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*With rising Islamic fundamentalism, weak government, and not enough dry land for its 150 million people, Bangladesh could use a break. Instead, it must face the catastrophic threat of climate change.*

**by Robert D. Kaplan**

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## Waterworld

**T**he monsoon arrived while I was in a shallow-draft boat traveling over a village that was now underwater. In its place was a mile-wide channel, created by erosion over the years, separating the mainland of Bangladesh from a *char*—a temporary delta island that would someday dissolve just as easily as it had formed.

As ink-dark, vertical cloud formations slid in from the Bay of Bengal, waves began slapping hard against the rotting wood of our small boat. Breaking days of dense, soupy heat, rain fell like nails upon us. We started bailing. The boatman, my translator, and I made it to the *char* before the channel water that was splashing into the hull, heavy with silt, could threaten the boat's buoyancy. It was a lot of work just to see something that was no longer there.

On another day, in order to see a series of dam collapses that had forced the evacuation of more than a dozen villages, I rode on the back of a motorcycle along a maze of embankments framing a checkerwork of paddy fields that glistened in the steamy rain. Again, the sight that greeted me—a few crumbled earthen dams—was not dramatic, unless, that is, you were holding the “before” picture in front of you.

Yet from one end of Bangladesh to the other, I saw plenty of drama, encapsulated in this singular fact: remoteness and fragility of terrain never once corresponded with a paucity of humanity. Even on the *chars*, I could not get away from people cultivating every inch of alluvial soil. Human beings were everywhere on this dirty wet sponge of a landscape. Squeezed into an Iowa-sized territory—20 to 60 percent of which floods every year—is a population half the size of that in the United States and larger than the one in Russia. Indeed, Bangladesh's Muslim population alone (83 percent of the total) is nearly twice that of either Egypt or Iran. Considered small only because it is surrounded on three sides by India, Bangladesh is actually a vast aquascape, where getting around by boat and vehicle, as I learned, can take many days.

I went through towns that had a formal reality as names on a map, but were little more than rashes of rusted-corrugated-iron and bamboo stalls under canopies of jackfruit trees, teeming with men wearing skirt-like *lungis* and baseball caps and women in burkas that concealed all but their eyes and noses. Between the towns were long lines of water-filled pits, topped with a green froth of hyacinths; the soil had been removed to raise the road a few feet above the unrelieved sea-level flatness. Soil is a commodity so precious in Bangladesh that people dredge riverbeds during the dry season to get more of it. When houses are dismantled, the ground on which they stand is transported through slurry pipes to the new location.

In every respect, people were squeezing the last bit of use out of the land. One day I saw a man carried by on a stretcher moments after he had been mauled by a Royal Bengal tiger. It is not an uncommon occurrence. As fishing communities crowd in on one of the tigers' last refuges in the mangrove swamps of the western Bangladeshi-Indian border area, and as salinity from rising sea levels reduces the deer population on which the tigers feed, man and tiger have nowhere else to go.

**T**he Earth has always been unstable. Flooding and erosion, cyclones and tsunamis are the norm rather than the exception. But never have the planet's most environmentally frail areas been so crowded. The slowdown in the growth rate of the world's population has not changed the fact that the number of people living in the countries most vulnerable to natural disasters continues to increase. The Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004 was merely a curtain-raiser. Over the coming decades, Mother Nature is likely to kill or make homeless a staggering number of people.

American journalists sometimes joke that, in terms of news, thousands of people displaced by floods in Bangladesh equals a handful of people killed or displaced closer to home. But that formula is now as unimaginative and out-of-date as it is cruel.

With 150 million people packed together at sea level, Bangladesh is vulnerable to the slightest climatic variation, never mind the changes caused by global warming. The partial melting of Greenland ice over the course of the 21st century could inundate a substantial amount of Bangladesh with salt water. A 20-centimeter rise in the Bay of Bengal by 2030 could be devastating to more than 10 million people, says Atiq Rahman, executive director of the Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies.

While scholars debate the odds of such scenarios, one thing is certain: Bangladesh is the most likely spot on the planet for one of the greatest humanitarian catastrophes in history. The country's future, however, and the

fate of its impoverished millions, will be determined not necessarily by rising sea levels, but by their interaction with, among other things, the growth of religious fundamentalism, the behavior of its neighbors and other outside powers, and the evolution of democracy. So, I came to Bangladesh.

**A**top the Bay of Bengal, the numberless braids of the Ganges,

Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers have formed the world's largest, youngest estuarine delta and one of its most dynamic. It is, in effect, the world's biggest flush toilet. Once a year, over the space of four months, God yanks the handle. First comes the snowmelt in the Himalayas, swelling the three great rivers. Then, in June, comes the monsoon from the south, up from the Bay of Bengal.

Calamity threatens when the amount of water arriving by river, sea, or sky is tampered with, whether by God or by humans. India, for example, is appropriating Ganges water for irrigation schemes, limiting freshwater flows into Bangladesh from the north, causing drought. Meanwhile, to the south, in the Bay of Bengal, global warming appears to be causing a rise in sea levels that is bringing salt water and sea-based cyclones farther inland. Salinity—the face of global warming in Bangladesh—threatens trees and crops and contaminates wells. And the less fresh river water that comes down from India, the greater the hydrologic vacuum that sucks salt water northward into the countryside.

Yet Bangladesh is less interesting as a hydrologic horror show than as a model of how humankind copes with an extreme natural environment. Weather and geography have historically worked here to cut one village off from another. Central government arrived only with the Turkic Moguls in the 16th century, but neither they nor their British successors truly penetrated the countryside. The major roads were all built after independence in 1971. This is a society that never waited for a higher authority to provide it with anything. The isolation effected by floodwaters and monsoon rains has encouraged institutions to develop at the local level. As a result, the political culture of rural Bangladesh is more communal than hierarchical, and women play a significant role.

Four hours' drive northwest of Dhaka, the capital, I found a village in a Muslim-Hindu area where the women had organized themselves into separate committees to produce baskets and textiles and invest the profits in new wells and latrines. They had it all figured out, showing me on a crude cardboard map where the new facilities would be installed. They received help from a local nongovernmental organization that, in turn, had a relationship with CARE. But the organizational heft was homegrown.

In a mangrove swamp in the southwest, at a fishing village of bamboo-thatched huts, I watched a local NGO perform a play about climate change. It emphasized the need to conserve rainwater through catchments and to plant

trees against erosion. Hundreds of villagers were there. I was the only foreigner. Afterward, they showed me the catchments that they had already built to direct rainwater into their wells.

Through similar bottom-up, purely voluntary means, the total fertility rate in Bangladesh has been cut from seven children born per woman after independence to three now—a striking achievement, given the value placed on children as laborers in a traditional agricultural society. Polio had been eradicated, before a recent reinfection from India. Despite all of Bangladesh's predicaments, it has gone from starving in the mid-1970s to feeding itself for the past two decades.

The credit for coping so well rests ultimately with NGOs. As familiar as their work now is, NGOs in Bangladesh represent a whole new organizational life-form; thousands of them fill the void between village committees and a remote, badly functioning central government.

Of course, this enhanced role raises ethical questions, not least because many of these Bangladeshi humanitarian enterprises have for-profit elements. Take Muhammad Yunus, who, along with his Grameen Bank, won the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize for pioneering micro-credit schemes for poor women: Grameen also operates a cell-phone and Internet service. Then there is the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, which, besides doing bounteous relief and development work, operates dairy, poultry, and clothing businesses. Its head offices, like those of Grameen, are in a skyscraper that is some of Dhaka's most expensive real estate. Yet to focus on the impurities of these NGOs is to ignore their transformative powers.

“One thing led to another,” explains Mushtaque Chowdhury, BRAC's deputy executive director. “In order not to be dependent on Western charities, we set up our own for-profit printing press in the 1970s. Then we built a plant to pasteurize milk from the cattle bought by poor women with the loans we had provided them.” Now they've become a kind of parallel government, with a presence in 60,000 villages.

Just as cell phones have allowed developing countries to make an end run around the need for a hard-wired communications grid, Bangladesh shows how NGOs can make an end run around dysfunctional governments. Because Bangladeshi NGOs are supported by international donors, they have been indoctrinated with international norms to an extent unmatched by the private sector here.

The linkage between a global community on one hand and a village community on the other has made Bangladeshi NGOs intensely aware of the worldwide significance of their country's environmental plight. “Come, come, I will show you the climate change,” said Mohon Mondal, a local NGO worker in the southwest, referring to a bridge that had partially collapsed because of rising

seawater. To some degree, this awareness feeds a mind-set in which every eroded embankment becomes an indictment against the United States for walking away from the Kyoto accords. (Muslim Bangladeshis are in almost every other way pro-American—the upshot of their historical dislike for their former colonial master, Great Britain; frequent intimidation by nearby India and China; and lingering hostility toward Pakistan stemming from the 1971 war for liberation.) But regardless of the merits of this case, the United States can't just defend its own position. As the world's greatest power, the U.S. must be seen to take the lead against global warming, or suffer the fate of being blamed for it. Bangladesh demonstrates how developing-world misery has acquired—in the form of climate change—a powerful new argument, tied to the more fundamental outcry for justice and dignity.

**N**GOs would not have such influence in Bangladeshi villages without the country's moderate, syncretic form of Islam. Islam did not arrive in Bengal until the end of the 12th century, when Muslim invaders brought it from the northwest. It is but one element of Bangladesh's rich, heavily Hindu-ized cultural stew. In Muslim Bengali villages, *matbors* (village leaders) can be weaker than the sheikhs in Arab villages. And below these figureheads, women—whose committee mentality has been both receptive to and empowered by Westernized relief workers—can play a great role.

But this low-calorie version of Islam is giving way to a stark and assertive Wahhabist strain. A poor country that can't say no to money, with an unregulated, shattered coast of islands and inlets, Bangladesh has become a perfect setup for al-Qaeda affiliates, which, like Westernized NGOs, are filling needs unmet by a weak central government. Islamist orphanages, madrasas, and cyclone shelters are mushrooming throughout the country, thanks in part to donations from Saudi Arabia as well as from Bangladeshi workers returning home from the oil-rich Arabian Peninsula.

A decade ago, women in Dhaka and in the port city of Chittagong wore jeans and T-shirts, but more and more they cloak themselves in burkas. Madrasas now outnumber secondary schools, according to Anupam Sen, the vice chancellor of a new private university in Chittagong, who also told me that a new class of society is emerging that is “globally Islamic” rather than “specifically Bengali.”

Here is how global warming indirectly feeds Islamic extremism. As rural Bangladeshis flee a countryside ravaged by salinity in the south and drought in the northwest, they are migrating to cities at a rate of 3 to 4 percent a year. Swept into the vast anonymity of sprawling slum encampments, they lose their local and extended-family links, becoming more susceptible to a form of Islam with a sharper ideological edge. “We will not have anarchy at the village level,

where society is healthy,” warns Atiq Rahman. “But we can have it in the ever-enlarging urban areas.” Such is the weakness of central authority in Bangladesh following 15 years of elected governments.

**B**angladesh perfectly illustrates the perils of democracy in the developing world. That is because it is not a spectacular failure like Iraq, but one typical of those developing countries that officially subscribe to democracy and pay lip service to liberalism: here, civil-society intellectuals play almost no role in the political process, the army is trusted more than any of the political parties, and everybody—at least everybody I met—dreads elections, which they fear will lead to gang violence. “We have the best constitution, the best laws, but no one obeys them,” lamented one businessman. “The best form of government for a country like ours,” he went on, “is a military regime in its first year of power. After that, the military fails, too.”

The military has become the power behind a caretaker civilian government since the autumn of 2006, when the political system appeared on the brink of chaos, with strikes, demonstrations, a spate of killings, and a stagnant economy. The ruling Bangladesh National Party was in the process of fixing the upcoming election, and the opposition Awami League was planning a series of attacks by armed gangs in return. Up to that point, elections had essentially been contests between these two feudal dynasties: the Awami League, headed by Sheikh Hasina Wazed, the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, one of Bangladesh’s founding fathers who was assassinated in a military coup in 1975; and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, headed by Khaleda Zia, the widow of another of the country’s founders, General Ziaur Rahman, who was assassinated in another coup in 1981. The animosity between the two women harks back to their feud over whose family played a greater role in the country’s independence struggle, as well as to the pardon Zia’s late husband gave to the killers of Hasina Wazed’s father.

Because each party is too weak to rule on its own, each has sought alliances with various Islamic groups and turned a blind eye to al-Qaeda affiliates such as Jemaah Islamiyah, which has reportedly used Bangladesh as a transit point and training base. Last March, when the military-backed caretaker government hanged six militants from the Jama’atul-Mujahideen—another local Islamist group responsible for hundreds of terrorist attacks from 2003 through 2005—the conventional wisdom had it that neither party could have carried out the sentence, compromised as each was by its Islamist coalition partners. In the eerie calm of the present moment, with the country more orderly than it has been in years—with no terrorist attacks, no strikes at the ports, army checkpoints everywhere, hundreds of politicians arrested on charges of corruption, and technocrats getting promoted over party hacks—nobody I met

wanted a return to the old two-party system, even though no one wanted the military to continue playing such an overt role in the nation's affairs.

For now, the fear that radical Islam will take advantage of a political void keeps the military from returning to the barracks. "But in the long run, we are hostages to democracy," Mahmudul Islam Chowdhury, a former mayor of Chittagong, told me. "Your Westminster–Capitol Hill system won't work here. But we're poor and need aid, and so are required to hold elections." Democracy works in India, Chowdhury explained, because there are so many states and cities where different political parties dominate, so that state and municipal governments thrive alongside the federal one in a multitiered system. But in Bangladesh, the central government finds it hard to risk an opposition party's gaining control of one of the two big cities or some of the smaller ones; all power is hoarded in Dhaka. The result is a gap that village committees have filled at the bottom level of government, and NGOs and Islamists are vying to fill in the vast and crucial middle ground.

**B**arisal, a major river port in southern Bangladesh, offers a case study of the costs of that vacuum: a middle-sized city that reeks of garbage and raw sewage, because treatment plants are inadequate and canals have dried up, and because unauthorized high-rises have brought ever more people into the urban core. Ahmed Kaisea, the district environmental director, was another official who told me, "The laws are just fine. There is just no enforcement." I had walked in on him without an appointment. He did not seem busy. His phone never rang, and there was no evidence of a computer. With electricity cuts throughout the day, use of the Internet is severely limited in Barisal, as in other Bangladeshi cities. He was like many a bureaucrat I encountered, with a spacious office but little effective power. And as his city sprawls around him, its growth driven in large part by rural migrants escaping the flood-ravaged countryside, his job becomes harder still.

For the many rural newcomers to Bangladesh's cities, there is the rickshaw economy, as much an animating force in urban areas as the search for usable soil is in villages. Dhaka alone, a city of more than 10 million people, has several hundred thousand bicycle rickshaws. A rickshaw driver generally pays a rickshaw *mustan* (a mafia-style gang, often associated with a political party) the equivalent of \$1.35 a day to rent the rickshaw. He collects 30 cents from an average passenger and ends up making around a dollar a day in profit. His wife may earn a similar amount breaking bricks into road material, while their children sift through garbage. In a country where 70 percent of the people subsist on less than \$2 per day, such is the lot of a typical Bangladeshi family. This economic environment is perfect for the growth of radical Islam, which offers answers and spiritual rewards for suffering that a conviction in voting

periodically cannot match. The surprise is not how radical Bangladesh (and much of the developing world) is, but how moderate it remains.

The social cohesion that does exist on the national level is the result of linguistic nationalism, not democracy. Unlike Pakistan or Iraq, this is an ethnically homogeneous country, and Islam is not the glue that holds together disparate groups. Moreover, national identity has been built on a shared history of violent struggle. In 1947, Muslim Bengalis rose up against the British and against India to form East Pakistan. Next came the 1971 liberation war against Muslim West Pakistan, which led to widespread rape and executions committed in Dhaka by a West Pakistani military hell-bent on imposing its Urdu language on the Bengalis. From East Pakistan—the “Land of the [Muslim] Pure”—the country became Bangladesh, the “Land of the Bengals.” Language had replaced religion as the society’s organizing principle.

**B**ut that principle is not inviolable. India, because it occupies most of the subcontinent—between the Himalayas and the Indian Ocean—enjoys a demonstrable geographic logic; not so Bangladesh. Yet as small as Bangladesh is, it is vast in its own right. “Whoever comes to power in Dhaka—democratic, military—neglects us in Chittagong,” Emdadul Islam, a local lawyer, complained to me, voicing a sentiment common in the southeastern port city. “We have our own Chittagongian dialect—a mixture of Portuguese, Arakanese, Burmese, Bengali, and so on. Historically, we are as linked to parts of Burma and India as we are to the rest of Bangladesh. Who knows what will happen when Burma one day opens up and we have new road and rail links with India and southwestern China? Give me my fundamental rights and dignity, and I’ll love this soil. If not, I don’t know.” He was not calling for secession. But he was indicating how this artificial blotch of territory on the Indian subcontinent—called in turn Bengal, East Bengal, East Pakistan, and Bangladesh—could metamorphose yet again, amid the gale forces of regional politics, religious extremism, and nature itself.

India and China are nervously watching Bangladesh, for it holds the key to the reestablishment of a long-dormant historical trade route between the two rising behemoths of the 21st century. This route, as the Chittagong lawyer indicated, would pass through Burma and eastern India, before traversing Bangladesh on the way to Kolkata, helping to give China’s landlocked southwest its long-sought access to the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. Whether this happens may hinge on the relationship between the environment and politics in Dhaka. A stable Bangladesh is necessary for this trade route, even though the route may lead, in time, to a weakening of national identity.

Toward the end of my stay in Bangladesh, I was in a bus traveling north from Cox’s Bazar in the southeast of the country, near the Indian and Burmese



borders, to Chittagong, plowing through one recently formed swamp after another. It was only a week into the monsoon: there'd been no cyclone, no tropical storm, just normal heavy rains and mudslides that had killed more than 120 people in 48 hours. Along the sides of the raised road on which the bus traveled, the tea-colored water reached up to the bottom of corrugated-iron roofs. In other places, men gripped their lungis in waist-deep water. Whole trees were being swept downstream as rivers flowed only a foot or two under bridges. On these bridges, hordes of young men had gathered with ropes, fishing for firewood as it passed beneath. High mounds of wood were piled up, waiting to dry. Even heavier rains would come in July and August.

Society coped as well as it could, often ingeniously. A cascade of cell-phone text messages told of danger ahead. Signal flags had been set up on beaches to forewarn of incoming water. Disaster supplies had been pre-positioned in places as part of an increasingly sophisticated early-warning system. The Bangladeshi army and navy were available in case of major catastrophe. Otherwise, in many ways, it was up to the villages and the NGOs to deal with the natural world.