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Subject: Orissa cyclone--- a write up  
Date sent: Wed, 1 Dec 1999 21:34:35 +0530

Hi

The attachment appeared as an "opinion" in the last issue of Outlook magazine.

Regards

unni

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OPINION  
After the Act of God

"...physical catastrophes have their inevitable and exclusive origin in certain combinations of physical facts." - Rabindranath Tagore

By UNNIKRIISHNAN P.V.

India is one of the world's major theatres of disasters-natural and human-made-faring the worst even in disease-prone, poverty-stricken South Asia. It offers a classic, if numbing case-study on the nexus between nature, poverty and criminally bad policy. Disasters occur here on a colossal scale. On average, they affect over 56 million people every year and kill 5,063. The average economic loss is an estimated \$1,646 billion a year. Floods hit over 11.2 per cent of India's total area. About 28 per cent of the total cultivable area is drought-prone. Of the 7,516-km coastline, high-velocity killer cyclones pummel the east-coast states of Orissa and Andhra Pradesh frequently. The Himalayan region and the Deccan plateau sit on a seismic tinderbox.

Human-made disasters too aren't rare here. Communal and caste riots pepper the country. India has 30 million people displaced within the country as a result of riots, militancy, disasters and, ironically, development projects. Conflicts in the neighbourhood have offloaded 240,000 refugees on us.

Those who face the risk must have a role in evolving a disaster policy. That will yield an informed, alert populace.

It's a truism, but the poor suffer the most. Modern studies of disaster, conflict and subsequent forced migration stress that more than chance, it's socio-political factors that push a section of people to always bear the albatross. The Human Development Report, '98, noted: "The poor are forced to deplete resources to survive; this degradation of the environment further impoverishes them. When this downward spiral becomes extreme, they are

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forced to move to ecologically fragile lands." Half of the world's poorest-over 500 million-live on marginal lands, drought-smacked uplands, flood-prone deltas and right at the edge of storm-subject seas.

The government's duty to respond scientifically has been observed more in the breach. The UN's International Decade for Natural Disasters Reduction did spawn some efforts. Like, a multi-crore plan to install modern radar along the east coast to predict and track cyclones. Such initiative often fails to reach its full potential as India still has no comprehensive disaster management policy.

The key agency for such emergencies is the agriculture ministry's Natural Disaster Management Division. The alacrity and extent of its response is often dictated by the media and the state's clout and ability to put pressure. A Delhi-centric bureaucracy is also inevitably infected with a "going by the book" attitude. It calculates losses in terms of cropland and cattle, often ignoring the loss of life-sustaining systems such as commons, mangroves or fishing fields.

Human-made disasters like riots and refugee crises are handled by the home ministry. Often, 'law and order' concerns outweigh humanitarian ones. The psycho-social impact, a worldwide concern since the '70s, has yet to find a place in the official lexicon here.

It's not enough to wonder despairingly why relief operations often miss the target. The crux is, no amount of relief can automatically console a traumatised human being. It takes psychological and social interventions. Again, the 'Contingency Action Plan for Natural Calamities', the government's blueprint, is reactive in essence. It emphasises relief, not reduction. This flies in the face of global trends, marked by a radical shift towards preparedness. The evolution of opinion here is still flawed and full of gaps. The obvious ones:

- Absence of an informed debate/policy at all levels;
- Absence of focused documentation, social action research and capacity-building programmes;
- Lack of coordination within government and between government and civil society;
- Lack of attention from the media, legislators, policy-makers.

The objective of any disaster policy should be to shift relief and rehabilitation to a development mode, involving the affected communities as stakeholders. A multi-sectoral approach, involving the government, NGOS, academics, media and the affected communities, is slowly gaining currency in some parts of India.

Preparedness is most effective when built into the process of local-level development planning and implementation. This way, in the long run, disaster mitigation can be effected at minimal cost. Simply put, it calls for carefully-planned road and rail tracks that do not block drainage, flood-proof bridges, community buildings, quake-proof housing etc. The expenditure would, over time, more than compensate itself in human and material terms.

Understanding the inter-linkages of disasters is crucial. An ethnic clash and forced migration may lead to an epidemic. Drought can lead to prolonged malnutrition, especially among children. Cross-studies must have an inclusive approach. Those who face the risk must have a role in the evolution of policy. It must be based on their experiences and needs, rather than be thrust top down. For community preparedness to be in place, people must have access to information on disaster-prone areas, industries and activities in their habitat. The National Human Rights Commission can monitor to what extent the rights of affected people (and disaster-prone communities) are protected by government and ngo interventions.

An overall development policy incorporating disaster response entails drastic changes in several related policies. Insurance and welfare schemes have to be sensitive to felt needs and include vulnerable sections, like fisherfolk in cyclone-prone areas. A 'disaster risk audit' is highly recommended. Open disaster-impact studies should be mandatory before mega-projects are commissioned.

In India, community-based institutions have always played a pivotal role in rescue/relief activities. The challenge is to acknowledge and channelise such initiatives. Local "rapid rescue and response forces" involving community, panchayat, government and military personnel are in vogue in some cyclone-prone Andhra villages.

An effective early warning system, supported by a communications strategy through radio, TV and other media has to be developed. Fisherfolk in areas of Andhra Pradesh have begun to go to sea with radio and other systems. An enlightened population can preclude both panic responses and passive acceptance. As India hurtles from disaster to mega-disaster, the key challenge is to empower the vulnerable. First, it must be recognised that humanitarian assistance is a right of the affected communities, not an act of charity.

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