

How prepared are we for another earthquake?

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The tremors that shook Ahmedabad and brought down several buildings on the fateful day of January 26, 2001 also exposed our woeful lack of disaster management. A decade after the tremors were first felt, have we learned our lessons?

What will happen if the earth shakes once again? Are we capable of quickly getting to people trapped in the debris? Do we have the equipment to lift heavy chunks of debris to free the victims and above all do we have trained men and women on hand to do the same?

These are questions that merit an answer given the fact that we live in a state that figures in the seismic 4 zone - one which is most vulnerable to earthquakes.

Talking to DNA, Chief Fire Officer, Ahmedabad Fire and Emergency Services (AFES), MF Dastoor said that both the response time and rescue work will be far more effective than what was in 2001 when the earthquake struck.

He said that AFES can operate almost 10 times faster than what it had done during 2001. He said all aspects of a rescue operation that need to be in place for a calamity like an earthquake has been taken care of by the AFES.

This includes getting the latest gadgets, training staff in rescue work and handling equipment, ensuring additional vehicles and quick response among others.

The city, according to him, has the capacity to simultaneously carry out rescue operations in 12 different locations, in case of building collapse.

It should be noted that during the year 2001, the service just had three vehicles and used a rag-tag assortment of equipment for rescue efforts.

"We have 12 different highly equipped vehicles which can take care of all aspects of a rescue operation during an earthquake," Dastoor said.

During 2001, the AFES conducted rescue operation with primitive tools like spades, iron rods and metal cutters. "In 2001, there was no training, no vehicles, no trained staff against 98 buildings that collapsed," he said.

But now the AFES boasts of world-standard equipment including Hydraulic Rescue Tools (HRT), air bags, search cameras and acoustic listening device.



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HRT has the capacity to lift or shift scrap weighing over 16 to 20 tonne, while the air bags can move scrap weighing over 20 to 67 tonne.

A team of 36 AFES members had been trained in Netherlands in using the equipment. They in turn trained the fire brigade staff of different districts of the state.

In a nutshell, the AFES has tried to learn from its past and this time is prepared to face any eventuality. Echoing similar sentiments, joint CEO and Information Commissioner, V Thiruppugazh told *DNA* that the Gujarat State Disaster Management has already trained 6000 engineers and 29,000 masons to construct earthquake resistance buildings. He said that along with Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation, five other corporations of the state have also been provided with emergency search and rescue equipment.

Talking to *DNA*, director, Disaster Mitigation Institute, Mihir Bhatt said that earlier livelihood of the affected people was not made a part of relief policy framework, but now livelihood has become a part of relief policy.

But not everybody is optimistic about the govt agencies ability to effectively handle a disaster of this magnitude.

SK Jain, director, IIT Gandhinagar said that the number of buildings is much higher compared to what we had in 2001. "So even if the quality of buildings improved, the sheer number of buildings means the damage could be more. I feel there is a bit improvement in construction but one needs to study it to see how good or bad it is," said Jain.

He said what we need is not voluntary efforts at better construction practices but strict enforcement of rules for the same.

"We need to have a strict system in place that will not allow construction of any unsafe buildings, perhaps then we can breathe a bit easy. So let us concentrate on improving enforcement on the delivery mechanism," he said.

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