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Press release

A national calamity Cyclone left hundreds people died

National Dalit Watch Report

Aila cyclone hit coastal West Bengal on the **25th May 2009** causing untold devastation, particularly in the Sunderbans. **Prasad Chacko** and **Ashim Boral** from National Dalit Watch-NCDHR along with the team from DRCSC (**Development Research Communication and Services Centre**) a partner of **Christian Aid** visited the area to observe the nature of disaster and steps being taken for relief and rehabilitation by the state and Civil Society. The team from NCDHR had a specific mandate to look into issues of inclusion of Dalit and other marginalized communities. We visited the Sunderbans area of the North and South 24 Praganas districts. Christian Aid coordinated the visit with its partner DRCSC. National Dalit Watch would like to thank DRCSC, Christian Aid and Cordaid for the support and in facilitating this visit.

The enormity of the disaster is what struck all of them as we moved from village to village, from island to island over the two days that they spent in the affected areas of the North and South 24 Parganas districts. We joined the DRCSC team on the 28th and the 29th of May for a short visit to the cyclone affected areas in these districts. Given the limited time and the difficulty in accessing the villages we covered only about 4 villages in 3 blocks; but the long journey by road and by boat across three affected blocks left a lasting impact on them.

The scenario was heart rending, which will certainly not be captured in the few words written in the following account; nor the pictures that are there in the attachment.

Observations

1. **Insufficient cyclone warning:** Our first visit to a village of Basanti block was an eye opener; over 1200 people who had taken refuge in a school being run by a local NGO (Champa Mahila Society), a partner of DRCSC. The people complained that they were not at all warned of the advancing cyclone. They had to run for their lives with the advancing waves and water gushing into their houses. The only option was to huddle in relatively higher areas in their settlements and hope that the waves did not reach there also. There was only one death in this village.
2. **Abysmal relief:** The only aid they got was 500 gms of beaten rice per family per day for 3 days since they were displaced by the cyclone. Houses broken down, belongings lost, paddy fields and ponds inundated by saline water, livestock dead by the hundreds. Mercifully, the Pradhan and the GP decided to use their stock of grain the village school that was stored for the mid-day meal programme. But that could see them through only for a couple of days.

3. **Scarcity of drinking water:** We could not decide whether the single functioning tube well near the relief camp, serving 1000 odd people was a blessing or a symbol of the lack of sensitivity of the administration. We were to see worse things the next day.
4. **Children forced to beg for food:** During our journey by road to Sandeshkhali it was shocking to see scores of children jumping in front of vehicles to beg for food. We could see some travellers giving biscuit packets and water bottles to these hapless children. In every junction small tents from where appeals for help were being made continuously over the loudspeakers. Anxious crowds of survivors, suffering written all over their faces would be waiting helplessly for some vehicle of the government or NGOs to come in with water and food.
5. **Desperation giving way to anger:** In some places anxiety gave way to anger; anger erupted into sporadic violence. There were instances of vehicles being looted and government officials being assaulted, politicians being heckled. It was clear that on the 5th day after the fateful day of the fatal fury of Aila, whatever response in terms of humanitarian relief that may have reached the people was highly insufficient. Many people all along the way that we talked to had only the same story to say; they had survived only on 500 gms of beaten rice per family that was given may be once or twice. And this was the state of the survivors who had taken refuge along the highway. We wondered what would be the state of those who were still stranded on the numerous islands in the Sundarban delta. We were on our way to see that first hand.
6. **Precarious survival:** Everywhere along the broken banks of the river we could see the people fishing frantically and desperately the whole day, with their small fishing nets that they use near the shores. That was perhaps the only hope for food; One of the workers of a local NGO 'Sanirbahar' mentioned that people are in desperation even collecting the dead fish that were deposited on the mud banks and mangrove thickets along the river; large numbers of fresh water fish were killed due to the excessive ingress of saline water during the tidal ingress that accompanied the cyclone.
7. **The corpses of 5 human beings that we saw floating around** – a grim reminder of the fatal fury of the cyclone. A mother and child locked in an eternal embrace of love – manifested tragically even in death. A kind soul had tied their mortal remains to a mangrove bush in the hope that may be their dear ones would be able to perform their last rites one of these days when they found the mother and child.
8. **Victims turning violent:** It has been 5 days since Aila struck; but no food, water and medical services had reached the islands. Some of the GPs had managed to get a measly amount of 'Cheera', some of them started getting bleaching powder; but the large mass of population still hungry. There was anger, slowly giving way to desperation; there was violence in some areas, government officials assaulted and looting of vehicles passing by – more by the mass of affected people who have taken shelter on the highway. But the inhabitants of these far flung delta islands had no way but to wait stoically, their strength giving away, with increasing morbidity, and the frightening scenario of epidemics already looming large. Diarrhoea has already broken out; and what is to follow is only anybody's guess.

A systemic exclusion that determines the nature and quality of disaster response

1. **Majority of the affected population is SC and Muslims;** Although the visit was too short to reach firm conclusions, we could not find any evidence of discrimination in (though extremely miniscule) relief measures within the villages and settlements we visited. People seemed to be living together wherever they had taken refuge. Later on it was clear why: as per information received, the largest population in the affected areas of the Sunderbans in N&S 24 Parganas is that of SC and (Dalit) Muslims. So the scope of internal discrimination amongst them was minimal, coming from the same social strata and caste identity.
2. **Enhancing the media's sensitivity towards issues of inclusion:** The media has been reporting only the statistical trivia of this disaster; it was distressing that no report on the humanitarian crisis was being pursued by the journalists, leave alone the question of inclusion. Even the photographs were revealing; only aerial survey photos and not of the affected human beings. There is a need to challenge and sensitize the media on this count.
3. **Need for an orientation to the activists on inclusion and pro-people rehabilitation:** The activists involved in responding to this disaster should be alert regarding the possibility of such conspiracies and prepare to counter them. During the earthquake people were encouraged to be relocated; during the tsunami too. But the people by and large did not fall for this since wiser counsel prevailed.

Immediate release of funds and flexibility to act urgently: The kind of interventions required is fairly well established and does not require any description at this stage. DRCSC has already updated their partners and civil society about their preliminary assessment of needs, and already in the process of sending proposals to donor agencies. What is required is immediate release of funds and the flexibility to act urgently. Need for a task force to track inclusion in relief and rehabilitation, need to strategise and strengthen peoples committees for entitlements. Rebuilding of houses of course is a priority; but what kind of houses? It is very important to have a design that suits the local conditions but still resistant to cyclones and floods. NREGS (National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) can be used as a potent entitlement during rehabilitation phase and livelihood restoration phase, if given enough flexibility and planned in an appropriate manner along with the affected people.

Climate change and Sunderbans: It is essential to look at the Sunderbans as an ecologically endangered area in the medium term from the perspective of climate change. The Master plan prepared cannot be just engineering-based with embankments as the main solution. The future of the people, their livelihoods, the prognosis as far as the rising sea levels are concerned, the resettlement of people if required a few years from now – all these factors need to be considered sensitively in consultation with the people themselves, the Panchayats in the area and the experts.

Prasad Chacko
09099927101
National Coordinator
National Dalit Watch

Safdar Ali
9213378753
Media & Comm. officer