

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

ARE WE PREPARED TO MEET THE GROWING CHALLENGES OF DISASTERS?

Jamil Ahmed, Vikram Mehraj*

Department of Community Health Sciences, * Department of Pathology & Microbiology, Faculty of Health Sciences, Aga Khan University, Karachi, Pakistan

South Asian countries are the lands of great topographic and climatic contrasts. Floods, cyclones, earthquakes, droughts and heavy rainfalls are some major natural threats that this region faces.¹ The tsunami of December 26, 2004 that struck the coasts of most landmasses bordering the Indian Ocean killed more than 225,000 and many more became homeless in eleven countries of Asia. This was followed by the most devastating earthquake in the history of Pakistan which struck the region on 8th October 2005 and killed about 75,000 people, injured more than 100,000 and affected an overall population of more than 3 million.

Apart from this, Pakistan witnesses on an average one flood every year. The occurrence of man made disasters including the terrorist bombings, fire engulfing buildings and collapse of multistory residential buildings is not uncommon in Pakistan.²

The Emergency Relief Cell (ERC), Federal Flood Commission (FFC) and meteorological department are the key agencies for the management of disasters in our country. The relief work that is usually carried out in case of an emergency is on ad hoc basis and there is no significant prior groundwork.

It is well established that if the natural disasters cannot be prevented they can be predicted and contained on a large extent if taken as an important and serious national agenda. The death and disability from disasters can be reduced through a coordinated and institutional effort.

The public health mechanisms that involve the management of any disasters include disaster response, disaster preparedness and disaster mitigation.³

Disaster Response

This is the phase when a disaster has taken place and the aims are to reduce the number of casualties through medical treatment. The response is a first aid on a very large scale depending on the scale of the problem and must be initiated within the first few hours. This immediate care is always given by those who are survivors and less affected. However the institute that is already prepared will mobilize the health care at the site and start giving medical and surgical care depending upon the type of

problem. Any survivors need to be rescued, dead identified and shifted to the mortuary, bereaved taken care of and adequate care, food, shelter, safe water etc, given to the survivors especially the vulnerable, i.e., elders, children and women. Immediate epidemiological surveillance is to be carried out during this phase and proper preventive measures, including vaccination and sanitation, taken to prevent the emergence of any epidemic. The most significant factor that accounts during and after the early relief phase is coordination among various sectors. Factors that lead to weak cooperation and isolated and therefore ineffective efforts include weak leadership, absence of accountability, lack of credentialing and disagreement on goals by the responding agencies.⁴

Mitigation

This involves those measures taken with regard to risk reduction. Proper building planning and regulations, earthquake resistant buildings in the high risk zones, fire management system in buildings and construction of embankments on the sides of rivers are some important measures that can reduce the number of casualties and harm.

Preparedness

This is a state of being already prepared to face any disaster. It includes all those activities that strengthen the capacity of a country to manage efficiently all types of emergency. This must include involvement of all sectors of the society including governmental and non-governmental organizations. The communities are to be trained, educated and facilitated to become self-sufficient and develop their capacity to face any emergency. Governmental institutions must help these communities to generate resources, develop and adopt standards and policies with respect to specific risks posed to these communities. Also early warning systems for the prediction of emergencies and development of information and communication systems in this regard are inevitable.

Asian countries face many challenges of disasters. There are some international conventions and forums that can help us to develop our capacity and help prepare for any impending disaster. The most important of these are Beijing action for disaster risk reduction in Asia (2005), Delhi

declaration on disaster risk reduction in Asia (2007) but the Hyogo framework (2005–2015), adopted in Japan in world conference (2005) is considered a guideline. It promotes that:

1. The nations should make disaster risk reduction a national and local policy.
2. Identify, assess and monitor disaster risks and enhance early warning.
3. Use knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels.
4. Reduce the underlying risk factors.
5. Strengthen disaster preparedness for effective response at all levels.⁵

It is therefore of enormous importance that the state take the responsibility to give priority to

this issue and take efficient and sincere measures for the disaster risk reduction. This will save millions of vulnerable populations from the effects of natural and man made calamities.

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Address for Correspondence:

Dr. Jamil Ahmed, Chief Resident, Department of Community Health Sciences, The Aga Khan University, Stadium Road, PO Box 3500, Karachi-74800, Pakistan. Tel: +92-21-4864933, Cell: +92-333-3785695
E-mail: jamil.ahmed@aku.edu