

Panic grips Sunderbans

|| Soma Basu

GOSABA, 19 MAY: A year after *Aila* lashed Sunderbans, the status of embankment repair in the cyclone-hit villages stands at zero and people are reeling under the fear that *Laila*, intensifying in the Bay of Bengal, will take away whatever little they had saved last year.

It is *bhora kotal* and the breaches in the embankment are gaping at the hapless villagers who have nowhere to go if the water gushes in again. They have already lost their lands to the saline water and are still awaiting the relief package of Rs 10,000 that the government had promised just after the storm wreaked havoc in the islands last year.

The Centre had promised assistance for embankment repair post-*Aila*, but according to Mr Subhas Nashkar, state irrigation minister, "the money was technically sanctioned at the end of March, 2010. On 30th March, we received only Rs 187 crore from the Centre. We had submitted the assessment report in December, 2009 and had asked for an assistance of Rs 6,000 crore." Out of total 3,000 km of embankment, 778 km was destroyed during the storm. The minister said that because of cash crunch, new type of embankment couldn't be constructed. However, the work of temporary protection is on.

In Roydighi, Kongkondighi, Jharkhali, Kultali, Rangabelia, Satjelia, Lahiripur, Chhoto-Mollakhali, Kumirmari, Hingalgunj, Kalitala and Shamshernagar, mud has been dumped on the damaged embankments in the name of repair. Farmers nar-



rate how the land, which was once their rice field, has a crust of salt on it. "A tarpaulin sheet, a dhoti, a handful of *dal* and rice was all that we got as relief. We haven't even got Rs 10,000 promised after *Aila*," said Shambhu Mondol, a resident of Lahiripur.

Even if there is no cyclone or storm, the embankments are too weak to withstand the river currents. A portion of embankment was washed away in Pakhira on Saturday and in Gobindakati on Sunday. Mr Tushar Kanjilal, Sunderban expert and a member of the task force formed by the Union ministry of water resources to assess the damage caused by *Aila*, says that the embankments were made 150 years ago and they are not based on any scientific approach.

Mr Nashkar said that by October-November, the state would acquire 200-mouza land for construction of embankments and the villagers will get relief for the first time since *Aila*.

Laila likely to hit state

KOLKATA, 19 MAY: The cyclonic storm *Laila* is likely to hit the coastal areas of West Bengal and Orissa on Thursday night or Friday morning. Weathermen have forecast rains and squally weather in the city due to the cyclone in the coastal belt and had advised fishermen not to go out into the sea.

Laila is likely to intensify further and move in a northeasterly to northerly direction and cross the Andhra Pradesh coast between Nellore and Kakinada, close to Machilipatnam by Thursday morning. "After this, there is a chance that the cyclone will move towards Orissa and West Bengal affecting the weather in the coastal regions," said Dr GC Debnath, director, Alipore Meteorological office. Finance minister Mr Asim Dasgupta held a meeting to discuss ways to handle disaster management in an efficient manner. The state has decided to send 4.28 lakh tarpaulins to the districts. Meanwhile, two persons were killed and four fishermen injured as heavy rains battered coastal Tamil Nadu while a full alert was sounded in Andhra Pradesh. || SNS