

N K SINGH

Sunday, January 16, 2005

FROM THE RINGSIDE

Globalising disaster management

In an earlier column on New Year resolutions, I had outlined my wishlist. Topping the agenda was the constitution of a national disaster management authority. It is gratifying that this proposal, which was under consideration for long has, at last, reached finality. We believe an authority would be set up and a Bill introduced in Parliament. Given its broader social and human dimension, there should be wider public discussion before the government finalise the proposal or the provisions of the Bill.

Even optimists would agree that the world is becoming more prone to natural disasters. The consequences of global warming, relentless use of depleting fossil fuel have serious ecological consequences, resulting in rising sea levels and deterioration of Arctic/ Antarctic ice shelves. Changing jet streams could mean unusual storms and hurricanes hitting new areas with consequences for orderly habitation or pursuit of normal agricultural and other activities. We are entering a period in which our environment would be changing rapidly and there may be unexpected natural events which may surprise us. Equally, we are vulnerable to man-made disasters where leadership and social cohesion breaks down and humans regress to a Hobbesian state “where life is nasty, brutish and short”. Failed States that no longer have coherence of government could become more common. Natural and man-made disasters could converge. Environmental studies — desertification, crop failures, flooding contribute to refugee movements which strain tacit social agreements and peace between ethnic, income and other divisions.

Whatever be the differences and perceptions on UN’s capabilities, the world sees UN as the only legitimate representative of the international community without which concerted actions by nations may be difficult or mired in distracting controversies. Is the framework of international partnership optimally designed to meet major man-made and natural disasters? There are three clear areas of deficiency;

First, the adequacy of a legal framework to deal with calamities of this nature. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies had initiated an International Disaster Response Law (IDRL) project with the objective of promoting IDRL mechanisms to facilitate effective humanitarian assistance. Such a mechanism has been on the agenda for very long but a comprehensive treaty or legal framework has eluded success.

In 2001, Prof. Horst Fischer of the Ruhr-University, Bochum was commissioned by the Red Cross to examine the adequacy of international treaties. Bilateral treaties between international organisations exceed 100 but these have not been woven together in a multilateral framework. The Agreement on Temporary Importation, Free of Duty, of Medical Surgical and Laboratory Equipment in 1960 also does not specifically apply to situations of natural disasters. The two other multilateral

treaties are: the 1986 Convention on Assistance in the case of a nuclear accident or radiological emergency and the Tampere Convention on Telecommunications Resources for Disaster Mitigation of 1998. The subsisting infirmities cover a wide gamut of issues ranging from entry provisions, amenities to relief personnel, treatment of consignment, work permits, application of customs tariff and distribution of relief material to name a few.

Based on extensive consultations, the Red Cross has evolved a framework for the conclusion of an International Disaster Response Law which would be adequate to deal with major disasters. The tsunami disaster must act as a wake-up call; nations acting in concert must subscribe to a multilateral framework.

Second, the specialised body of the UN namely, Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) based in Geneva and New York, acting as a Secretariat for co-ordinating multi-pronged action, was strengthened in 1991. The earlier Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC) has now the status of an Under Secretary General. There is also an Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP).

Nonetheless, OCHA suffers from serious handicaps. It has a budget of just 84 millions dollars of which only 11 per cent, namely 10 million, comes from UN's regular budget and the balance from extra-budgetary resources. This cripples long-term planning and pursuit of sustained activity. There is a multiplicity of agencies within the UN family and, given OCHA's present status, is unable even in times of emergency to override the jealously-guarded turf of other organisations like the UNDP, WHO, UNICEF to name a few. Inter-agency coordination remains a serious handicap.

Third, within the UN family, all specialised bodies have developed expertise on disaster mitigation namely, to deal with the consequences of the tragedy for relief, rehabilitation and humanitarian efforts. The tsunami tragedy poignantly brings out the need for disaster prevention, surveillance and advance warning systems. The UN must develop new capabilities within a cohesive framework on advance warning systems, tracking unusual events, significant climatic changes or noticeable seismological activity. Technology offers as never before ability to collect, collate and disseminate information vital to human life.

The forthcoming International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) conference to be held in Kobe, Japan later this month will be an opportunity to consider some of these issues. India, acting in concert with other countries, must seek a special session of UNGA on disaster management which could be held immediately prior to the annual session in September. This special session could inter alia consider:

- A comprehensive approach on natural and man-made disasters.
- Steps on early conclusion of a multilateral framework on International Disaster Response Law.
- Strengthening of OCHA — either its conversion into an inter-governmental body or commission with the mandate and clout to overcome co-ordination handicaps.
- Provision of adequate and predictable financial resources to fulfill its enlarged

mandate.

- Extend the ability of UN from disaster mitigation to disaster prevention.

The adequacy of financial resources is a tricky subject. The nature of disaster response is that there may be long period of idleness punctuated by disasters. The organisation needs to have some kind of a human resource structure that allows its members to swell and contract (or find other jobs quickly). Perhaps this means maintaining an international ready reserve. To augment income, this body could act as consultants to insurance companies during the waiting period, advising insurance companies, long-term investors and people seeking information on long-term risks. Flexible contracting procedures may be necessary.

Innovative organisational structure is necessary in an area where the unknowns clearly exceed the known.

The international community must wake up to these new challenges. This is the least mankind can do in the wake of the present tsunami disasters. We owe this to ourselves and to future generations. India must play a leadership role.

Write to nksingh@expressindia.com