

Nepal in crisis after earthquake

HRWF Nepal (04.05.2015) - A powerful 7.8 M earthquake struck Nepal on 25th April. As of 3rd May, it has been reported that 7276 people have died and 14278 people are injured. In this earthquake, Gorkha, Sindhupalchowk, Makawanpur, Sindhuli, Bhaktapur, Dhading, Dolakha, Kathmandu, Lalitpur, Lamjung, Rasuwa, Ramechhap, and Nuwakot districts are severely affected. In such crisis situation lots of support and aid has been receiving by the government but still rescue and relief operation is not being effective due to following reasons;

1. Less prompt and ineffective communication

a. Prime Minister of Nepal knew about the earthquake half an hour after, with the twitter message of Indian Prime minister Modi¹. This suggests that the head of executive is not continuously updated about his country, which indicates reluctance and less concern for his country.

b. As powerful after shocks hit one after another, the required amount of rescuers weren't mobilized for several hours of earthquake. The government failed to effectively communicate to them so that rescue and relief would be more prompt.

c. People tried to contact their family, relatives and friends so due to the over traffic on cell phone network, it become inaccessible. On the other hand significant numbers of BTS towers installed in the rooftop of the buildings collapsed. Alternative means of communication, which is Internet, was also shut down. Government had no satellite phone to establish communication with concerned stakeholders in time.

2. Delayed decision to deliver command in rescue operation

a. Emergency Ministerial cabinet meeting was held only five hours after the earthquake. It should have been held much earlier to plan the; disaster management, the manner in which the rescue and relief should be conducted, and proper mobilization of rescuers so that more lives could be saved.

3. Lack of relief materials in store with the Government

a. Nepal lies in high seismic zone, and this is well known by the government. The government officials and ministers have been attending many national and international seminars and meetings regarding this issue, but government showed least preparedness, with very shameful amount of rescue and relief materials in store. There was great scarcity of heavy equipment that was required for rescuing the trapped ones, and clearing the roads by removing the rubble.

4. Lack of clear and adequate knowledge about responding in emergency situation

a. Deputy prime minister, Bamdev Gautam declared a 'state of emergency' in ministerial cabinet meeting of 25th April². Nepal government has also appealed for humanitarian assistance across the region. However, when members of the 'state management committee' of the parliamentary committee argued that state of emergency is not applicable in such situation, Mr. Gautam himself seemed to be unclear about his previous statement and he corrected himself by stating that he declared severely affected districts as 'crisis zone'. This suggests that even a responsible person like deputy prime minister can't clearly differentiate such important concepts³.

5. Office and residence of the head of the state and head of the executive were not safe

¹ <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Modi-Nepal-PM-learnt-of-quake-from-my-tweet/articleshow/47102377.cms>

² <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-32461019>

³ http://article.wn.com/view/2015/04/25/Quakehit_areas_declared_crisis_zones/

a. Office of the both president and prime minister is very old building, and have got several cracks due to earthquake⁴. When there was a shake of 6.8 Richter scale the following day, which is 26th April, the participants of ministerial cabinet meeting, rushed to the open space while the meeting was taking place at the office of the Prime Minister⁵. This shows the extent of carelessness and ignorance of the leaders. At least they should have chosen a safe building to live and work, as they are the responsible ones for most of the power and commands to operate the country.

6. Complicated Lifestyle

- a. Due to the lack of electricity and most BTS and Internet tower shut down, it made a difficult situation for people to communicate and seek help.
- b. Rain made life more difficult as almost all people were living under open sky.
- c. It was difficult to find open space in Kathmandu. The available spaces gradually got dirty as there were many people residing, with lack of latrines and clean water.
- d. Mosquito, insects and parasite problem were rampant in the open space. There was shortage of mosquito repellent.
- e. The shops and other private sectors didn't feel responsible enough. They didn't easily provide supply of the basic needs. Those who provided inflated the price many times than normal times⁶.
- f. Indian helicopter highly accompanied Indian journalist rather than rescuer and relief materials. They prioritized publicity rather than the rescue operation.⁷
- g. There is a perceived threat of epidemic.

7. Political parties, leaders and ministers are taking this situation as an opportunity

- a. The influential political leaders have captured the relief materials and dispatched them in their home district. This has led to many needy victims still deprived of relief materials⁸.
- b. Instead of identifying the villages that need immediate relief and rescue, the ministers were sending rescuers to places of their interest. In the ministerial cabinet meeting held the day after the earthquake the finance minister, Ram Sharan Mahat, expressed his dissatisfaction with Nepal Army as he had requested the Nepal Army to send relief materials to his constituency in Nuwakot district. The Army officials did not identify his village, so he expressed that he himself would go with the officials in their helicopter to distribute the relief materials. This caused the disturbance in the meeting and Minister of Health, Khagraj Adhikary, thought that if a leader belonging to Nepali congress does this, people will incline and be loyal to Nepali Congress, and so he said that Mr Sharan has to take the Foreign Minister along with him because the Foreign Minister belongs to Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist) and is also from Nuwakot district. This issue heightened to such level which halted the distribution of relief materials in Nuwakot for 7 days, as the parties were disputing over who should distribute these materials. The ministers are using this time of crisis also as an opportunity to make happy their cadre.⁹
- c. Political parties are exerting pressure to the bureaucrats to include the names of the party cadre in the earthquake victim list, although they are not the real victims. In Sarlhai district political parties have intimidated the bureaucrats to do so.¹⁰
- d. The political parties desperately want to get credit, but instead of acting wisely and gaining trust and rebuilding their diluted image by showing sincerity at least during this situation where people are in real need, they are fighting with each other in order to get more share of relief materials, so that and they can donate it with their name.¹¹

⁴ <http://www.myrepublica.com/politics/item/20226-quake-damage-assessment-for-govt-buildings-starts.html>

⁵ <http://www.myrepublica.com/politics/item/20226-quake-damage-assessment-for-govt-buildings-starts.html>

⁶ Kantipur daily Apr, 30 2015

⁷ Kantipur daily Apr, 29 2015

⁸ Kantipur daily 29 Apr 2015, page 15

⁹ Kantipur daily Apr 30, 2015

¹⁰ Kantipur daily 30th Apr, 2015, page 9

¹¹ Kantipur daily, Apr 29, 2015

8. Old law fails to properly address the complexity of modern disaster management

a. The country has a very old law called 'Natural Calamity Relief Act 1982' there are no clear legal provisions of the jurisdiction of bureaucrats in time of such devastating crisis¹².

9. Incompetency of bureaucrats and ego problem

a. There seems to be lack of consensus between bureaucrats, which is one cause of delayed and inefficient relief and rescue operation¹³. The Chief secretary holds the capacity to order and assign tasks to all other secretaries. Thus, with this in mind Mr. Leela Mani Paudyal, the Chief secretary in his leadership formed a committee of 11 members to manage this disaster in a better way. But according to the 'Natural Calamity Relief Act 1982', rescue and relief operation falls under the jurisdiction of Home Ministry. So, the Home Minister and Home Secretary showed great disagreement to Mr. Paudyal's act. Mr. Paudyal might have thought of forming such committee because, Defense Ministry looks after and regulates Nepal Army, so the Home Ministry might not be able to properly mobilize the Nepal Army for better relief and rescue, but the Chief Secretary as aforementioned does hold the capacity to give instructions and mobilize them, therefore he might have thought his committee would be very useful to suitably manage this crisis. With such disagreements this issue did not come to understanding and Mr. Paudyal's committee stood ineffective with no opportunity to perform the desired tasks¹⁴.

In this way bureaucrats have failed to plan properly, failed to co-ordinate successfully, failed to identify the urgency of relief and rescue of the victims, and failed to prioritize victim's needs over theirs are some reasons behind the snail pace dispatch of relief material¹⁵.

10. Too many parliamentarians and their overloaded interest

a. Nepal has 601 constituent assembly members and most of them want reach to their constituency for inspection, interaction with people, and distribution of relief materials. In this they are using the helicopter that has been transporting relief materials to various places. In such a scenario the amount of relief materials that used to be loaded in a helicopter is being reduced, so that the constituent assembly members can also be included in that helicopter.¹⁶

11. Government acts hopeless

a. After four days home minister said that rescue and relief operation was ineffective¹⁷.

12. Delayed announcement of nominal relief package

a. After five days of earthquake Prime minister announced that the relief amount of USD 1000 will be provided to the bereaved families¹⁸.

13. Least responsible leaders

a. Chairman of the Constituent Assembly of Nepal, demanded to hold a constituent assembly meeting, so that information from constituent assembly members can be obtained about their respective constituencies, and on that basis rescue and relief could be made more effective, but the PM denied calling for the meeting assuming that

¹² Natural Calamity Relief Act 1982

¹³ Kantipur daily, 29 Apr, 2015 page 15

¹⁴ Kantipur daily Apr 30, 2015

¹⁵ Nagarik daily, Apr 30, 2015

¹⁶ Kantipur daily, Apr 30, 2015

¹⁷ Kantipur daily Apr 29, 2015

¹⁸ Kantipur daily Apr, 30 2015

discussion about the government's weak responding mechanisms, drawbacks, and failures would be discussed¹⁹.

b. Political leaders of Nepal love to attain international meeting. Leaving behind this pathetic scene at home, Finance Minister Ram Sharan Mahat flew to Azerbaijan to attend a donor meeting on 3rd May²⁰.

Nevertheless, the sectors that have been doing commendable jobs to soothe the victims have also been witnessed, which are:

- h. Nepal Army, and Nepal Police have been playing significant role in the crisis situation.
- i. International relief effort is praiseworthy.
- j. Nepal electricity authority has been able restore electricity very quickly excluding some severely damaged areas and arrangements.

¹⁹ Kantipur daily, Apr 30, 2015

²⁰ <http://www.myrepublica.com/politics/item/20324-mahat-flies-to-azerbaijan.html>