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DISASTER MANAGEMENT

INTERVIEW

Building Resilience Against Disasters



In an Interview to Yojana, General N. C. Vij, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM (Retd.), Vice Chairman, National Disaster Management Authority, talks about the various aspects of Disaster Management in India and the steps that are being taken in this direction

The approach to disaster management in India is said to have undergone a paradigm shift. In what way is the new approach different from the earlier one?

Yes, at the national level there is proposed to be a paradigm shift from the erstwhile relief-centric response to a proactive prevention, mitigation and preparedness-driven approach. These efforts are aimed at conserving developmental gains and also minimising losses of life, livelihoods and property.

In pursuance of the above approach, the Government of India enacted the DM Act in 2005, under which the National Disaster Management Authority has been set up at the Apex level with the Prime Minister as the Chairman, a Vice Chairman and eight members. Similar organisations have also been set up at the States and District level with State Chief Ministers and Deputy Commissioners as their Chairpersons.

Ever since its inception, the NDMA has been working on prevention, preparedness, capacity development and public awareness to implement the Proactive Strategy.

What are the areas/factors that India needs to work upon to strengthen its disaster preparedness and management?

The aspects which need added emphasis and on which the work has already commenced are:

- Promoting a culture of prevention and preparedness.

- Encouraging mitigation measures based on technology and traditional wisdom.
- Capacity building including specialist response capabilities at the National and State levels.
- Mainstreaming disaster management into the developmental process.
- Establishing institutional and techno-legal framework to create an enabling regulatory environment and a compliance regime.

What are the critical areas of concern in disaster management?

The arrangement for disaster management is comparatively of recent origin in our country as compared to other countries like the USA which had set up a formal arrangement in 1979 during President Carter's time. Some of the critical areas which need priority attention in our country are:

- Enforcement of techno-legal regime so that all our towns and cities are developed according to well laid out plans catering for disaster resilient features and good mitigation and response mechanisms.
- Mitigation projects at the National and State level, especially for cyclones, earthquakes, floods and landslides to develop infrastructural arrangements and capacity building for these disasters.
- There is also a requirement for good preparedness in the field of Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear emergencies as also for Industrial Disasters.
- We also need to create a good response capability in way of 10 National Disaster Response Force Battalions at the national level and minimum one battalion equivalent response force at each state level.

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- Revamping of Civil Defence has also to be given priority for enhancing the capability for disaster management at the community level.
- Community Based Disaster Management is another very important aspect.

How would you assess India's vulnerability to disasters – both natural and man-made in the coming years?

India is vulnerable, in varying degrees, to a large number of natural as well as man-made disasters. 58.6 per cent of the landmass is prone to earthquakes of moderate to very high intensity; over 40 million hectares (12 per cent of land) is prone to floods and river erosion; of the 7,516 km long coastline, close to 5,700 km is prone to cyclones and tsunamis; 68 per cent of the cultivable area is vulnerable to drought and hilly areas are at risk from landslides and avalanches. Vulnerability to Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) emergencies and other man-made disaster has also increased manifold in the recent past.

Disaster risks in India are further compounded by increasing vulnerabilities related to changing demographic and socio-economic conditions, unplanned urbanization, and development within high-risk zones, environmental degradation, climate change, geological hazards, epidemics and pandemics. Clearly, all these contribute to a situation where disasters seriously threaten India's economy, its population and sustainable development. However, with the measures which are now being put in place – and on their fructification – as a part of proactive strategy we shall be able to meet the challenges to a large extent.

What are the major projects that NDMA is currently working on?

Ever since its inception, NDMA has taken a number of initiatives to operationalize the National Vision on various fronts. Some of the important initiatives which are currently underway are:

- Guidelines to facilitate the Central Ministries and States: NDMA has taken the initiative for preparation of guidelines in priority areas to facilitate the process of preparation of plans. These guidelines are formulated in an inclusive and participatory process. The guidelines on Earthquakes, Cyclones, Floods, Biological Disasters, Chemical (Industrial)

Disasters, Nuclear and Radiological Emergencies, Medical Preparedness and Mass Casualty Management and formulation of the State plans have been released. Guidelines on Landslides, Chemical (Terrorism) Disasters, Psycho-social and Mental Health Care, Tsunami, Urban Flooding and other important subjects will be released by the end of this year.

- Mitigation Projects: NDMA has taken up five mitigation projects on priority basis at the national level. The Cyclone Risk Mitigation Project with the assistance of the World Bank is being launched shortly in five states in the first phase and finally in 13 states and UTs. Projects on Earthquake Risk Mitigation, National Disaster Information and Communication Network and National Mitigation Reserves are under preparation and Detailed Project Reports are being finalized. The School Safety Project is now awaiting clearance from the Government, before being launched.

- Awareness Campaigns: Awareness and preparedness campaigns on earthquakes, floods and cyclones have been taken up on electronic and print media. Besides, the National Disaster Response Force has also undertaken community preparedness exercises on various disasters, especially the floods. During last year 60 NDRF teams were deployed in the states to train people in anti-flood measures.

- Mock Exercises: NDMA in partnership with state and district authorities are conducting mock exercises in various types of man-made and natural disasters in different states. So far, we have conducted 57 exercises covering 27 states and UTs. For the coming year 100 such exercises have already been planned to be conducted. During this summer season a new initiative has been launched to conduct mock drills to the school students. This is proving to be a very useful exercise. More such exercises are being planned in the coming academic year.

- Disaster Management as compulsory training in Universities: A beginning has been made in this important field with Pune University. They have made one week capsule compulsory for all graduate courses. In this way there will be approximately 2.15 Lakh students trained per year at the University. The work is in progress to initiate such programmes with other universities in the country.

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Under the new disaster management approach, what role is being envisaged for Civil Defence? Realizing that Civil Defence can be useful in disaster management, the Government of India by an executive order has authorized utilization of civil defence for disaster management. Civil Defence Act is also being amended accordingly. Civil defence now will be a district based and not a town centric organization as earlier. The advantage of civil defence is that it is a community based organization and will prepare the community as the first responder to any disaster situation. This organization will also help in spreading awareness and preparedness activities in the community. In the above context training Civil Defence volunteers is thus of utmost importance. A comprehensive training curriculum has already been prepared and is likely to be issued shortly. The Planning Commission has also earmarked Rs 100 Crore for this purpose. A massive training programme is being launched. What are the plans for the training and capacity of the National Disaster Response Force, especially the battalions who are to be trained for tackling nuclear, chemical and biological disasters? Presently, the National Disaster Response Force consists of eight battalions located at different parts of the country. Two more battalions have been agreed to be raised, keeping in view the vulnerability, and existing gaps. Out of these eight battalions, four battalions have been given the responsibility to deal with, chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) emergencies. A very comprehensive training schedule has been drawn up for training of all the eight battalions. These battalions are being trained in Collapsed Structure Search & Rescue (CSSR), Medical First Response (MFR), Heli-Borne Training and Water Rescue. For CBRN battalions various institutes within the country and abroad have been selected to train the trainers. The equipments for these battalions have been finalized and these will be fully equipped by September this year. Subsequently all the ten battalions will be trained in CBRN emergencies. Do we have any action plans in place to tackle cyber terrorism? Cyber terrorism is outside the scope of our responsibility and is being dealt by National Security Council Secretariat.	Awareness generation and educating people about common Dos and Don'ts are important components of any disaster management plan. How do you think this can best be achieved in context of India? Awareness generation is one of the most important components of proactive strategy. NDMA has laid due emphasis on this aspect and some of the important programmes which are being under taken are: a) Focused campaign on Earthquakes, Cyclones and Floods has already been initiated on electronic and print media. b) Salient features of the Guidelines are being released on the National and local press. c) 58 table top and mock exercises each have been conducted on various types of disasters with participation at state district level. 100 more have been planned for 2009-10. d) NDRF teams are being sent to various districts for training and capacity building at the community level. e) Some of the other activities proposed are preparation of documentary films, TV spots, posters and leaflets. What are the major constraints that India faces in managing disasters effectively? Disaster management is comparatively a new initiative in our country. Most of the developed countries are 30 to 40 years ahead of us. Now that the path has been well defined and strategy has been worked out, there is a requirement both at the National and State level to empower the Disaster Management Authorities. There is a requirement to give a serious push at various levels to the policies and programmes of the NDMA so that the work can move with requisite speed. Speed is very essential so that we can make up for the lost time. What are our hopes for the future? A beginning has been made, NDMA has embarked on its mission in the right earnest. Planning Commission is also seized with the requirements of disaster management. The goal of disaster management in India is to protect people, property and economic infrastructure by building resilience against disasters. It is a long journey but with the help of all states, we shall be soon counted amongst the well prepared countries in the world.
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