

Mounting criticism of the Indian government as earthquake toll rises

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6 February 2001

As the toll of death and destruction continues to mount following the devastating earthquake in western India on January 26, there is growing public criticism of the shoddy construction that caused widespread building collapses and of the inadequacy of government rescue and relief efforts.

Last Sunday, the official figures stood at 16,435 dead and 66,758 injured. Authorities acknowledge that many more bodies are likely to be found as excavation continues in Ahmadabad, the commercial capital of Gujarat, as well as major towns such as Bhuj, Anjar and Bhachau and outlying villages. Estimates of the number of dead vary from 35,000 to 100,000.

More than a week after the quake many survivors still lack shelter and sleep outside in the cold. Red Cross official Dr. Richard Munz commented on the situation last weekend in Bhuj, the worst hit town: "We found destroyed villages and destroyed houses, and many people sleeping on the streets without any tents, and without any blankets." In Anjar, the second hardest hit, survivors criticised the lack of help. "How long can we keep living outside? We need immediate help. The government should realise that in this country a house is made by a man's life-long earnings," said Mohammed Hassan.

The situation in the villages is even more desperate. An article in the *Hindustan Times* on February 5 described the homeless near the town of Khavda without any food, tents, blankets or emergency supplies: "[N]ot a single official or politician has visited the 25 villages around Khavda, ever since the quake razed every house in the region leaving 100 dead and over 25,000 homeless. Relief supplies stop at Bhuj. Except for the army, which has set up a camp hospital, Khavda and its mass tragedy do not exist for the government and the rest of the world."

The International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies last week airlifted a mobile field hospital to Bhuj and some relief equipment but said that it needed large quantities of tarpaulins, plastic sheeting, blankets and warm clothing, cholera kits, high-protein biscuits and water purification supplies. Spokesman Denis McClean said: "Inevitably, the needs on the ground will overwhelm our capacity to respond to them."

Tens of thousands of refugees have flooded out of Kutch, the

district at the centre of the quake, as a result of aftershocks, chronic food and water shortages, lack of shelter and the outbreak of looting. The aid has not only been limited but also uncoordinated. It reportedly took seven hours to convene a top-level disaster management committee in New Delhi and longer to begin to dispatch aid. Rescue teams wasted time waiting to be told where to go. Relief supplies—tents, blankets, food and medicine—remained piled on runways for lack of transport or a clear picture of where aid is most needed.

Visiting dignitaries took precedence over aid and rescue teams. According to the *New York Times*, "When Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee visited Bhuj several days after the quake, roads used by rescue teams were closed and emergency flights were suspended for several hours. Indian newspapers reported that officials overseeing rescue operations were pulled off the job, also for hours, so they could be at the airport for Mr Vajpayee's red-carpet arrival."

The *Frontline* magazine described the chaos: "Consider this as an example of disaster-preparedness: it took the Gujarat government two days to set up a functional control room in the state capital, Gandhinagar, which was untouched by the earthquake, and to get satellite telephones to Bhuj ... No clear protocols appeared to be in place, and the government was forced to wait for additional earthmoving equipment to come from Udaipur, Rajasthan. Large bulldozers could not reach many downtown areas, and no special provision had been made for smaller models... Any disaster plan for an earthquake, for example, should anticipate that hospitals will be destroyed, and have defined measures to cope with such a situation."

Prime Minister Vajpayee tacitly admitted that his government was unprepared, telling reporters in Ahmadabad: "The country is not ready to face such disaster." He has announced the introduction of a 2 percent special surcharge in the next budget to raise \$US238 million to help pay for reconstruction. Another 5 billion rupee (\$108 million) is to come from the Calamity Relief Fund and 200 million rupee (\$4 million) from the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund. But these figures are dwarfed by the estimated \$4.5 billion needed for relief and reconstruction.

In an attempt to deflect criticism, Vajpayee convened an all-party meeting in New Delhi last weekend to discuss the

situation in Gujarat. With the support of the opposition parties—Congress (I) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist)—the meeting pledged to set up another committee, comprised of the leaders of the major parties as well as experts, to deal with future disasters.

The Gujarat state government is also under fire. The *Hindustan Times* posed the question bluntly in an article entitled “Will [Gujarat Chief Minister] Keshubhai Patel survive this earthquake?” The article blasted the government for having displayed “a total lack of grip over its administrative machinery in the three disasters that hit the state—the cyclone of June 1998, the drought of 2000 and earthquake now.”

The article described the “government's nexus with the builders' lobby”: “The builders' lobby had duped people with substandard construction, which is the main reason why most of the houses collapsed. People will still remember how the BJP [Patel] administration had given in to the builders to promulgate an ordinance regularising illegal constructions in the six municipal corporations of the state. It was only a fortnight ago that the government had decided to allow builders to construct two additional floors above the permissible 10-storey limit.”

Shoddy construction is responsible for most of the deaths. Even though Kutch is one of the highest earthquake risk areas in the world, most of the state's buildings do not meet earthquake standards. While the state's nuclear power plants and dams, which are built to withstand major earthquakes, survived unscathed, large areas of domestic housing were completely or partially destroyed.

According to a *New York Times* article, Indian authorities disregarded the findings and recommendations of a 1998 study by a government-appointed expert group on natural disaster prevention. The three-volume study bluntly stated that “Disasters don't kill people, buildings do” and “The number of unsafe buildings is increasing every day”.

T.N. Gupta, head of the study group of eminent engineers and scientists, said the committee had advocated widespread “retrofitting” to strengthen existing buildings, as well as techniques to construct new ones. Using sound building methods could make a huge difference during a quake. “We had an earthquake in Latur that killed 9,700 people,” he said. “An earthquake of the same intensity in California killed five.”

Ben Wisner, a member of the International Geographical Union's group on hazards and risks, who is familiar with Ahmadabad, said: “On the one hand, there is an ageing building stock and lack of maintenance. On the other, some new structures may well have been built without proper adherence to codes and not properly inspected. ... It is unlikely the percentage of buildings that are earthquake-resistant is any higher in Ahmadabad or Bhuj than it is in Delhi.” He condemned the failure to take measures at the hospital in Bhuj: “Authorities know how to protect hospitals... There is no reason why the civil hospital in Bhuj needed to collapse on

patients and staff.”

Bhuj Municipal Corporation president Kirit Sompura openly admitted: “We are selfish people. As long as it did not affect us, we kept sanctioning building plans.” Over the last two years the corporation sanctioned buildings of up to eight floors without any checks or inspections. According to Indian building standards, in seismic-prone zones like Bhuj, the reinforced concrete content of buildings has to be four and a half times higher than elsewhere. “But, it is costly, and most builders take short cuts since authorities don't insist on compliance,” a former mayor of Bhuj told the *Express*.

In Ahmadabad, criminal complaints have been lodged against 21 construction companies. “Ahmadabad's story is one shared by nearly every booming city in India, where millions of walls are high on sand and low on cement,” an Associated Press report commented. “Bribing officials to overlook poor workmanship or code violations is not uncommon, and officials are often unqualified to carry out inspections... A survey of engineers after the earthquake showed that in many cases, the pillars were not secured to foundations with steel reinforcements, as the national code requires. When the earthquake struck, many such buildings swayed and collapsed under their own weight or because walls made of adulterated cement buckled.”

Information Technology Minister Pramod Mahajan said the government had learned the lessons of the Gujarat quake and promised to quickly bring in legislation to make it mandatory for all buildings to be quake-proof before being occupied. Similar statements have often been made by the Vajpayee and previous governments to quell the widespread anger generated by the needless loss of life when floods, typhoons and other disasters hit India. As in every other aspect of life in India, it is the profit requirements of business—not the social needs of the masses—that determine government priorities and policies before, during and after such calamities.



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