

DISASTER RESPONSE MECHANISM OF INDIA

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India has been traditionally vulnerable to natural disasters on account of its unique geo-climatic conditions. Floods, droughts, cyclones, earthquakes and landslides have been a recurrent phenomena. About 60% of the landmass is prone to earthquakes of various intensities; over 40 million hectares is prone to floods; about 8% of the total area is prone to cyclones and 68% of the area is susceptible to drought. In the decade 1990-2000, an average of about 4344 people lost their lives and about 30 million people were affected by disasters every year. The loss in terms of private, community and public assets has been astronomical.

Section 2 (d) and (e) of the Disaster Management Act, 2005 defines disaster as a catastrophe, mishap, calamity or grave occurrence from natural or man-made causes, which is beyond the coping capacity of the affected community. DM involves a continuous and integrated process of planning, organizing, coordinating and implementing measures which are necessary or expedient for:

Prevention of danger or threat of any disaster. Mitigation or reduction of risk of any disaster or its severity or consequences. Capacity building including research and knowledge management. Preparedness to deal with any disaster. Prompt response to any threatening disaster situation or disaster. Assessing the severity or magnitude of effects of any disaster. Evacuation, rescue and relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction.

Studying the National Disaster Response Force is essential for the purpose of understanding its efficacy in disaster management situations. For the purpose of specialized response to a threatening disaster situation or disasters/emergencies both natural and man-made such as those of Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear origin, the Act has mandated the constitution of a National Disaster Response Force (NDRF). The general superintendence, direction and control of this force shall be vested in and exercised by the NDMA and the command and supervision of the Force shall vest in an officer to be appointed by the Central Government as the Director General of Civil Defence and National Disaster Response Force. Presently, the NDRF comprises eight battalions and further expansion may be considered in due course. These battalions will be positioned at different locations as may be required. NDRF units will maintain close liaison with the designated State Governments and will be available to them in the event of any serious threatening disaster situation. While the handling of natural disasters rests with all the NDRF battalions, four battalions will also be equipped and trained to respond to situations arising out of Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear emergencies. Training centres will be set up by respective paramilitary forces to train personnel from NDRF battalions of respective Forces and will also meet the training requirement of State/UT Disaster Response Forces. The NDRF units will also impart basic training to all the

stakeholders identified by the State Governments in their respective locations. Further, a National Academy will be set up to provide training for trainers in disaster management and to meet related national and international commitments. Experience in major disasters in the last decade has clearly established the need for pre-positioning of some essential reserves at crucial locations, including some for the high altitude areas. These reserves are intended to augment the resources at the State level. Mitigation reserves will be placed at the disposal of National Disaster Response Force for enhancing their emergency responding capabilities for assisting the State Governments during a disaster or disaster like situation.

States will be encouraged to create response capabilities from within their existing resources. To start with, each state may aim at equipping and training one battalion equivalent force. They will also include women members for looking after the needs of women and children. NDRF battalions and their training institutions will assist the States/UTs in this effort. The States/UTs will also be encouraged to include DM training in their respective Police Training Colleges and basic and in-service courses, for gazetted and non-gazetted officers. Then there is a National Disaster Response Fund as mandated by the Act. It is established towards meeting the expenses for response, relief and rehabilitation.

Unlike man-made disasters, natural hazards like floods, earthquakes, and cyclones cannot be avoided. However, with mitigation measures along with proper planning of developmental work in the risk prone area, these hazards can be prevented from turning into disasters. A three-pronged approach needs to be adopted to undertake mitigation measures:

- Building mitigation measures into all development projects.
- Initiating of national level mitigation projects by the NDMA, in high priority areas, with the help of the Central Ministries and Departments concerned and the States.
- Encouraging and assisting State level mitigation projects in accordance with the guidelines.
- Indigenous knowledge on disaster and coping mechanisms adopted by various States will be given due weightage with special focus on protection of heritage structures.

Disaster management occupies an important place in this country's policy framework as it is the poor and the under-privileged who are worst affected on account of calamities/disasters. The approach has been translated into a National Disaster Framework [a roadmap]¹ covering institutional mechanisms, disaster prevention strategy, early warning system, disaster mitigation, preparedness and response and human resource development. The expected inputs, areas of intervention and agencies to be involved at the National, State and district levels have been identified and listed in the roadmap. This roadmap has been shared with all the State Governments and Union Territory Administrations. Ministries and Departments of Government of India, and the State Governments/UT Administrations have been advised to develop their respective roadmaps taking the national roadmap as a broad

¹ Available at <http://www.unisdr.org/2005/mdgs-drr/national-reports/India-report.pdf>.

guideline. There is, therefore, now a common strategy underpinning the action being taken by all the participating organizations/stakeholders.

Going by the criticisms of the Disaster Response Mechanism of our Country, I want to summarize it as follows:

For example, the Bhuj Earthquake, 2001 brought out several inadequacies in the system like the search and rescue teams had not been trained professionally, specialized dog squad to look for the live bodies under the debris were not available and there were no centralized resource inventory for emergency response. Also, there was a need for fully equipped mobile hospitals with trained personnel. There were inadequacies in the stage of preparedness altogether.

The Government should have taken the following steps to combat this problem:

- 1.The Central Government should train and equip many specialist search and rescue teams which includes paramedics, doctors, structural engineers, etc.
- 2.The personnel of Central Police Organizations should also be imparted training in search and rescue so that they can be requisitioned to the site of incident without loss of time.
- 3.The States should set up their own specialist teams for responding to disasters.
- 4.There should be more number of Regional Response Centres to be set up in different parts of the Country. These teams would have response teams, equipments and resources for being able to response to any hazard/calamity in the neighbouring States.
- 5.Also, more number of mobile hospitals should be established which should also be attached to the leading Government Hospitals in the Country.
- 6.The Government should purchase aircrafts and helicopters with a view to reducing the response time.
- 7.There should be introduction of an Incident Command System in the Country to professionalize the response. This system provides for specialist incident command teams with an Incident Commander and officers trained in different aspects of incident management – logistics, operations, planning, safety, media management etc.
- 8.At all the levels, disaster management committees and disaster management teams should be established for the active participation of the Community and the NGOs.
- 9.India has a large network of Civil Defence and Home Guards volunteers. This organization should be associated with disaster mitigation, preparedness and response functions.
10. The Geographical Information System (GIS) data base is an effective tool for emergency responders to access information in terms of crucial parameters for the disaster affected areas. The crucial parameters include location of the public facilities, communication links and transportation network at national, state and district levels. This data base needs to be upgraded for the purpose of institutionalizing the arrangements. It is essential to carry out hazard zonation and vulnerability assessment, as well as coordinate response after a disaster. Also, the web-enabled centralised data base for the India Disaster Resource Network should be operationalized.

11. Lastly, the States are being persuaded to set up control rooms/emergency operation centers at the state and district level. Also, for effective communication, Police Network (POLNET) should be used for disaster management.

Disaster Management has to be a multi-disciplinary and pro-active approach. Besides various measures for putting in place institutional and policy framework, disaster prevention, mitigation and preparedness enunciated in this paper and initiatives being taken by the Central and State Governments, the community, civil society organizations and media also have a key role to play in achieving our goal of moving together, towards a safer India. Our vision 2023 is to build a safer and secure India through sustained collective effort, synergy of national capacities and people's participation. What looks a dream today will be transformed into reality in the next two decades. This is our goal and we shall strive to achieve this goal with a missionary zeal. The path ahead, which looks difficult today, will become a lot easier as we move along together.