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GVMC wakes up to unsafe buildings

VISAKHAPATNAM: The collapse of City Light Hotel in Secunderabad seems to have woken up officials of the Greater Visakhapatnam Municipal Corporation (GVMC) on the need to identify unsafe buildings and take action against the owners.

"We are now on the job of enumerating the unsafe buildings in the city," said deputy city planner of GVMC's town planning department Venkata Subbaiah on Tuesday.

Former bureaucrat E A S Sarma said that he has during the last five years written several letters to GVMC highlighting this issue. "I wrote a letter to GVMC addressing additional commissioner M Janaki to take a note of the unsafe buildings and conduct a study on structurally unsafe buildings," Sarma said.

Even new buildings and under-construction structures are also collapsing nowadays because of the substandard material such as sea sand being used by contractors. A building in Dabagardens collapsed few years ago, killing a worker, Sarma recalled.

The GVMC remains clueless on the number of dilapidated buildings in the city as it has not undertaken any survey to

identify such structures on the lines of studies done in Hyderabad earlier. The city has 3,20,855 residential buildings such as individual houses, apartments and housing complexes, 38,839 non-residential buildings including shops, malls, hotels and cinemas, according to GVMC officials. Besides, the city has 13,735 residential-cum-commercial buildings.

Nearly 50% of about 50,000 buildings in zone-I are considered to be unsafe and the authorities, including GVMC, will have to conduct a sample study on the durability of the buildings with experts, particularly from Andhra University, according to general secretary of GVMC Contractor's Association O S R Chowdary.

Despite the threat facing them, some people prefer to stay in decades-old houses on the account of minimal rent charges, he noted. "GVMC should have to dismantle the unsafe buildings for the safety of many lives," Chowdary said.

Janaki said that they will not take any action on the unsafe buildings as of now as they did not have data of the structurally unfit or unsafe buildings. Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC) earlier did a survey on such buildings, but GVMC couldn't, she added. The town planning and engineering wings of the GVMC have been instructed to conduct a zone-wise study on the structurally unfit buildings in the city and submit the report within a week.

"Based on the report, GVMC can take action against the dilapidated buildings according to Section 456 of Hyderabad

Municipal Act, 1955," Janaki told TOI. GVMC will serve notices to owners to vacate and remove the dilapidated house or building within 24 hours.

Head of the civil engineering department of Andhra University, Prof D S R Murthy said that the authorities were not regularly conducting 'structural audits', which are nothing but examination of the durability and lifespan of a building. Generally, buildings more than 30-35 years and those that have undergone unscientific changes are prone to collapse. "Except heritage structures, residential and non-residential unsafe buildings should have be dismantled on the lines of steps taken in foreign countries," Prof Murthy said.