

PREFACE

This study was conceived during Kosi disaster 2008 appropriately called National Disaster by Prime Minister of India. Kosi river, the 'sorrow of Bihar' breached (18th August, 2008) its embankment at Kusaha 10 kms inside Nepal bordering Supaul district of Bihar and started flowing along a new course approximately 15 to 20 km wide and 150 km long affecting 35 blocks, 407 Panchayats and 980 villages in five districts with population of over 33 lakhs. More than 33 lac people and their houses spread in 110258 ha land fell in the path of the new course. The entire country side within this 3000 sq. km swathe was totally devastated by the rapid surging flow of the river along its new course. Houses, school buildings, roads, health centers, bridges, telephone towers and railway tracks were all flooded and severely damaged/ swept away. Several banks closed their branches in the affected area causing problems in distribution of relief. There was complete disruption of road connectivity and as such boats became the only source of reaching the people.

As Special Secretary in the department of Disaster Management, I had the opportunity to organize response-both evacuation and relief. It involved perhaps the largest evacuation and relief operation in the country involving all wings of the defense services, specialized disaster response force- NDRF and state agencies specially police. I was also part of the team organizing relief and shelter for the affected population under extremely adverse conditions. The response was prompt and highly organized and several elements of the Incident Command System were practiced.

During Kosi, different functions were performed by the police as we went along with evacuation and relief work. These functions were evolved as the response activities unfolded. During rescue/evacuation police became the first responder - actually conducting search and rescue. Later on it facilitated operations of defence services, NDRF and others when they arrived as guides, coordinators and logistic support, helping maintain law & order and safety of property in the affected areas. The role during relief and recovery phase was more significant. It supported the civil administration in all the activities. The police forces got involved in whole lot of activities including security at relief distribution centers and relief camps to prevent unrest, security at food godowns, stations where material was being received from all over the country.

Although police has to perform function as above, it does not have the appropriate mandate in relevant Acts and manuals. Some of the enactments do mention this function, but it is of general nature ie search and rescue in State government disaster management plans and subsequent SOPs. Therefore there was need for defining the specific roles that police can play in different phases of an emergency-evacuation, relief and rehabilitation. The functions that are being identified for the police is based on the experience of Kosi disaster 2008 when as mentioned earlier I had the opportunity to evolve and define the roles as problems/issues came up during rescue, relief and recovery phases. People and government agencies perceive police as first responder due to the proximity of police station to the community. Even Model Police Act and Administrative Reforms Commission have recognized police as first responder. Therefore police is and would remain the first responder since immediate response can be provided at the police station level only. For this police must be trained and equipped. However, police station level police is neither trained nor equipped and therefore they would not be able to perform their role properly.

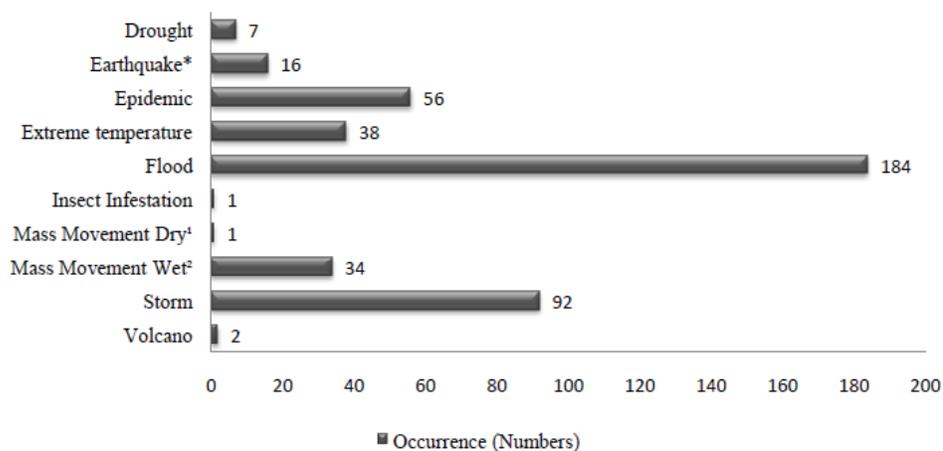
Now the approach to disaster management has undergone a paradigm shift from relief centric to holistic approach involving preparedness, mitigation and recovery. The present disaster management system and its strengths and weaknesses have been studied to understand whether it has the capability to accept the future challenges. The present day response management is becoming increasingly difficult due to variety of reasons including population growth, climate change and democratization of information, which makes incumbent upon us to bring about changes in approach, policy, legislation etc. The basic responsibility of undertaking rescue, relief and rehabilitation measures rest with the concerned State Government. The Central Government supplements the efforts of the State Governments by providing logistic and financial support in case of severe natural calamities. It includes deployment of aircrafts and boats, specialist teams of Armed Forces, Central Para Military Forces and personnel of National Disaster Response Force (NDRF), arrangements for relief materials, medical stores, and restoration of critical infrastructure facilities.

India has a well defined administrative structure extending up to the village level which is quite robust and time tested. Well defined and clearly designated, coordinating authorities exist at all levels. Line departments (police, health, PWD, power, civil supplies etc) function under chief executives at various levels. All are being coordinated by district magistrate / collector/ deputy commissioner. This structure is also responsible for disaster management.

Nonetheless, disaster management operations often takes place without any appropriate plans, designated authorities are not backed by professional response teams for various functional assignments and authority and responsibility are position based / designation and not backed by professional training. And finally there is poor resources/ inventory management leading to non /sub optimal deployment of men and material resulting in response at higher cost.

The human and economic losses from disasters are enormously high in India as compared to other developing nations of the world. According to the World Bank, direct losses from natural disasters have been estimated to amount to up to 2 per cent of India’s GDP and up to 12 per cent of central government revenues.

Natural Disaster Occurrence Reported during 1980-2010 in India



Source: Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India

The institutional mechanisms put in place at the Centre, State and District levels should be able to help the States manage these disasters in an effective manner. The National Disaster Management Act, 2005 mandates the State Governments, inter alia, to take measures for preparation of state disaster management plans, integration of measures for prevention of disasters or mitigation into state development plans, allocation of funds, establishment of early warning systems and to assist the Central Government and other agencies in various aspects of disaster management. State Governments have enacted their own Acts, prepared State disaster management polices and guidelines for different kinds of emergencies. This has gone along with formation of several institutions at national, State and district levels including NDMA, SDMA, DDMA and NDRF and State level SDRFs. These institutions

have taken shape also in some states, but even those have not really become strong/active enough to improve response adequately. Moreover, machinery at the executive level i.e. district, subdivision, block, panchayat/village is nonexistent or very weak. There is need to build institutions at district and below with professionals who engage in all aspects in disaster management-preparation, mitigation etc. Even panchayats should be empowered to prepare vulnerability plan, response etc. Alongside, incident management teams should be constituted at all levels to respond in quickest time.

The Study aims at building a holistic, coordinated and prompt response to any disaster situation. The objective of this study is to suggest ways to quicken the emergency responses by empowering, training and equipping the police station and state police personnel and the auxiliary support agencies such as home guards and civil defence which would provide the immediate response to take care of the ‘golden hour’. This would enhance crisis management capability of the local and state governments.

The police has well defined role in internal emergencies including terrorist action. There is urgent need for capacity building of the police personnel. This includes a system wherein disaster management becomes an integral part of training of the Police Forces integrated with the community-based disaster management and closely coordinated with other agencies. The role of Police becomes very eminent as a law and order interface vis-à-vis the social welfare assistance to the community with a human face. The psyche of the members of the police force is to be fine tuned to the needs during such times.

Based on the first-hand experience of the author during Kosi disaster ‘2008’ in Bihar the paper brings out the multifarious role played by the police force as first responders. The lessons learnt need to be shared such that they can be applied elsewhere.

Happily, things are changing. Police Act of Bihar (2007) and Kerala (2010) has clearly put disaster Management as one of the police duties. This is certainly welcome. Even the Model Police Act prepared by BRRD in 2010 has identified police as first responder. This should go a long way in empowering and preparing the police as alternative to specialized and the defence forces wherein they become effective first responders capable of handling most emergencies.