

Flood Inspection

From the moment I deplaned at Dhaka's Hazrat Shajalal airport I was swept up in a torrent of activity — a torrent that consisted largely of three solicitous, handsome, and highly verbal government functionaries, Arif, Imran, and Bashira. The trio bustled me through the diplomatic queue for entry (pulling my passport away from the dour customs officer in mid-stamp, so my visa page has a long purple smear on it) and then, not to the lobby and a limo as I expected, but to an elevator up to the roof of the building.



On the flat roof, behind the Arabic letters of a huge sign, was a small marquee. Under it was a comfortable looking chair and a table cluttered with gear; beside it I saw a large drone, fully 3 meters from tip to tip of its four propellers, resting on a stand.

“But I thought — my hotel, and the tour down-country...” I protested.

“Yes, of course, but there are difficulties,” said Arif.

“There is flooding,” started Imran.

“I know!” I said, “That’s what UNHCR wants me to see!”

“No, pardon, sir, there is flooding here. In Dhaka.”

“The streets leading to the Renaissance Dhaka are...” said Bashira.

“Momentarily impassible,” finished Imran.

“We will see you to fine accommodations later,” said Arif, “And tomorrow—”

“In’sh’allah” muttered Bashira.

“—the helicopter, also meeting with the Environment Minister, all in order.”

Imran took over the spell: “But today, now, you see, we can take a quick look and see with the drone and the Apple VR headsets!”

I allowed myself to be tucked into the armchair and accepted the familiar compact Apple Vision Pro VI, like light-weight cycling goggles with mirror lenses. Bashira, meanwhile, picked up a control box as the drone came to life and lifted off its stand, the wash of its props blowing dust across the roof.

Imran and Arif also put on VR glasses, so I slipped mine on, and now had a fine 3D view of the four of us from 10 meters up.

“You see, sir,” came Imran’s voice in my ear, “if you turn your head you have all-around view.”

“Also, sir,” came Arif’s voice in the other ear, “If you lean forward, the view zooms in, or lean back to zoom out.”

So it was, and I had a fine view as Bashira guided the drone over this ninth-largest city in the world, and was startled to see the gleam of water filling many of the streets nearer the Padma river.

“On the right, sir, the Renaissance hotel,” and I noticed water in a couple of adjacent streets.

But the drone sped up and headed down-river toward what had been the agricultural and population heart of this nation, kilometer after kilometer of flat and fertile lands among winding streams — much of which now gleamed with shallow salt water. At many points I could see the remnants of villages, collapsing roofs and submerged dikes and pens.

“Ah, there is the result of one of the UN programs,” said Arif, and the drone circled over an array of rectangular mats. “People weave floating mats of water hyacinth stalks and other material to make a floating seed-bed on with to grow vegetables.”



“That works?” I said in amazement.

“To a degree,” said Imran, sadly. “Weaving the mats is highly labour-intensive.”

“But clearly, people are being displaced?”

“Yes of course. In numbers. Just off to the left is a camp. We will see... Bashira, go over there.”

“We should not,” demurred Bashira, “They are quick at scavenging.”

“Do it,” said Arif, imperiously, “The sir must see. No! Go right in.”

Below us a group of young men were pointing and waving up at us—well of course not at us truly, but at the drone from through we were looking—and then I noticed more than one of them had slingshots. And were shooting pebbles up at us.

And then there was a twitch in the view, and then a spiraling descent, and blackness in my goggles.

I pulled the goggles off just as rain began to fall around us on the roof of the arrivals building. Thus ended my initial inspection of the current flooding in Bangladesh.

Web pages consulted for this essay

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