

Thousands of Indian cyclone survivors at risk due to official indifference

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18 November 1999

Weeks after the October 29 super cyclone struck coastal areas of the east Indian state of Orissa, the Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP)-led central government and Congress (I) State government have failed to mobilise necessary relief resources. This indifference toward the plight of survivors has left tens of thousands at risk.

As of November 12, the official death toll from the cyclone had reached 9,392, with most affected district, Jagatsinghpur, reporting 8,119 deaths. With relief workers believing that over 8,000 people are still missing in Jagatsinghpur alone, it is feared the final toll may reach 20,000.

At least 200,000 survivors in 350 villages in the Ersama area of Jagatsinghpur are under grave threat of disease due to the contamination of their drinking water by decomposing human and animal corpses and salination. A government official in the area said that there could be as many as 4,000 bodies still unburied. With heavy machinery required to dig mass graves unable to reach the area, the only way of overcoming the risk of epidemics would have been evacuation. This was ruled out on financial and logistical grounds by the Congress-controlled Orissa state government on November 9. Revenue Minister Jagannath Patnaik stated: "Where will we house the people, even if temporarily?"

In an attempt to placate fears, State Health Secretary, Meena Gupta, told the media that there were no epidemics and large stocks of medicines were available. On November 10, however, state government officials admitted that 2,375 cases of gastroenteritis had been reported with 278 resulting deaths. Non-government relief workers estimate that across all the affected areas at least 100,000 people are sick with gastroenteritis and cholera symptoms, and that over 1.4 million people are

drinking contaminated water.

As well as leaving people exposed to disease, there are reports of severe inadequacies in the government relief measures. According to sources in Bhubaneswar, the state capital, at least 500 tons of rice is needed daily to feed the estimated 11 million cyclone victims. The State government has said it has the capacity to provide only 200 to 250 tons. Because of this situation, district authorities have been instructed to reduce either the amount of food given to each person or the distribution frequency of relief.

Top officials handling the relief works have reported that other essential items, such as candles, matchboxes, blankets and polythene sheets, were also in short supply. The special relief commissioner D.N. Padhi has complained about "logistical problems", including truck availability, as factors affecting the dispatch of relief to affected areas. Some of the affected areas are inaccessible by road due to continued flooding.

Relief efforts are also being hampered by bureaucratic restrictions imposed by State government authorities. While cyclone victims were starving in far away villages, hundreds of loaded trucks were waiting at Kalinga stadium in Bhubaneswar for permission to move into affected areas. Ganesh Mahakud from Balugaon in Puri district told reporters: "I have been waiting desperately for the last two days just to get permission to distribute the relief material. But there is nobody to guide me."

The response of the central government to the alarming situation in Orissa has not been fundamentally different from their state counterparts. It was not until November 10, twelve days after the cyclone and amidst the criticisms of the central government for its inaction, that Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee appointed "a high-powered task force", headed by Defence Minister

George Fernandes, “to direct and coordinate” all central rescue, relief and rehabilitation measures.

In announcing the task force constitution, a Defence Ministry official admitted: “A proper assessment of the cyclone is still to be carried out and the same is true for the number of casualties, relief measures and rehabilitation programs.” According to Fernandes, the task force, which has been asked to make a damage assessment, will not submit an interim report until November 25, a full month after the cyclone.

The October 29 cyclone was not the first to wreak serious destruction to Orissa. In 1971, a major cyclone claimed over 10,000 lives. Speaking at a news conference in Bhubaneswar on November 12, Fernandes admitted that the government had not taken the necessary steps to prepare the area for another cyclone: “We certainly cannot prevent a cyclone from coming but the magnitude of the destruction can be contained with careful planning... We can have, for instance, cyclone-proof houses and bunds and dykes to check the flow of flood waters.”

The stark contrast between the incapacity of the Indian state to mobilise resources for the cyclone victims and the massive military mobilisation during the recent clash with Pakistan over control of the Kargil area of Kashmir has been noted in India.

On November 5, the *Times of India* commented: “During Kargil, crores of rupees were collected by corporations, government bodies, political parties, overseas Indians and common citizens so that the families of those killed in action could be well provided for.”

“In the case of the Orissa cyclone, our political class seems paralyzed by apathy and lack of leadership. The average citizen is more concerned—indeed, there are few in this country who can remain unmoved by the appalling conditions the Oriyas [people in Orissa] are enduring—but official India seems reluctant to enlist his or her support. For there will be no ‘Kargil factor’ that any party or politician can benefit from, no jingoism that can be ignited to light victory lamps at election time.”



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