Saleemul Huq
Climate revolutionary

"It was an absolute red line. We were ready to walk."

This climate researcher from Bangladesh helped to force wealthy countries to pay for the losses and damages from climate change.

By Ehsan Masood

In the final hours before the close of last month's United Nations climate conference in Egypt, exhausted delegates slumped on sofas outside the formal meeting rooms. But not Saleemul Huq, who was sitting upright, rapidly checking messages on his phone.

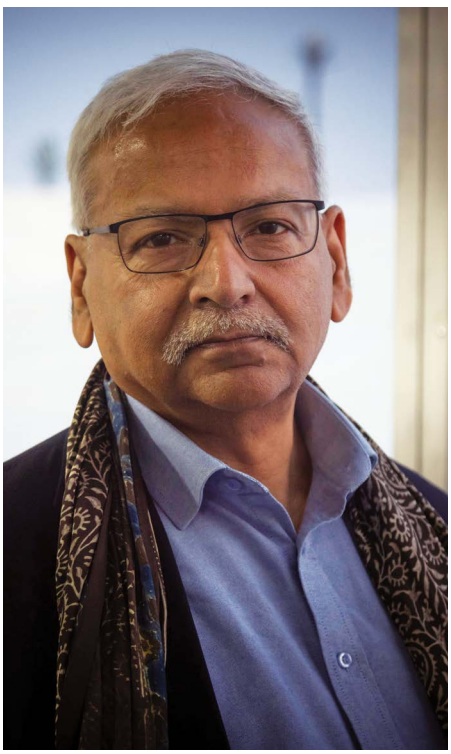
The meeting's final text had yet to be agreed. But Huq told *Nature* he was confident that negotiators from the world's governments attending the conference would agree to a new kind of climate fund: one that would cover the costs of the 'loss and damage' suffered by climate-vulnerable countries. "Don't worry," he said. "It's in the bag."

And so it was. The final agreement signed in the Red Sea resort town of Sharm El-Sheikh includes a commitment to establish a loss-and-damage fund to help lower-income countries deal with the impacts of climate change. That provision is the culmination of a nearly 30-year campaign to get the world's historically high carbon emitters to acknowledge they have some financial responsibility to low-emitting countries that face devastation as temperatures continue to rise. And for more than a decade, that movement's unofficial leader has been Huq, originally a plant biologist who now directs the International Centre for Climate Change and Development in Dhaka.

"Loss and damage isn't aid," says Huq. It is based on the 'polluter pays' principle, and that, says Huq, is why it has been opposed since before the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, which gave rise to today's climate agreements. "When money is given as aid, all the power rests with the donor." It's an unequal relationship, he adds.

Huq's experience with the turmoil of international politics started young. He was born in Karachi to parents in Pakistan's diplomatic service, before East Pakistan broke away from West Pakistan to become independent Bangladesh after the 1971 war of liberation. His parents, who opted for Bangladesh, escaped capture by Pakistan's military by travelling overland on a donkey to India through Afghanistan.

Growing up in Europe, Africa and Asia through his parent's diplomatic postings, he developed a passion for science and moved to London 50 years ago to study biochemistry, eventually doing a PhD at Imperial College London. Huq later returned to Bangladesh and co-founded, with Atiq Rahman, the Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (BCAS), an independent think tank focused on environment policy. Bangladesh has a long history of environmental disasters, especially flooding. Huq and his colleagues persuaded their government that it needed an environment department, and that BCAS would be its thinking and research arm. BCAS helped the department to write Bangladesh's first environmental action plan, says Mirza Shawkat Ali, the government's director for climate change.



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Huq led the establishment of a worldwide network of experts who work in a branch of development called community-based adaptation, says Lisa Schipper, a climate researcher at the University of Oxford, UK. This long-standing idea, pioneered in Bangladesh, focuses on helping rural communities to find their own research-based solutions to problems, such as improving flood defences or adjusting cropping patterns in response to climate change.

The communities, Huq says, "need to be in the driving seat".

By the 1990s, he had become active in international climate negotiations, as an adviser to climate-vulnerable countries, especially small island states, helping them to put their needs on the agenda in UN talks. The idea of funding for loss and damage gained traction in the years leading up to the 2015 Paris climate agreement, says Achala Abeysinghe, an environmental lawyer now at the Global Green Growth Institute in Seoul, who worked with Huq advising climate-vulnerable countries. Huq's strategy, she says, was to persuade more countries (including China and India) of the case for loss and damage "so the least developed countries and small island states are not alone". But persuading the high-emitting wealthy countries was a tougher task.

An early breakthrough came at the 2015 Paris talks. Article 8 of the final agreement explicitly uses the term: "Parties recognize the importance of averting, minimizing and addressing loss and damage associated with the adverse effects of climate change." But getting those words into the text needed nerves of steel, Abeysinghe says. "We were told that if we insist on including loss and damage, we would be blamed if the treaty failed. But it was an absolute red line. We were ready to walk."

Huq faced the same response from the European Union and the United States at Sharm El-Sheikh. But once again, the advocates of loss and damage held firm as some of the world's wealthiest nations pushed to keep the commitment out of the treaty, says Huq. "We didn't blink."