

Flood-hit human rights

Mohna Ansari

Continuous rainfall since August 10, 2017 triggered floods and landslide in different parts of the country, causing a great loss of human lives and properties. Our natural landscape is full of geographical complexities and rivers. Memories of huge loss of human lives and properties caused by the collapse of Koshi embankment in 2007 is still fresh in our mind. Those from Surkhet to Bardiya affected by floods two years ago could not receive due compensation from the government despite their frequent visit to the offices. Some of them, after they could not receive the compensation, committed suicide. These are fresh examples.

Another recent example is the status of reconstruction after the 2015 earthquake. Whenever we face a disaster, we realise the failure of disaster risk reduction mechanisms. Our proactiveness remains for some days, and we forget again. Due to such negligence, many Nepalis are compelled to lose their lives. Ironically, the state mechanism is yet to become sensitive to this issue. While discussing about the disaster management and preparedness from human rights perspective, we must admit that we are fortunate to survive.

In my recent monitoring visit to flood-affected districts, I found nothing about disaster preparedness. What I found was, the government mechanism was either unaware or ineffective for preparedness and preventive measures in pre and post disaster situation. The presence of the government was rarely seen when it comes to relief and rehabilitation. In most of flood-affected areas, NRs 70 (approximate 0.7 USD), as decided by the government for a meal to each of the flood affected for a month, was not distributed. Even, the government's one-door policy discouraged those who rushed with relief materials to the affected communities.

Rautahat has further been plagued with the heartrending incident wherein floods swept away the whole family while they were on the way to hospital for delivery. Likewise, four children (girls) were drowned in open pits that were dug for road construction and subsequently abandoned without filling them up. But no action has been taken against the Department of Roads and contractor yet. This demonstrates our rule of law.

With an aim to manage disaster in a coordinated way, an Emergency Operation Center under the Home Ministry has existed since 2007. That center has done nothing than paperwork. The mechanism does not possess a rope. It has to await the decision of the Home Ministry and the government for the purchase of emergency materials of immediate needs. The Home Ministry has two fax machines, which receive fax from 75 districts. A Chief District Officer (CDO) told me that one has to wait in queue in order to send a fax. The mechanism does not have funds for purchasing fuel of their vehicle that can be used for emergency purpose.

There is an attitude among the government officials that why a boat is required in a drought-hit region, where floods are unlikely. There is only one rubber boat in a district, with 0.8 million population. Six to eight people are required to operate the boat. This resembles the situation in all flood-hit districts.

According to an eyewitness in Rautahat, floodwater in Gaur had exceeded up to 8 ft. It looked like a sea everywhere. There was no flow of water. Rescue operation could have been done. He further recalled that Nepal Army personnel in a boat and a team of government representatives, including members of Red Cross and Police, in another boat had gone for rescue in Gaur. But they could not rescue a youth. After two hours of struggle in floodwater, he himself was able to save his life.

The government offices did not hold any meetings while it was still raining. These offices do not have information whether they have boats and jackets. In fact, the government offices do not have any materials for disaster management. District Disaster Relief Committee did not have a rope. The condition of the rivers in Rautahat is similar to Gandak. Like in Rautahat, floodwater had overflowed the embankments of Gandak. It had created havoc among locals, and they had to spend their sleepless night in fear.

The district dwellers and the district administration had early warning about the flash floods of Bakaiya, Jhanjh and Bagmati rivers. But they did not have any substantial answer when asked about the preparedness. Locals had informed the district administration about the collapse of the river embankments. But, the administration did not have any strategy what to do the next.

On August 11, 2017, Locals had informed that Garuda has been submerged with foods. According to an eyewitness, local administration had done an announcement, but no one could find out what was being spoken, and what it was for. At 1 pm, the local administration was once again informed that Rautahat will be inundated. After a while, the government office chiefs were unreachable because the government offices were submerged with floodwater.

I saw the plight of elderly, children and women. Most of them had not drunk water for 48 hours. Flood survivors told me that new mothers and newborns were not rescued immediately. All the goods in local shops were wet. The scene of putting the wet goods in the sun can still be seen in Gaur.

Billions of dollars are spent by the United Nations and foreign agencies, and international/national non-government agencies for disaster risk reduction projects. How ineffective and helpless they are can be traced properly when floodwater enters districts of Madhes/Terai.

Go-down and stores of Terai-Madhes are wet. Foods and grains stored in the stores are rotting. The rotten food items and goods and animals have been thrown everywhere. There is no proper management of these things in the aftermath of floods. This may lead to outbreak of epidemic diseases in flood-hit areas. Although the information and awareness messages are communicated through national media, such message has not been conveyed in local level, and if conveyed, it is limited.

Officials at municipality are seen irresponsible for the cleanliness of the flood-affected areas. No one can beat them in providing readymade answers to avoid their responsibilities.

Instead of putting efforts together for the disaster management, some of government officials were seen busy managing their transfer. The condition of health posts and health facilities is worst. Why have Rautahat, Bara and Sarlahi, which can easily be reached from Kathmandu in five hours, has remained in such a condition? Now is the time to ponder over this. Needless to say, election is a must and it needs to be done. What will be the answer of the political leaders contesting for the upcoming local elections when they approach their voters? The ruling parties and government representatives must face the questions.

Finally, at this age of information and technology, floods and landslide-related risks can timely be communicated with people, and this can help minimise the loss and damage. Flood and landslide, causing human casualties and a hug loss of properties, is an annual disaster in our country. However, apathy of disaster management-related government mechanism has led to the loss of innocent lives and properties. This is also the violation of human rights. For this, the government agencies must be accountable. The government must make the disaster management-related mechanism resourceful.