

Reducing risk of disasters: Taking it to India's public



Syed Ata Hasnain

There are some good things happening in India and some bad things too; in the context of the famous quip by Charles Dickens. The good is much about the great scientific achievement, with Isro succeeding in placing Chandrayaan-3 on the moon with a soft landing and rolling out the rover Pragyan on the lunar surface. Followed by Neeraj Chopra's gold medal-winning throw of the javelin, the terrific race run by the Indian 4x400 quartet at the World Athletics Championships in Budapest and the meteoric rise of Rameshbabu Praggananandhaa, the prodigious young chess player; it made us all proud to be Indians. Yet, triumphalism was overcome by the agony of events in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand; nature's fury worsened by man-made ignorance. Landslides of such proportions have never been witnessed anywhere in India, wiping out multi-storied buildings where anyhow they should never have been built. Shimla's 2.75 lakh population is now realising the folly of construction that resembles houses made of cards. That is sad, even though we realise that there are some compulsions that hill states have to live with. They have limited means of income and most of them rely on tourism, for which infrastructure is necessary. That infrastructure is very often of relatively poor quality as the rules and laws are seldom complied with. 2023 is giving us a wake-up call in this sphere, just like 1999 and 2001 did in the domain of disaster management (DM).

Before the Odisha super-cyclone and the Gujarat earthquake took a toll of over 10,000 lives each in 1999 and 2001 respectively,

DM was treated lightly with a concept based on response. Under this, we waited for disasters, never prepared or trained to meet them headlong, or mitigate their likely effects. On occurrence we sent some relief with a few soldiers, policemen, NGOs and whoever we could find. The DM Act of December 2005 changed everything, creating new structures such as NDMA, NDRF and NIDM (all at the Central level), with the Union home ministry as the controlling ministry. The Prime Minister being the chairperson of the NDMA gave the authority a huge boost. Similar structures were created at the state level with an SDMA, SDRF and in some states an institute relating to training, awareness and research. It goes right down to the district level, and in some cases even panchayats have developed their own DM plans with great effectiveness.

So, what is the change now? Very simply, it has shifted from response mode to a disaster cycle approach. Preparedness for disaster is the key. That includes awareness, procedures and training, including a tried and tested practice called the Incident Response System. The latter clearly lays down the structure of the response system and the responsibilities. The states are required to notify this from time to time and pinpoint responsibility. Side by side there is the entire domain of mitigation, that identifies potential hazards and draws up projects, execution of which will help partially diminish the effects of that hazard. The best example of this is the project to mitigate the effects of heat-waves: housing is constructed so as to ward off the worst effects of heat. As part of training for preparedness, NDMA conducts table-top exercises

The Working Group will remain a legacy of India's presidency of the G20, which apparently Brazil and South Africa, the next chairs, have promised to imbibe and pursue.

and mock drills by bringing together all stakeholders, including the armed forces, the railways, industry (such as the chemical industry), civil society outfits, medical personnel and others to remind all of their responsibilities, coordinate the response system and the command, control and communications system, almost like military operations. Each district administration is trained with a dedicated effort by the NDRF at least once in three years. The system is now progressively coming into place in India, whereby from the local community to the national effort an outlined process will be executed. The community affected by the disaster knows best if at least some personnel within it are trained as volunteers. In the last few years, the government has initiated the Aapda Mitra (Friends in Disaster) scheme which aims at the creation, training and maintenance of 300,000 local young volunteers with a 12-day training capsule and an inventory consisting a basic rescue kit and personal insurance for each such volunteer.

In 2016, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, based upon his experience and a world vision of DM, gave the nation his Ten Point Agenda, a comprehensive set of reminders of the actions which optimise the DM system. Prime among these is the employment of all available technologies for mitigation of effect, upscaling of awareness through networks and use of the social media, and very importantly, the sensitivity to gender vulnerability, with women and children being the worst sufferers of disasters. India has walked the talk on the very first

point of the Ten Point Agenda — imbining of the principles of disaster risk management and reduction. In India's presidency of the G-20, one of the innovations has been the creation of the 13th Working Group which is on Disaster Risk Reduction. It met thrice in the last five months, at Gandhinagar, Mumbai and Chennai; and found consensus portions, which hopefully will find their place in the overall communique at the final summit in New Delhi. The Working Group will remain a legacy of India's presidency, which apparently Brazil and South Africa, the next chairs in succession, have promised to imbibe and pursue. The focus of the Working Group was on early warning systems, resilient infrastructure and financing for DRR.

Despite the modernisation of DM which the government is following ardently, it is the non-compliance of laws and norms which endanger entire communities. The Himalayan tragedy is a trauma the nation has to suffer, but with deep involvement in research and development in this field hopefully some of the ills may be reversed, although at great cost. The 15th Finance Commission has been expressive about its concerns for DM. It has allotted a handsome sum of money to NDMA to undertake mitigation projects to freeze and capture some of the deterioration which is taking place. It will extend to hazards such as earthquake, heat, landslides, urban flooding and lightning. India now has some of the best technologies for mass communication of early warning of potential hazards. It is only limited by lack of awareness.

DM will remain a priority domain for the government, especially after the continuing evidence of climate change and the effects that it brings.

The writer, a retired lieutenant-general, is a former GOC of the Srinagar-based 15 ("Chinar") Corps. He is currently a member of the National Disaster Management Authority.