Tropical cyclone risk in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT. We explore current and future tropical cyclone risk in Bangladesh using numerically simulated tropical cyclones downscaled from reanalyses and from current and future climate states simulated by five CMIP5 and seven CMIP6 climate models. The downscaled tropical cyclones provided statistically robust estimates of wind and rain risk and how these risks may evolve over this century if little is done to curb greenhouse gas emissions. While there is considerable scatter among the climate models used, the multi-model consensus suggests that the probability of coastal winds exceeding 100 kts will triple, while those in excess of 150 kts will increase by a factor of ten by the end of the century. Likewise, the frequency of storm total rainfall at Dhaka in excess of 500 mm increases from once in 325 years to once in 40 years by the end of the century, while the probability of rainfall in excess of 1 meter increases by a factor of about 20. These results indicate very substantial increases in risks associated with tropical cyclones in Bangladesh over the next 80 years, barring substantial reductions in the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.

Key words – Pre-monsoon rainfall, Hurst Exponent, Lyapunov Exponent, Southwest monsoon, Northeast monsoon.

1. Introduction

With it low-lying floodplains and proximity to very warm ocean waters, Bangladesh is highly susceptible to strong tropical cyclones and accompanying heavy rain and storm surge. Having a densely packed and vulnerable population, it is the site of many of the worst tropical cyclone disasters in world history, including the Bhola Cyclone of 1970, which killed between 300,000 and 500,000 people - the largest loss of life in any tropical cyclone on record globally. The inadequate response of the government of what was then East Pakistan to the disaster was among the factors leading to independence from West Pakistan and the founding of Bangladesh as a nation in 1971.

Fig. 1 shows a tabulation of annual loss of life from tropical cyclones in the region that is now Bangladesh, from 1760 to 2020.

During this period 14 storms killed more than 10,000 people; most recently the 1991 Bangladesh Cyclone, which killed upwards of 150,000. Loss of life has been greatly reduced since the 1991 event by sustained disaster management efforts, including the construction of evacuation shelters and implementation of advanced warning and evacuation strategies (Ahmed et al., 2016). For example, severe Cyclone Amphan struck West Bengal, just west of Bangladesh, in May, 2020 in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a 5 m storm surge. It proved the costliest cyclone ever recorded in the North Indian Ocean, but the death toll was held to 128.

Yet continued reductions in tropical cyclone mortality are now threatened by climate change, owing to increasing sea level and the possibility of more dangerous cyclones. The region is too small and the historical record too short and incomplete to provide an adequate estimate of historical tropical cyclone risk, let alone future risk in...
the presence of climate change. For this reason, we turn to
physical modeling of tropical cyclones to provide
quantitative risk assessments.

The main tool for assessing climate change effects
on weather risks is the global climate model. However,
such models are far from ideal for the task, owing to
inadequate spatial resolution. Today’s best global climate
models have grid spacing of tens of kilometers, whereas
experiments with specialized, high-resolution, convection-
permitting models show that numerical convergence
requires grids spacing on the order of kilometers (Rotunno
et al., 2009). While global climate models usually produce
facsimiles of tropical cyclones, their structure and
intensity are distorted by inadequate spatial resolution.
Yet such models continue to be the primary basis for
assessments of climate change effects on tropical cyclone
risk (e.g., see the review by Knutson et al., 2020).

For the present study, we use the downscaling
method developed by Emanuel et al. (2006) and Emanuel
et al. (2008). Tropical cyclone tracks are created by
randomly seeding, in space and time, the evolving, global,
large-scale environment. This environment is synthetically
generated from gridded global reanalyses or climate
models in a way that insures that the monthly means of all
variables are those of the gridded data (interpolated to the
storm positions) and that the monthly mean variances and
covariances of the daily atmospheric winds with respect to
their monthly means are correct. Finally, the kinetic
energy spectrum of the synthesized large-scale winds
obeys geostrophic turbulence scaling.

Once the tracks are created, the Coupled Hurricane
Intensity Prediction System (CHIPS; Emanuel and
Rappaport, 2000) model is run along each of the randomly
generated tracks. The intensity model has very high spatial
resolution in the storm core, owing to the use of an
angular momentum radial coordinate and has been shown
to produce skillful real-time intensity forecasts (Emanuel
and Rappaport, 2000). Well over 99% of the seeded tracks
dissipate rapidly and are discarded; the survivors
constitute the downscaled tropical cyclone climatology of
the original reanalysis or climate model. This technique
has been shown to accurately simulate all the salient
features of the current climatology of tropical cyclones
when applied to global reanalysis data (Emanuel et al.,
2008).

There are several advantages to this technique in
comparison to conventional downscaling using regional
models. The use of angular momentum coordinates allows
increasing spatial resolution of the storm core as its
intensity increases, thus each storm’s intensity is limited
by the physical properties of its environment rather than
by numerical resolution. Because the tropical cyclone
model is driven by the statistics of the global model or
reanalysis, an arbitrarily large number of events can be
simulated in a given climate and the seeding is global so
there is no need to pre-select sub-domains.
TABLE 1

Global Climate models used in this study

| Institution                                                                 | Model       | Atmospheric Resolution* | Reference                 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| National Center for Atmospheric Research                                  | CCSM4       | 1.25 × 0.94 degree      | (Lawrence et al., 2011)   |
| NOAA Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Laboratory                                 | CM3         | 2.5 × 2.0 degrees       | (Donner et al., 2011)     |
| Met Office Hadley Center                                                   | HADGEM2-ES  | 1.875 × 1.25 degree     | (Collins et al., 2011)    |
| Institut Pierre Simon Laplace                                              | CM5A-LR     | 3.75 × 1.89 degrees     | (Dufresne et al., 2013)   |
| Max Planck Institute for Meteorology                                       | MPI-ESM-MR  | 1.875 × 1.865 degrees   | (Giorgetta et al., 2013)  |
| Canadian Centre for Climate Modelling and Analysis                         | CanESM5     | 2.8 × 2.8 degrees       | (Swart et al., 2019)      |
| EC-Earth consortium                                                       | EC-Earth3   | 0.7 × 0.7 degree        |                           |
| Institut Pierre Simon Laplace                                              | IPSL-CM6A-LR| 1.25 × 2.5 degrees      | (Hourdin et al., 2016)    |
| Center for Climate System Research; University of Tokyo; Japan Agency for Marine-Earth Science and Technology; National Institute for Environmental Studies | MIROC6     | 1.4 × 1.4 degree       | (Tatebe et al., 2019)     |
| Max Planck Institute                                                       | MPI-ESM1-2-HR | 0.94 × 0.94 degree     | (Müller et al., 2018)     |
| Meteorological Research Institute (Japan)                                 | MRI-ESM2-0  | 1.12 × 1.125 degree     | (Yukimoto et al., 2019)   |
| United Kingdom Met Office                                                  | UKESM1-0-LL | 1.25 × 1.875 degrees    | (Sellar et al., 2020)     |

* - This is the resolution of the output used to drive the downscaling; it may not correspond exactly with the native resolution of the GCM.

For the present analysis, we created sets of synthetic tropical cyclones whose centers passed over either (or both) of the line segments displayed in Fig. 2. This captures most storms that affect Bangladesh, though a few may pass through or near the nation by entering from the west; these would have travelled over some land before...
affecting the region. We downscaled 3,800 synthetic tracks over the period 1979-2016 from NCAR-NCEP reanalyses and 2,000 tracks for each of five CMIP-5-generation and seven CMIP-6-generation global climate models for each of two periods: 1981-2000 from historical simulations and 2081-2100 from RCP 8.5 simulations (CMIP5) and SSP5 8.5 simulations (CMIP6). In total, 51,800 tropical cyclone events were created. Table 1 summarizes the reanalysis and climate models used. Storm total rainfall was calculated at Dhaka using the algorithm described in detail in Feldmann et al. (2019).

2. Results

Figs. 3(a&b) displays the return periods (inverse annual exceedance probabilities) of maximum surface winds accompanying tropical cyclones whose centers were crossing the line segments shown in Fig. 2 (these may be considered the maximum winds experienced along the coastline of Bangladesh during the life of each storm). The red curve is derived from 3,800 cyclones downscaled from NCAR/NCEP reanalyses over the period 1979-2016 and the blue dots represent return periods estimated from 21 historical storms that crossed the line segments shown in Fig. 2. The historical tracks are from the U.S. Navy’s Joint Typhoon Warning Center (JTWC) and were accessed through the IBTrACS historical tropical cyclone archive (Knapp et al., 2010). To estimate sampling error, we created many subsamples of the full synthetic data set at the rate of the historical tracks in each wind speed bin. The blue shading in the figure represents limits within which 90% of the return periods based on the subsamples lie.

The synthetic tracks significantly underestimate the frequency of high intensity events striking Bangladesh. This is not a bias we see in other regions and so indicates problems with the synthetic downscaling and/or historical data peculiar to this region.

There is considerable uncertainty in estimating tropical cyclone wind speed in regions, like the Bay of Bengal, that are not surveyed by reconnaissance aircraft. The data plotted as blue dots in Fig. 3(a) were assembled by JTWC, which uses a 1-minute average wind speed, but several other agencies do their own analyses and may use different convections. As an example, Fig. 3(a) also shows, in green dots, return periods based on winds assembled by the Regional Specialized Meteorological Center (RSMC) in New Delhi, India. They record only 12 events passing over the coast of Bangladesh during this period, in contrast to 21 events recorded by JTWC. Apparently, RSMC ignores may weak storms included in the JTWC data (Bhardwaj and Singh, 2020), and moreover RSMC New Delhi uses a 3-minute wind averaging convention, which tends to record wind speeds that are smaller than JTWC’s 1-minute average winds.

The New Delhi analyses shown by the green dots in Fig. 3(a) have fewer total events and also fewer very strong events, more in line with the return periods of strong events indicated by the synthetic tracks.

Yet part of the problem may also lie in the synthetic track model. In particular, the ocean mixing model, an important component of the intensity model that accounts for the effect of wind-driven turbulent mixing, which brings colder water to the surface, does not account for salinity effects on density. But the Bay of Bengal has strong salinity gradients, especially in summer, owing to a combination of monsoonal rains and river runoff
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Figs. 4(a-c). Return periods of tropical cyclone winds on the Bangladesh coastline from downscaling. (a) CMIP5 models, (b) CMIP6 models and (c) both together. The green curve in all three panels is from downscaled NCCAR/NCEP tropical cyclones for the period 1979-2016, as in Fig. 3(a). The blue curves are the 1981-2000 results from downscaling the historical simulations, while the red curves represent the period 2081-2100 from RCP 8.5 (CMIP5) and SSP5 8.5 (CMIP6). The shading represents one standard deviation up and down (in annual exceedance frequency) among models downscaled.

(Vinayachandran et al., 2002) and there are even indications that the salt stratification is increasing, leading to more intense cyclones (Fan et al., 2020). Stronger density stratification reduces vertical mixing, leading to stronger cyclones, all other things being equal.

To test whether such an effect makes a difference in our intensity model, we modified it to include the effects of salinity on potential density. [The original ocean mixing model is described in detail in Emanuel et al. (2004)]. For this purpose we used the long-term monthly mean upper ocean climatology of Levitus (1982), which does not, however, take into account any change in the upper ocean thermal and salinity structure in recent decades. The downscaling model was re-run with this one change and the effect on wind return periods is shown in Fig. 3(b). While, as expected, there is hardly any effect on weak storms, the frequency of stronger storms is indeed increased, though not enough to account, by itself, for the discrepancy between the downscaled results and the JTWC-analyzed historical events.

Figs. 4(a-c) displays the return periods of maximum surface winds accompanying tropical cyclones whose centers were crossing the line segments shown in Fig. 2, downscaled from climate models. The left panel shows the results of the CMIP5 model downscaling, the right panel shows CMIP6 and the bottom panel shows return periods based on the combination of CMIP5 and CMIP6 downscaling. Each panel also shows (in green) the return periods of tropical cyclones downscaled from NCAR/NCEP reanalyzes over the period 1979-2016, as in Fig. 3(a). The blue curves are from the CMIP model historical simulations 1981-2000 and the red from the RCP 8.5 (CMIP5) and SSP5 8.5 (CMIP6) simulations, 2081-2100. The shading shows one standard deviation (in exceedance frequency) among the five CMIP5 and seven CMIP6 models.
Figs. 5(a-c). Return periods of tropical cyclone storm total rainfall at the city of Dhaka, from downscaling. (a) CMIP5 models, (b) CMIP6 models and (c) both together. The green curve in all three panels is from downscaled NCCAR/NCEP tropical cyclones for the period 1979-2016. The blue curves are the 1981-2000 results from downscaling the historical simulations, while the red curves represent the period 2081-2100 from RCP 8.5 (CMIP5) and SSP5 8.5 (CMIP6). The shading represents one standard deviation up and down (in annual exceedance frequency) among models downscaled.

The multi-model consensus shows appreciable increase in tropical cyclone wind risk resulting from global warming; more so among the CMIP6 models than the CMIP5 models. For example, for the combined results, the multi-model mean return period of 150 kts at the coast decreases from 425 years in the historical period to 45 years by the end of this century, a nearly ten-fold reduction. The frequency of hurricane-force winds doubles from once in four years to once in two years.

It is evident from Figs. 4(a-c) that the overall frequency of tropical cyclones crossing the coast of Bangladesh increases in the multi-model consensus. If we artificially hold the overall frequency constant and re-calculate the return periods, the high intensity events still increase in frequency. For example, the return period of 150 kts still decreases from 425 years in the historical period to 110 years by the end of the century (not shown), an increase of roughly a factor of four. Thus we may conclude that the increase frequency of high intensity events is owing both to an overall increase in tropical cyclone frequency and to a shift to greater storm intensity.

We calculated storm total rainfall at Dhaka, the capital and largest city of Bangladesh, located about 300 km inland from the coast, using the technique described in Feldmann et al. (2019). The return periods of storm total rainfall are displayed in Figs. 5(a-c), in the same format as Fig. 4. The return periods of rainfall downscaled from NCAR/NCEP [green curves in Figs. 5(a-c)] are in this case nearly one standard deviation higher than the multi-model mean of the historical simulations from the CMIP models but nevertheless well within the scatter among those models.

As with the winds, the changes in storm total rainfall wrought by global warming are larger in the CMIP6 models than in CMIP5. The projected percentage increases in rainfall are quite large, owing to the compound effects of increased frequency and intensity of
Bangladesh. These downscaled tropical cyclone account for changing genesis frequency and location, changing tracks, moisture availability and storm intensity and size as climate changes, but with much uncertainty tracing to the differing projections by the various climate models we used. While advances in climate science and improvements in climate models offer the prospect of reduced uncertainty, the risk as currently assessed warrants determined action to mitigate and adapt to existing and future tropical cyclones.

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