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Nepal's Tragedy

The earthquake that devastated Nepal on April 25 has left behind an untold and terrifying story. The quake that hit Nepal on past Sunday had a magnitude of 7.8 at Richter scale. The quake that was followed by aftershocks has wreaked havoc in terms of immense loss of human lives and by causing tremendous damage to property and infrastructure in Nepal and northern states of India, especially those bordering Nepal. Bangladesh and China have also been affected by it. Many ancient temples and buildings of historical importance, including the UNESCO World Heritage Site, have either collapsed or badly damaged in the aftermath of this earthquake. The death toll in Nepal is already nearing the 5,000-mark and is likely to reach 10,000 when more dead bodies are recovered from the rubble. The casualties have already exceeded 8,000-mark in Nepal alone. Deaths and casualties have been reported in India, China and Bangladesh as well. The U.N. spokesman Farhan Haq, citing Nepalese government figures, said recently in Kathmandu that an estimated 8 million people had been affected by the quake in 39 of Nepal's districts. More than 1.4 million people affected by this devastating earthquake in Nepal are in need of food assistance.

India's response to Nepal's natural calamity has been quick and timely. India lost no time in launching rescue and relief operations by pressing into service nearly two dozen aircraft, including heavy lift planes such as the C130J Hercules and C-17 Globemaster, and hundreds of personnel from the military and National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) under Operation Maitri, making it one of the largest relief efforts mounted by India on foreign soil. Available scientific evidence shows that the entire Himalayan region, especially Nepal, is vulnerable to high intensity earthquakes exceeding 8.0 on the Richter scale which could adversely affect millions of people. Four major earthquakes have already occurred in the Himalayan region — Shillong in 1897 (8.7 on Richter scale); Kangra in 1905 (8); Bihar-Nepal in 1934 (8.3) and Assam-Tibet in 1950 (8.6).

In the aftermath of the quake, Nepal has been faced with a crippling economy and the uphill task of post-quake reconstruction that will further push its economy years back. Nepal is not in a position to fund a major reconstruction effort on its own. Broad estimates show that the economic losses from the quake constitute around 35 per cent of Nepal's gross domestic product. International aid has started pouring into Nepal. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has announced that it will provide a USD \$ 3 million grant to Nepal for immediate relief efforts and up to USD\$200 million for the first phase of rehabilitation.

According to media reports, the United Nations was releasing \$15 million from its central emergency response fund for quake victims of Nepal to allow international humanitarian groups to scale up operations and provide shelter, water, medical supplies and logistical services. Nepal's tourism industry, which is the backbone of Nepalese economy, employing over a million people and accounting for about 8% of the economy, is likely to take a hit in the near term. Broadly speaking, the cost of reconstruction over the next few years will be massive and rebuilding costs could exceed USD\$5 billion. The quake has literally wiped out major buildings in Katmandu and transportation infrastructure across the country has been laid to waste. Observers differ in their views on the task of reconstruction in post-quake Nepal. Some believe that reconstruction after natural disasters can usher in a period of better economic growth, as infrastructure is built back better in developing countries. Nonetheless, others say there is little empirical evidence to support such claims, as any positive impact from aid is negated by destruction of factories, private property and other infrastructure. The present fluid political situation pervading Nepal entails the potential of rendering the task of reconstruction more difficult with a broken political system.

The Nepalese tragedy is a stern warning of the mounting adverse impact of ongoing climate change which calls for joint efforts of the countries located in this part of the Himalayan region to cooperate in the sustainable management of trans-boundary natural resources. These countries should pool together their financial and technical resources to ensure judicious use of natural resources, including water. Specific emphasis needs to be focused on disaster management.

— BK