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News

Cruel negligence

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From having signs of severe drought we are now at risk of floods. These are two extreme situations but there is one common thread: in both cases the relevant state authorities had no systems in place to pre-empt the impending disaster or set up a preventive system that could safeguard the lives of the people who were vulnerable to these catastrophes.

People started to die of hunger and lack of water in Cholistan and that is when the state agencies began to think of preparing a relief package for them. Similarly, now only after the rains have washed away thousand of houses and killed couple of hundred people, the state agencies have finally put together an ad hoc programme to provide temporary relief to the victims. Clearly, all this does not talk much about our water management system. Nor does it reflect positively on the disaster prevention and management skills of state agencies.

But, the issues raised by the havoc played by the present rains do not stop here. A look at the victims of the present rains brings the slum area issue to the forefront as majority of the victims in the twin cities belonged to such settlements. The death count due to the current rains rests approximately at 250 individuals. Out of these victims, 43 are reported to be from Rawalpindi area while 10 deaths have been reported in Islamabad. Majority of these victims were from the slum areas in the twin cities. Also, more than 2,200 dwellings have been damaged by the rains in these slums.

And what are these slums? Are our public policy managers even aware of that. These are dirty, dingy areas in our big cities where more than 35 percent of the population of a big city

might reside. Studies in Karachi suggest even higher percentage of the population of this

city living in slums. These are places where the poor live. Most of the people from rural areas when migrating to big cities in search of jobs end up finding a shelter in these slums.

Slums vary from one to the other, but none boast of high living standards. Sanitation facilities simply do not exist in most such areas leading to disease and ill health of the residents. Children die of avoidable diseases like cholera. Electricity supply often does not exist. Since, the slums constitute largely the poor population, it is the section of the society that is most vulnerable to other frustrations like unemployment, lack of education, poor health, etc. Finally, when the nature becomes merciless, these are the people most vulnerable as their mud or poorly build houses are least capable of surviving against the heavy rains or high winds.

But, for the state agencies these aspects of the slums are best ignored. State agencies do talk about slums from time to time but the focus of the discussions is very different. The related state agencies are more concerned that many of the people in the slum areas are living on state land and the discussion is centred on how to retrieve this land. The railway authorities have been under much fire from the non-governmental groups for trying to force inhabitants of certain slums to vacate the land owned by the railway authorities without giving any proper compensation. The



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Development Notes

solved the problem. The fact is that a large section of the population of this country is living in extremely poor housing facilities which are detrimental to their health as well as mental well being and the state is not much concerned about the whole issue.

Just for a moment imagine the life of an average victim from the slums of Rawalpindi and Islamabad who died due to these rains. Born in poverty, suffering from malnutrition, vulnerable to various sicknesses due to poor hygienic standards, having poor or no education facilities, facing challenges of earning enough to live, and then one day being swept away by the harsh rains.

Is that the life that even one individual of this country should be leading. Clearly, no. But, the reality is that many citizens of this country are leading exactly this kind of life. And the tragedy is that everyone has become so immune to it that it does not shock anyone any more. 40 percent of the population of this country is living below poverty line. 60 percent has no access to education. Almost, similar number has no access to sanitation facilities, while half of the population has no access to basic health facilities.

But, no we are a proud nation. Proud of our military arsenal, proud of our nuclear weapons, proud of our huge army. National security is of paramount importance for us but not

pressure from the civil society did help prevent some of that action but it by no means

human security. While, the reality is that in the long term a nation has no national security without human security.

But, transfer of resources from military spending to human development is not the only issue, even more critical is the use of resources which are available for development work. Every year the country receives millions of dollars in aid for various human development programmes from international aid agencies and various developed countries but where does all that money go? Every year the government announces billions of rupees for poverty alleviation funds but how come that money yields no success in fight against poverty? It is a matter of lack of commitment on the part of the state agencies responsible for spending that money.

It is high time that the state starts to address the problems confronting the common man. It can get help from the international aid agencies, international NGOs, and local civil society groups to address the needs of the common man. But, it requires the government agencies to first of all be concerned enough and secondly be competent enough to address these issues. Sadly, going by the experiences so far the situation is not very promising.

Lastly, the water problems this year, first in form of drought and now heavy rains should convince the government of the need for investing in building a sound water management system. Floods and droughts do not occur over night. There are means to predict them and reduce some of their negative effects. Surely, the state should look into developing such mechanisms.