

## Earthquake preparedness in Bangladesh

The devastation that has been wrought recently by the massive earthquake in Japan should come as a grim but timely reminder to the authorities that Bangladesh, too, is vulnerable to earthquakes. The country lies on a major geological fault line and has suffered seven significant tremors in the 20th century alone. Food and Disaster Management Minister Abdur Razzaque's emphasis on the need to enhance regional cooperation among South Asian countries to effectively tackle the challenge that is likely to emerge in the aftermath of a quake should be interpreted as a justifiable and time-befitting call. His call for regional cooperation in this regard came when he was inaugurating a four-day "First Regional Earthquake Response Seminar" in the city on Monday.

It is also praiseworthy that the regional countries are working to find measures to deal with any disaster caused by quake and trying to identify the countries vulnerable to calamities and share domestic, regional and international resources. As for Bangladesh, the country does have a natural disaster preparedness plan, and in the event of floods or cyclones, the authorities have performed quite efficiently. But planning for earthquakes is almost a different issue as they do not know how to face an eventuality. The lesson from the recent catastrophes in Indonesia, Haiti, Chile, New Zealand and Japan is that earthquake preparedness must be made a top priority.

There are several steps that the government should put in place in order to minimise the threat to life and property that results from earthquakes. In the first instance, first responders, such as the fire department and civil defence, are presently under the home ministry, where they have a peripheral existence. But they need to be brought under the disaster management ministry, and coordinated with the other bodies of the ministry. Second, investment must be made in human resources and equipment so that first responders are sufficiently trained, financed, and adequately equipped to be able to handle a huge catastrophe.

Finally, the authorities need to realise that a piecemeal and ad hoc approach would not suffice. They must brace themselves for coming up with a comprehensive plan and policy to tackle the ensuing crisis. Enforcement of building codes when it comes to construction is a matter of paramount importance. For the most part, buildings are constructed with no engineering input whatsoever, and building permission is granted with no thought to the making of the buildings earthquake-safe.

The building safety code needs to be rewritten as a legislative act, with stiff provisions to make it enforceable. If existing structures need to be remodelled or demolished to ensure public safety in the event of an earthquake, we should be prepared to do so.

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