Rescue and Relief Activities after the Earthquake

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Guest Column by Hari Bansh Jha

Within the twinkling of an eye, the 25/4 earthquake of 7.9 magnitude was able to bring incalculable miseries to the people of Nepal. With its epicenter in Lamjung near Pokhara in Western Nepal, the earthquake directly or indirectly affected the lives of more than eight million of the country's total population of 28 million.

As per the official estimate, close to 8,000 people were killed and more than 14,000 people injured during this tragedy. But it is largely assumed that the death toll of the people in different parts of the country could cross 100,000.

After 1934, Nepal did not experience earthquake of this magnitude in past 81 years. At that time the earthquake was of 8 Richter scale and the death toll was 8,500. The powerful earthquake which had its epicenter south to Mount Everest in Solukhumbu district of Nepal at that time had seriously affected regions as far as Lhasa in Tibet and covering most parts of northern Bihar, including Darbhanga, Muzaffarpur and Bhagalpur. Apart from Kathmandu, many parts of Nepal were almost razed to ground by that time.

More than 600,000 houses have been destroyed in the recent earthquake. A large number of houses have developed cracks. Certain roads have been completely or partially damaged due to cracks and landslides. Loss of property due to the earthquake could go up to $10 billion to $20 billion, when Nepal's total Gross Domestic Production is no more than $20 billion. Immediately, Nepal is in dire need of $2 billion to rebuild homes, hospitals, government offices and historic buildings.

The government of Nepal claims to have mobilized 65,000 Nepalese army, 31,500 Nepal Police and 17,000 Armed police Force personnel for the rescue and relief activities in the quake affected districts. Arrangement was made to distribute tents, medicines and food to the quake
affected populations under one-door policy. Besides, a monitoring mechanism was formed under the Nepalese Prime Minister Sushil Koirala.

As a mark of sympathy to the quake victims, people donated 1.5 billion rupees as of 29th April at the Prime Minister's Natural Relief Fund. Foreign countries, national and international organizations provided huge assistance to Nepal in the form of rescue and relief materials. But most of the relief materials are stuck at Nepal's Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu and also at Birgunj Custom, which failed to reach the victims, particularly out of Kathmandu Valley.

Ever since the earthquake made its dent on 25th April, there is a lack of direction on the part of the Nepalese government to handle the situation. It is a shame that the Prime Minister of Nepal received information about the quake not from the Nepalese source while he was in Indonesia, but from the tweets of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. And still more humiliating is the failure of the government to provide relief materials like water, food, tents, sanitary items or even medicines to the affected population in time when they are virtually dying or struggling for their life.

However, thanks are due to the rescuers from 25 countries, including India, China, Russia, Pakistan, Malaysia, Singapore and France that some rescue and relief operations started. In addition to 700 health workers, as many as 4,045 volunteers were mobilized from 34 countries in search and rescue operations. India came in forefront in providing relief and rescue support to Nepal. To the surprise of many, Indian rescue teams landed in Kathmandu within six hours of the massive earthquake.

Under operation Maitri and in coordination of the government of Nepal, India provided huge consignment of relief materials, including drinking water, milk, biscuits, noodles, tents, blankets, essential medicines, tarpaulin and plastic sheets to Nepal. The Indian helicopters distributed 100 tonnes of relief materials in the far flung areas of Nepal. Apart from running two field hospitals, India also deployed 18 Army medical teams, 1 IAF rapid action medical team, and 18 engineering teams. Besides, India mobilized 16 National Disaster Response Force teams. Each of these teams comprised of 45 personnel, who were fully equipped with modern equipment to handle search and rescue operations. They possessed medical and paramedics, sniffer dogs, life detector machines, and steel, concrete and wood cutters. Special assistance cells were opened at Indira Gandhi International Airport in New Delhi to facilitate the movement of people and goods between Nepal and India.

As a result of the services provided by the rescue teams, thousands of Indian nationals and tourists from different countries who were trapped during the hours of earthquake were evacuated. About 866 people were rescued with aerial support and 1062 from land routes. Apart from the central government of India, the state governments of Bihar, Bengal and Uttar Pradesh also rendered valuable services to the Indian nationals trapped in Kathmandu by facilitating their return journey to the respective states through free bus service.

For one or the other reason, the Nepalese nationals themselves took the initiative to return back to their homes in hills and Terai region through whatever transport means that was at their disposal like the planes, buses or the jeeps. Statistics is that over 800,000 people have
left Kathmandu following the earthquake fearing the outbreak of epidemics and also due to the lack of food, water, essential medicines, power and the panic created by aftershocks of earthquake. Exodus of the people on such a large scale somewhat helped ease the congestion of people in the capital.

Many of the lives would have been saved if the army, police, medical and other government staff of Nepal government would have come forward in support of quake-affected population. In the initial period, it looked like that there was no government in the country when people so badly needed help. Even the political parties, NGOs, INGOs and other civil society organizations stayed cool in that hours of tragedy. But then the role of the foreign countries and international organizations in rescue and relief operation was highly appreciated.

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