

Political disaster plagues Nepal after earthquake

HRWF Nepal (12.05.2015) - As Nepal enters its third week since a devastating earthquake killed, injured and made homeless thousands of people, some of the hardest-hit areas have only just started receiving humanitarian aid, while many people remain missing. The politicisation of the Nepal earthquake rescue and relief operation has not only hampered efforts to search for survivors and deliver essential supplies, but it can also be held responsible for deaths that were preventable if only the Nepal Government had kept its most fundamental obligation at the forefront of its agenda: the equitable protection of its citizens.

Despite numerous disaster management plans, policies and mechanisms, Nepal's political weaknesses, instability and party disputes meant vital policy and emergency plans could not be agreed upon or implemented. This has led to delays in delivery of relief, while reports have been made that political leaders misrepresent the amount of damage caused in certain areas, thus skewing the distribution of relief in favour of their own constituencies.

This political influence over the distribution process is devastating for those who could have been saved if the first crucial hours after the earthquake had been harnessed efficiently and fairly.

International aid organisations had to overcome numerous barriers just to get relief materials into the country in the first place, as they faced strict customs inspection requirements and taxation of relief supplies as normal goods, causing serious delays in the delivery of aid. It took a week for the Government to loosen these policies following complaints from the UN.

Despite Nepal's awareness of an imminent earthquake, preparedness seemed further lacking as no clear communications protocol was in place for immediately informing the Prime Minister of events while he was out of the country. Instead, he received the news via a Tweet by Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. The Government had no satellite phone to communicate with concerned stakeholders at this critical time, and ministerial offices were not even earthquake-proof to protect those commanding emergency operations.

The first critical hours after the earthquake were wasted as it took five hours before an emergency ministerial cabinet meeting was held to plan the rescue and relief operation and to mobilize rescue workers. The amount of supplies kept in store for such an event was shamefully low, and essential heavy equipment required for rescuing trapped survivors and clearing roads was scarce. Furthermore, The Government failed in their role to coordinate foreign rescue teams when, early on in the rescue operation, it was reported that multiple teams searched the same areas in the city because of a lack of coordination from the Government.

Weaknesses in Government leadership and Nepal's legal framework were exposed following a ministerial cabinet meeting on 25 April, where Deputy Prime Minister Bamdev Gautam declared a state of emergency. However, this was contradicted by members of the state management committee of the parliamentary committee, who argued that there is no constitutional provision in place to declare a state of emergency in the instance of an earthquake. Thus, a day later, Mr Gautam retracted his initial statement and instead declared the severely affected districts as crisis zones.

Differentiation between such important concepts by senior government members and disunity at such a critical time could have been disastrous.

While prompt delivery of relief materials should have been a priority, the Government allowed Indian helicopters to carry journalists for publicity.

Rather than filling helicopters to maximum capacity with relief supplies, Nepal Government ministers preferred to occupy precious space so that they could be seen distributing aid to their constituencies. They manipulated the situation for political gain even further by directing dispatch of relief materials to their own home districts rather than identifying the villages in most immediate need of relief and rescue. Unfortunately, reports of looting of aid materials were also received.

In a ministerial cabinet meeting held the day after the earthquake, Finance Minister, Ram Sharan Mahat, expressed his dissatisfaction with the Nepal Army as they had not heeded his request to send relief materials to his own village in Nuwakot District. He expressed that he himself would go with in their helicopter to distribute the relief materials, which caused a disturbance in the meeting. Minister of Health, Khagraj Adhikary, thought that if a leader of the Nepali Congress did this, people would become loyal to them. In response, he suggested Mr Sharan take the Foreign Minister along with him, a member of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist), also from Nuwakot district. This issue escalated to such a level that the distribution of relief materials in Nuwakot was halted for seven days as the parties disputed who should distribute the materials.

Not only have political parties been fighting over distribution of relief materials in order to gain political recognition, media reported that Sarlhai district political party members have gone so far as to intimidate Government officials into adding their names to earthquake victim lists in order to receive relief supplies in return for their vote. The National Human Rights Commission received complaints about the way in which relief materials were being distributed, and requested the Government supply relief materials directly to victims.

Nepal's legal system and highly bureaucratic political structure has been another disaster for this earthquake event. The Natural Calamity Relief Act, 1982 has no clear legal provisions for the jurisdiction of bureaucrats in times of crisis. A lack of consensus between bureaucrats caused further delay and inefficiency in the relief and rescue operation when Chief Secretary, Mr Leela Mani Paudyal, holding the capacity to order and assign tasks to all other ministerial secretaries, formed a committee of 11 members to manage this disaster effectively, and mobilize the Nepal Army under the Ministry of Defense. However, according to the Natural Calamity Relief Act, the rescue and relief operation falls under the jurisdiction of the Home Ministry. Thus, Mr. Paudyal's act faced great opposition from the Home Minister and Home Secretary. With such disagreements, no understanding was reached, and Mr. Paudyal's committee stood ineffective with no opportunity to perform its desired tasks.

Operations were further crippled when the Prime Minister refused to hold a constituent assembly meeting so that information from members could be obtained about their respective constituencies, and on that basis increase the effectiveness of rescue and relief operations. The Prime Minister was more concerned about avoiding any discussion he feared may arise about the Government's weak response mechanisms, drawbacks, and failures.

The crisis is not over. Nepal continues to experience large aftershocks and landslides, causing further damage to weakened buildings and mountains, and putting more lives at risk. Many people remain vulnerable, living with inadequate food, water, shelter and sanitation, and aid needs to be distributed quickly to avoid waterborne diseases spreading during the monsoon season. As Nepal's National Planning Commission begins looking at rebuilding the country, cracks can already be seen in the Government's handling of post-earthquake reconstruction efforts. The same political infighting, lack of

consensus over critical decisions and corruption will hamper Nepal's recovery for weeks, if not months or even years to come. To prevent this disaster from growing, the Government needs to remember its purpose, its most basic obligation: the equitable protection of its citizens.