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Friday, September 23, 2011

OP-ED

# Earthquake: A warning



The Daily Star

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Date	Time	Magnitude	Place
19.09.2011	22.30	4.6	Southern Iran
18.09.2011	18.32	5.1	Japan
18.09.2011	13.54	4.6	Sikkim
18.09.2011	13.12	4.8	Sikkim
18.09.2011	12.41	6.9	Sikkim
18.09.2011	10.40	5.0	Japan
18.09.2011	07.04	5.6	Japan

M. Mizanur Rahman

A magnitude-6.8 earthquake was felt across the country on September 18 evening, shaking buildings in the capital and elsewhere. Panic gripped common people. The US Geological Survey said on its website the quake was centered 64 km (40 miles) northwest of Gangtok, capital of northeastern state Sikkim and below 20 km of the surface.

It is very alarming the world has entered a new era of catastrophes. Economic losses from hurricanes, earthquakes and resulting tsunamis, floods, wildfires and other natural disasters increased from \$528 billion (1981-1990) to more than \$1.2 trillion over the period 2001-2010. The 9.0 earthquakes and massive tsunami in Japan this past spring caused hundreds of billions of dollars of direct and indirect costs (Washington post, 2011). It has affected the Japanese macroeconomic forecast and resulted in the departure of the then-prime minister. And before this, massive earthquakes in Haiti, Chile and New Zealand inflicted record human and financial losses as well.

There were tremors that shook various districts twice in Bangladesh including Dhaka on the night of September 10. And again, it was in 18th of the same month. The observatory at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) recorded 86 tremors of over four magnitudes during January 2006-May 2009. The meteorological department detected at least 90 earthquakes taking place in the country between May 2007 and July 2008, nine of them above five on the Richter scale and epicenters of 95 percent being within a 600 km radius of Dhaka city. There are four active sources of earthquake in the Bay of Bengal can generate tremors with a magnitude of over 7 on the Richter scale, affecting the country seriously.

This was the frequency of earthquake nearby Bangladesh on September 18 and 19. Experts say that there is a possibility of a great earthquake after every 100 years and we are now passing through this danger time. The Great Indian Earthquake occurred on 12 June, 1897 with a magnitude of 8.7. Besides this, there were Cachher Earthquake, Manikganj/Bogra Earthquake, Shrimangal Earthquake, Dhubri Earthquake all of which were with more than magnitude 7 and near about 100 years ago. So, analysing the historical trend and the recent incidents, we can assume that it is not impossible that a big earthquake could happen now.

The country is surrounded by three tectonic plates, which are always on the move. This is one of the major reasons of the vulnerability of the country. But all these things are natural vulnerabilities; our self-created ones are not less, rather greater.

We have made ourselves vulnerable to earthquakes in various ways. Weak infrastructure, lack of awareness, lack of law enforcement and massive corruption, though all are interlinked, are the major factors that have made us so. Our problem is that we do not learn from history and we cannot think for the greater interest of the country and the countrymen.

More than 72,000 buildings are vulnerable to earthquake in Bangladesh. The capital city, mostly built on wetland, has so many high-rise buildings (a significant number of them do not comply with the building code) that it has become a risk zone for the populace. Again, supportive infrastructure or agents like roads, fire brigade, trained volunteers, equipment are incapable of responding in a post-earthquake situation.

It has been shown in different studies that people having less experience of earthquake suffer most if it happens, as they do not have knowledge about, and preparation for, it. If the structural mitigation is out of control of a citizen, he/she can easily go for at least non-structural ones with which he/she can protect himself/herself. Even, the falling down of furniture due to a small tremor can create fatality. If household level preparation can be taken this sort of fatality can be prevented, a strong level of awareness is necessary. In these days of high satellite media coverage, it is essential that people be educated on these issues.

According to TIB, every year 7,000 to 8,000 people get permission for the construction of residential and commercial buildings in Dhaka, therefore training of engineers, masons and bar binders is also an important area to concentrate on. It is really good that some Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) have come forward

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to work for addressing urban risks by awareness raising, capacity building of the people involved in the construction sector, and creating a strong volunteer group.

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The government has also taken some initiatives which are praiseworthy. We do not know when all the plans for urban risk reduction of the government will come into being, but we hope for the best.

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