

# Human tragedy — unattended

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HYDERABAD: The massive earthquake that hit the desert belt states of Gujarat in India and Sindh in Pakistan has multiplied human miseries on both sides. On our side the quake hit the areas comprising Badin and Thar districts, and destroyed 45,000 houses, rendering homeless an equal number of families.

What is painful is the fact that those who have been affected are still crying for help. Unlike in the neighbouring state where the people and the government did their utmost to help the quake victims, in our part nothing substantial was done to heal the wounds of the people who have been passing nights under the open sky since day one, hounded by aftershocks that still continue.

Not only this, arable land, measuring thousands of acres, has been converted into swampland. The quake-hit areas lie 12 to 30 miles from the coal mines of Rann of Kutch, the epicentre of the earthquake, and the quagmires of the Arabian Sea.

Thousands of acres with standing crops were turned into swampland, being flooded by the brackish and saline warm water that had erupted here and there as the earth moved with a loud rumbling on the morning of Jan 26. Fissures have appeared on the ground out of which warm water with bad odour and mud surged, turning the hard soil into quagmire-like soft surface, now unfit for cultivation, for no one knows how many years.

Thus the loss of land losing its productive capacity can be measured in billions of rupees, says Abdul Jabbar Arfani, a landholder and chairman of the Citizens Action Committee, Kadhan.

quakes in 1889 and 1903 had caused a huge loss of lives and property from Shah Bunder in the Thatta district to Weera Wah in the Thar district through Badin.

A vast tract of land was flooded with warm saline water that erupted from the powerful springs created by the movement of the earth with a rumbling sound.

The cyclones in 1883, 1902 and 1999 had swept the whole area each time, sinking boats, blowing trees and razing to the ground thousands of houses and destroying property worth billions of rupees.

Absence of a disaster management plan, lack of coordination between government and non-government agencies and attempts by a few government functionaries to gobble up the relief goods have added to the sufferings of calamity-hit people.

After the May 99 cyclone the then prime minister Nawaz Sharif had sanctioned Rs550 million for the relief and rehabilitation of the affected people but Rs50 million only could reach them thanks to the squabbling over the money by ministers, legislators and bureaucrats.

The people of this part of Pakistan who have not yet recovered from the impact of the May '99 cyclone were surprised by the massive earthquake on Jan 26, but the government had so far thought little of how to provide succour to those reeling under the impact of the latest disaster. Thousands of ill-fed and ill-clad people are still passing their nights under the open sky.

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claim, paid Rs30,000 only to the heirs of the family.

In Kadhan town, 450 houses had collapsed on Jan 26 but the commissioner's office, Hyderabad, has the figure of 380 collapsed or damaged houses.

Moreover roads at many places have developed gaping cracks in the wake of the quake.

Tremors still continue, the last two were felt on March 12 at 5.15am and at 8am in Kadhan, Mithi, Nangarparkar, Chhachhro Islamkot and other towns of Thar and Badin districts.

The population of 200,000 in and around Kadhan is now facing hardships in obtaining food and water needed for their survival.

In another village, Thobho, the top soil has depressed to a depth of four feet, sinking, as a consequence, all 29 houses and forcing the dwellers to abandon the place.

They are now living a mile away along the Indian border. Villagers Mohammad Sadiq Rahmoon, Moosa, Dodo, Malook, Yousuf, Saleem Qasim, Ibrahim and others are witness to the earth moving and creeping under their feet. They are also witness to the earth being rent asunder 250-foot-wide when they quickly ran for safety.

They also recall how black oil-like warm water, with bad odour, was spouting when the quake had struck.

Villagers recall seeing the land cut up to a mile's length and claim this process still continues. These and thousands of other displaced persons are passing sleepless nights in the open.

The shallow wells, the only source of drinking water in

holder and chairman of the Citizens Action Committee, Kadhan.

He says the Kadhan area is in the canal zone but a powerful earthquake can change the whole scenario and turn the area into a desert.

According to an estimate, about one million people, suffering from diarrhoea, acute fever, skin diseases, etc, are anxiously looking for international assistance in the absence of any coordinated government help. In the meantime, disease and starvation stalk the unfortunate people.

The water of shallow wells, the only source of sweet drinking water, have turned saline. The ill-fated people have now started moving to neighbouring districts in search of food and water. Those who have no means at all to move out are at the mercy of nature and the circumstances obtaining there.

Southern districts of Sindh have remained under seismic disturbances. Within 100 years the area has witnessed three massive earthquakes and an equal number of cyclones which had swept and destroyed everything on the surface. The earth-

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The Jan 26 quake claimed its toll up to the Hyderabad city where two children were killed. The worst hit towns were Kadhan in the Badin district and 250 villages around it. In the Thar district the towns of Mithi, Islamkot, Chhachhro, Nangarparkar, Diplo, Umerkot plus 450 other village were affected badly.

But the government so far has not moved in to make its impact and earn a word of thank from the sufferers. In the words of Dr Abdul Ghafoor Memon, about one million people are still reeling under the impact of the earthquake. Allah Bachayo Jamali of Kadhan, a town of 10,000 people, says the recurring aftershocks send people running about in sheer panic.

The Kadhan people are very bitter about the government's indifference towards their sufferings. They claim that the relief commissioner who happened to visit their area did not bother to come out of his car and have a few words with them.

The chief executive, Gen Pervez Musharraf, had announced Rs100,000 for each death and promised rehabilitation but the officials, people

open.

The shallow wells, the only source of drinking water in Thar area, have turned saline forcing the population to migrate in search of food and water to other areas.

The people continue to die in the aftermath of the quake. A teenage girl, Diali, daughter of Shankar, in Tando Ghulam Ali, Badin district, succumbed to her injuries. She was injured on Jan 26.

A woman in Jhudo town died after remaining in a coma for about 20 days. Those who have not been able to move out of the affected areas have no option but to use the brackish water to the peril of their lives.

Such people have been exposed to water-borne diseases, observes a physician of Kadhan. He says that about 50,000 people are suffering from diarrhoea, acute fever, skin diseases and fear of the unknown. He needs a huge quantity of medicines to treat the affected people.

What is urgently needed is temporary housing for 1,000 families, plus a month's ration, including medicines, for them. Dr Abdul Ghafoor Memon, PMA treasurer, has offered free medical treatment by PMA doctors on the availability of medicines.

Every body is worried