New Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment**, released in February 2012 – for which some of the research featured in this article was carried out - notes that migration has become the most popular way of coping with climate change in the Sundarbans, because the lack of government response to people's deteriorating economic situation has left them with few other options.

“Amidst constant threats to livelihood from various non-climatic and climatic factors, the administration in (the) Sundarbans has not been able to help the populace in any way to restore their conditions or provide alternatives,” says the report.

Anurag Danda, head of climate adaptation at WWF-India, says his organisation regards those who are leaving as “climate refugees”.

“But we cannot officially confer such status to them because of political reasons,” he added.

“Lack of development and climate-related hardships (in the Sundarbans) are just escalating conflict between man and nature, making it impossible for them to peacefully and sustainably coexist,” Danda said.

Aditya Ghosh is a journalist who has carried out extensive research and reporting in the Indian Sundarbans.