

Unlikely Nuclear Disaster: Likely Preparedness Planning

In the popular perception, nuclear disaster seems unlikely in India. And all the care that can be taken is taken by the authorities and scientists. But should that stop the citizens of India from thinking ahead for our need for preparedness planning for an unlikely nuclear disaster?

Though the National Disaster Management Plan (NDMP) of India, first ever national plan that is in compliance with global Sendai Framework, highlights the nuclear disaster, in fact the spirit of the plan does, indeed, call for adding value to each safety and security measure enlisted.

In fact a nuclear disaster is not a local or regional event but, in fact, a national security challenge. Therefore, the wider the preparedness for possible response, the safer the citizens of India will be.

What may be a good next step is developing policies and managing processes for nuclear disasters. National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) of India has developed National Disaster Management Guidelines for Management of Nuclear and Radiological Emergencies in February 2009 under the Chairmanship of Shri B. Bhattacharji.

One way to initiate such preparedness planning is to develop an "area based" approach as was recently discussed at Urban Humanitarian Response Symposium organized by Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in UK. Though urban is a recent focus, the

idea of an area based approach is not new. UNDP has promoted this approach for years, including for tsunami recovery in Sri Lanka in 2005 to 2007. In India, since 1989 Ministry of Agriculture, Department of Rural Development, Government of India has taken up Area Development Programmes for the Eighth Five Year Plan (1992-1997). What is needed is a thoughtful transplant of the approach from the development sector to the disaster risk reduction sector.

For the existing safety procedures and security rules for nuclear disaster, what will be useful is third-party safety and preparedness verification and security compliance that is regular and action oriented. This is not to say that similar efforts have not been taken up at the nuclear sites in India. What will add value is a broader base for such actions and preparedness.

In fact such preparedness also needs to factor in the possible impact on changing climate and ways to reduce impact of nuclear disaster on India's climate. There are hardly any global studies on the impact of nuclear disasters on environment to draw lessons for action in India.

The role of media in facilitating such preparedness processes is central. The media needs to deepen the trust of Indian citizens in India's multi-cultural democracy and what is now polyphonic media. Trust—as one of the most trusted journalist in India, Mrinal Pande has recently said in Ahmedabad—springs out of "fruitful two way communication" on nuclear preparedness planning.

A concept which may be especially useful for India to explore for an unlikely nuclear disaster is "Cooperative Preparedness". Such cooperation, across authorities, levels, and states may seem to be a new federalist activity but at Sendai in Japan, Home Minister of India Shri Rajnath Singh has called for "Collaborative Federalism" for disaster risk reduction as a foundation for India's development activities.

The support of over 122 states to the Treaty on Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons is a reality. May be time has come for India to lead many of these nations in planning preparedness for a nuclear disaster.

It will be very unfortunate to let economic growth achieved with nuclear establishments—total 22 nuclear reactors in operations in 8 nuclear power plants having a total installed capacity of 6780 MW—to be lost by a nuclear disaster in India.

The Department of Atomic Energy (DAE), nodal agency for radiological emergency in India, runs Crisis Management Group (CMG) since 1987 and each site has context specific plans under jurisdiction of local District Administration.

Homi Bhabha and Vikram Sarabhai, leaders of India's nuclear development, will only be too happy to see India take such preparedness initiatives at district level.

The Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986 is not too far in time to be forgotten by Indian citizens. ■

- AIDMI Team