

From the horse's mouth

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First of all, let me pray for peace of the departed souls and wish early recovery of all those injured and traumatized from the devastating earthquake that struck Nepal on April 25, 2015. I fully understand the concerns and sentiments expressed by a wide range of people about post disaster management. I subscribe to the views expressed in various public platforms that government alone cannot respond to this scale of devastation. I am going to share my views about two issues here: role of civil servants in disaster management and Prime Minister's relief fund.

I admit that we didn't have capability and preparedness to handle a disaster of such magnitude. Even if we did, we would not be able to maintain that scale of resources, all the time, in anticipation of such disaster.

Many countries have a separate search and specialized disaster management organization. They have trained search and rescue operators. Such organizations are mandated to respond to post disaster management as well. We have also felt it necessary to have a specialized body of this sort. A draft bill to set up a similar Disaster Management Authority was submitted to the earlier legislature parliament but it was returned after the dissolution of the parliament. Nepal is one of the disaster-prone countries. The search and rescue team under such specialized body is important also from this perspective. But until now, except for the units in Nepal army, Nepal Police and Armed Police Force, there is no other government mechanism for search and rescue and post-disaster management.

At present, Ministry of Home Affairs is mandated to carry out disaster management related activities through a committee chaired by the Home Minister. As per Daibi Prakop Uddhwar Ain, 2039, a command centre in the capital and districts affected by disaster has to be set up for search and rescue operation immediately. This time, command centers at the central level under the secretary of Ministry of Home Affairs and in districts under Chief District Officers were established within two hours of the first earthquake on April 25. The primary responsibility of the State is to save lives. For that, trained security personnel were deployed and helicopters sent for search and rescue operations in all the affected districts immediately.

Central Disaster Relief Committee meeting followed by the meeting of secretaries took place on the same afternoon and it took more than a dozen important decisions to mobilize resources for search and rescue. On the same day, all agencies dealing with essential services like communication, power, road, water supply and transportation, etc. were asked to run 24/7. Water supply was a bit sluggish, as were transportation and power service. The delay in resuming road maintenance and water supply was due to the unavailability of many skilled operators who were themselves victims of the disaster. On the other hand, the communication sector was among the quick respondents.

Many public servants resumed their service, risking their lives, even amidst repeated aftershocks. An electrical worker fell off a pole in Kathmandu while repairing transmission line due to an aftershock. But major road blockades were cleared by Sunday evening, power in many places in Kathmandu Valley had resumed by that time, and communication improved a lot. Around 22,500 public servants, 65,000 army personnel, 45,000 police and 25,000 Armed Police Force were at work by Sunday afternoon.

In the absence of elected representatives, our village development committees have been run by junior level staff for the last 13 years. The district level government mechanism was also not prepared for a disaster of such magnitude, although small scale disaster preparedness was in place. Buildings of District Administration Offices and hospitals were damaged but they resumed services immediately and coordinated search and rescue operations in districts. The other task of civil servants was to collect preliminary data on damages for relief work and planning purposes. This was accomplished within a week despite our time and terrain constraints. Now, we have rough data from the VDCs about the number of affected households, schools and health posts that collapsed as well as public utilities that were damaged.

The challenge before us is to deliver relief materials promptly, equitably and to collect data for long-term planning. Recently, we have deployed about 1,800 officers in 14 affected districts, along with an 11-member team including doctors and engineers for each VDC. This team will help control post disaster epidemic, collect data of losses, distribute relief materials and prepare physical plan. We are also supporting the Chief District Officers who have been overstretched due to the devastating earthquake. A decision was taken by the committee of secretaries to send secretaries at the district level and joint secretaries in each constituency on the third day of the disaster. Teams led by secretaries at the district level and joint secretaries in each constituency were deputed on the fourth day of the disaster. This is the highest-level deployment ever at the local level. As of today, altogether 56 joint secretaries and 14 secretaries are mobilized for this.

Search and rescue operations wouldn't have been effective without civil servants' support. This task was carried out with utmost care and full support. Equally importantly, civil servants were deputed in health sector. Search and rescue operations needed to focus on treating the injured and saving lives. When hospitals were flooded by the injured, public officials had to undertake treatments, ensure doctors, medicine and other supplies and provide all support services in no time to the hospitals. This duty was carried out by limited number of people working overtime. Since such duty could not be assigned to anyone else, these functions were carried out (and will continue to be carried out) by the existing staff. Even in many developed countries, restoring services of public utilities during emergency might take longer than what we have achieved. Our public servants were involved in search, rescue, treatment and maintenance of public utilities. Their work is commendable.

We got a shocking response from transport operators when we requested them to resume services. They refused since they would have no passengers on their way back to Kathmandu. Few entrepreneurs also charged high transport fares from already victimized and traumatized public. Transport entrepreneurs' apathy to the trouble of commoners after earthquake was a shocking phenomenon in a civilized society. There was similar response from the suppliers/manufacturers of essential services. People working there could not demonstrate magnanimity in these troubled times. Such behavior of essential service providers would cause mental and emotional damage to the society in troubled time. In the post disaster scenario, if the people dealing with essential services aim at deceiving the already traumatized commoners, the economic and cultural damage to the society would be unimaginable. In this connection, HISSAN, PABSON and NPABSON deserve praise for their complementary bus services in the time of need. They helped around 8,000 people to travel free of cost to Itahari and Butwal.

Even after facing this great tragedy some people were engaged in self-serving activities. Essential service providers, almost all, were out of business in

Kathmandu after April 25 demanding water, tents, transportation and other essentials services from the government. How a poor government can supply all those services without their help? One could have helped police or local administration to maintain law and order during the difficult times so that the morale would be boosted up.

A disaster of this scale can sometimes be a 'blessing in disguise' by bringing people together, reinforcing national unity, promoting goodwill and harmony among societies enhancing feelings of nationality. If we fail to consolidate national psyche developed in troubled times, we may fall in a permanent trap of hatred and antagonism. Haiti is a glaring example of such negative consequences. Nepal's geopolitics warrants extreme care and tactful handling of such situations.

We need cooperation, understanding and support of people from all walks of life. The disaster of this magnitude calls for a response where the hands (and minds) of 30 million Nepalis are joined together. It is a time for everyone to introspect: can he/she fill the missing gaps in our response and delivery mechanisms? Government never bars anyone from contributing. We cannot imagine a situation whereby any NGO, CBO, Corporate House or individual is discouraged from reaching out to the victims. They do not need any permission. They can go to affected regions with any amount and any quantity of relief materials. They can contribute individually or institutionally. But they have to ensure that individual efforts are coordinated, the limited relief materials reach the needy and there is no overlap.

We have requested every individual and organization to coordinate with CDOs at district level. One can help CDOs to make sure relief materials reach the needy. There have been false media reports about the government trying to control individual efforts, barring private sector's efforts, etc. Some bloggers used derogatory words against the government. This is not in keeping with the norms of a civilized society. NPC chairman Govind Raj Pokharel, Member Swarnim Wagle, and the Secretary at Prime Minister's Office have already elaborated on this and Nepal Rastra Bank has also come out with a clarification. The PM's Fund is used in relief and rescue. The major contributor of this fund is the Government itself. A separate window is created to ensure quick release of fund in case of emergency without any hassles under present budgetary system. The record from the past several years proves that a ninety five percent of the contribution is from government's treasury. This goes through three channels and is fully accounted for and audited by Auditor General and is scrutinized by the CIAA in case of discrepancies.

But we believe that no one can collect donations in the name of disaster from general public without prior government approval. This is the law of the land. Every learned citizen should abide by this. Citizens have every right to criticize government but they should not bypass the government mechanism. The government's capability to maintain law and order is limited in crisis situation. A culture of breaching law makes everyone vulnerable and can be victimized of lawlessness anytime anywhere.

Public servants are the ones who keep law and order, maintain public utilities and ensure fairness and equity. If the people of social and political stature derogate, demoralize, haggle with and try to use public officials for petty/personal or institutional benefit, the efficiency of this moderately operating system will be affected. Most importantly, the consequences will not be in our interest.

The present situation is not a normal one. Some of you have lauded foreign workers while underrating national response. This is not done. Glorifying outsiders or non-governmental sector and belittling national system only strengthens outsiders and weakens the country. Such divided mentality and a culture of blaming each other also undermine our efforts and efficiency. If you mistrust your elected government, undermine the national system and its ability to respond, it breeds frustration among those who are giving their all to help those in need.

This is a time to show solidarity with the government. Let us make government system strong and capable by joining hands with it, and making it accountable. Your cooperation will strengthen national capability which in turn will strengthen the country's ability to fight unholy intentions and incidents. With the help of civil society, learned people and private sector working together, the government can hope to ensure equitable distribution. Otherwise, the powerful will continue to grab more and more, at the cost of the deprived.

Even after such a big tragedy some people have been engaged in self-serving activities. People were in the open areas of Kathmandu in the first week after the quake, demanding water, tents, transportation and other services. How could a poor government supply all those services without people's help? One could have helped police or local administration maintain law and order during the difficult times so that their moral would be boosted.

The government requests all fellow countrymen to collectively respond to this humanitarian crisis. United we stand; divided we fall. With a stronger government, our national capabilities to deal with foreigners will be strengthened. This is our elected government; we have no choice but to make it more resilient, efficient and capable. If we join hands, it becomes more capable. If we don't, it becomes weak and the resulting vacuum will be occupied by someone else. This will neither be in your interest, nor mine, nor in the interest of our beloved country.

- See more at: <http://myrepublica.com/opinion/item/20641-from-the-horse-s-mouth.html#sthash.UMViR2UC.dpuf>