FEB - 2005

Authored By Prof. Vijay Page – Director, MET Institute of Management

Disaster, and the day after

During the early hours of 26th December 2004, a tragedy struck the southern coast of India. The Tsunami waves that were triggered due to an earthquake (9.2 Richter scale) in the Indonesian region badly hit the Indian coastal region - Nicobar Islands, Pondicherry, Nagapattnam and Kanyakumari. Though the Government of India launched an ambitious rehabilitation package, the damage was already done as the death toll surpassed the 1,50,000 figure.

The disaster brought to fore several heroes who saved many-a-lives. For instance, a young scientist from the National Institute of Oceanography (NIO) on noticing unusual turbidity in the seawater persuaded villagers of the Nicobar Island to walk up the hills, thus saving many from a certain death. Then there was a case of a schoolteacher who on hearing the news of undersea earthquake pleaded the coastal inhabitants to move to the hilltop, and saving the locals. These instances demonstrate the presence of mind on the part of individuals, and rapid decision-making resulting into miraculous results.

As a matter of fact, there was a gap of over two hours between the earthquake and the impact of Tsunami waves on India. During this period, emergency evacuation of the coastal residents could have been easily done, but for want of a rapid disaster action team it wasn't possible. Resultant, the country has lost thousands of lives for lack of a proper warning system. The most important learning for us as a nation is that for our size and the strategic location, our response time and disaster management capabilities do not befit our strategic global position. There is an urgent need to deploy state-of-the-art technology to keep a track of the vast coastal boundaries of our country.

Reflecting on the after effects of the disaster, the President, Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam appealed to the scientists to come up with broad based technology solutions that could offer prior warning of disasters. As of now, the government is contemplating a permanent Disaster Management and monitoring mechanism, which would always be ready with an action plan should the need arise. However, such a group needs to be multi-disciplinary in nature as the inputs form an extremely complicated matrix. The coastal areas can be affected by cyclones while the mountainous Himalayas could face dangers of flash floods and landslides, which can destroy large areas. You also have the threat to locust attacks from the desert regions while health hazards like the SARS outbreak pose another kind of threat. All of these inputs require sophisticated processing and inter-disciplinary approach so as to chart out the road map to national safety. Apart from the infrastructure, such a set up would require strong administrative support to be decisive and effective.

Therefore, it is imperative that the government immediately sets up an independent organization to monitor threats to our survival as a nation and ensure that life and property of every inhabitant is protected from such disasters. This group may be styled as "Strategic Watch and Rapid Action Group" (SWARAG) and may consist of a

representative from each of the departments viz. Three defence services, Meteorological Dept., National Remote Sensing Agency, Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, Indian Space Research Organization, Atomic Energy Commission, Railways, International Airport Authority of India, Centre for Study of Landslides and Avalanches, National Institute of Oceanography, Central Energy Authority, National Cadet Corps, Geological Survey of India, Archeological Survey of India, etc.

One of the main tasks of this organization should be creating awareness among the populace living in the sensitive areas towards disaster management, which will comprise conducting of training programs and safety drills right from the school level. The students would then carry forward these learnings by educating the industry and business sectors as well as every segment of the civil society so as to ensure complete communication network. There are highly successful examples of such network in modern times in countries like Israel and Switzerland where the reaction time to any such disasters is less than 10 minutes. The armed forces especially the airforce of Israel has perfected systems where response time is even less than five minutes. All these systems are carried to the last beneficiary in the society through an intensive interactive training program wherein children and youth participate.

We must therefore develop our system of intense networking throughout the civil society by connecting the mass of youth with the technological excellence and ensure that we are better prepared to meet any future calamities. As the great freedom fighter Mazzini states, **"Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty".**