

Flood Fury: A National Calamity

Nature gives and nature takes away. The same clouds that bring drops of life choose to come down in excess and cause chaos. The same rivers that have sustained lives for centuries, albeit with occasional problems, turn into a roaring torrent and sweep all life away! When this happens because some of our own powers fail to properly maintain a dam upstream, the onus is upon all of us because we were not vigilant enough to ensure that the required job was being done. So also, it reflects our callous attitude and approach in preventing such unforeseen disasters.

The floods, a tragedy that has engulfed the lives and livelihoods of uncountable number of people has severely affected 15 districts of Bihar since late August this year. Media reports say around 3 million people have lost their houses, livelihoods and the right to life with dignity. The activists and experts who are working for the rescue or relief among the marooned people believe that the magnitude is much beyond the reported numbers. A report says that over 75% rescue work is still to be done. But the state government has conveniently declared that all the trapped persons have been rescued. One of the reports states that over 1 lakh hectare or 247 thousand acres of agricultural land is destroyed ensuring that the future of food security and livelihoods is not so bright even after the floodwater goes down. The floodwater is receding, creating space for epidemics, sanitation-related diseases and wide-scale corruption in implementation of relief works.

The floods have been rampaging since eons for the people of Assam, Bihar, Bengal and some parts of Uttar Pradesh. The point is that north Bihar is visited by floods every year and routinely devastated by its river systems, led by the Kosi, which originate in Nepal and eventually flow into the Gangetic plains. The world has not been told the magnitude of what has happened here or the

unique nature of this tragedy. This is heartbreaking. The disaster has also struck in places which have not seen flooding for 150 years. We are facing a total social collapse.

The flood in Assam also amounts to National Disaster in true sense because every year the floods leave a trail of destruction, washing away villages, submerging paddy fields and drowning livestock, besides causing loss of human life and property cost in several billions. Assam accounts for as much as 9.4 per cent of the total flood-prone area in the whole of our country. Assam has always faced the mighty challenge of flood year after year, thousands of people lost their lives and millions are rendered homeless every year, even the flood this year by all accounts was devastating.

The cry of the time is to ensure successful rescue of all the trapped people, irrespective of their castes, religion or any other considerations. There is a dire need of relief materials, rehabilitation, reconstruction, rebuilding strategies and initiatives and most importantly, strict monitoring of all such interventions. The civil society, state governments and many others responded to the unprecedented disaster spontaneously and have offered relief material for the victims. The local government poorly handled the situation before and after the breach of Kosi Embankment. The rescue and relief works offered by the government are far less both in quantity and quality.

It is suspected that the rescue and temporary relief will vanish with the receding water and subsiding media reports. The scars of the fury will remain for long, in the memories, and on the economy of millions of people. There will be the need of a timely and long-term rehabilitation of the livelihoods of affected people otherwise mass exodus is going to crush the already ill-paid workers and labourers in the small and big cities.

Nutrition is a major risk factor for disease and it is desperately neglected aspect of maternal,

newborn, and child health especially in disaster situations like flood. The reasons for this neglect are understandable but not justifiable. Breast-feeding counseling, vitamin A supplementation, and zinc fortification have the greatest benefits. Attention to maternal nutrition through adequate dietary intake in pregnancy and supplementation with iron, folic acid, and possibly other micronutrients and calcium are likely to provide value.

Adequate supplies and transport for the outreach teams are essential in order to deliver primary health care including TT immunization, iron folic acid, vaccines, syringes, ORS, malaria chemoprophylaxis and insecticide treated bed nets. This needs a well knit referral system and adequate number of transport vehicles (boats in this case). Last but not the least, medical teams need to coordinate with other relief (food/ nutrition, blankets etc) and operate in isolation of other relief work. Establishing a comprehensive disease surveillance (IDSP) and containment plan for early detection and prevention of outbreaks in all the flood affected districts should also become priority.

Indian Academy of Pediatrics, being the biggest and solitary group of qualified pediatricians in the country for the welfare of children in India should rise to the occasion and render services in this time of national calamity with full zeal and enthusiasm.

The outreach activities have been undertaken by our Bihar state branch. Much needs to be done on humanitarian grounds as the measures undertaken are not sufficient. Even the call given by me to mobilize funds has poor response in terms of our numerical strength. I request all the branches to carry out some outreach services by our members and branches in Bihar, Assam, Orissa and Uttar Pradesh where people are suffering from this unforeseen deluge. So also, 'Disaster Management Group' needs to be more active and effective in time of need.

There is no dearth of scientific knowledge, disaster management protocols and effective strategies; the enthusiasm gets diluted when it comes to actual services rendered on the spot. Does it mean the downward trend in concern for humanitarian values towards our fellow brethren in case of need or we are only meant for lip sympathy. We need to have good efforts to help those who are in great need. I appeal to you all again to rise to the occasion and please use the immense generosity in your kind hearts to support Academy's efforts.

RK Agarwal,
President, IAP 2008,
RK Hospital,
5/A, Madhuban,
Udaipur 313 001, India.
E-mail: rk_hospital@hotmail.com