

Perspective

How effective is Karachi's disaster response mechanism?

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Three years ago, while working on a campaign resisting the building of nuclear power plants in Karachi, I was involved in arranging a few dialogue sessions bringing stakeholders to the table for a series of discussions on the subject. During one such meeting, the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission's representative was asked if his department had an evacuation plan in case of a nuclear disaster or a tsunami. While explaining that the commission followed the Pakistan Nuclear Regulatory Authority's direction for an evacuation plan for a five-kilometre radius around the plant, he also nonchalantly retorted: "If there is a high-magnitude tsunami, there will be no Karachi left. What use will an evacuation plan be?"

The representative's attempt at comic relief did little to assuage a worried audience bogged down by the grim scenario of the possible fallout of a nuclear power plant disaster in the city. It was, however, telling of how various individuals and institutions seek to take advantage of Karachi's commercial potential but are least interested in their obligation towards public safety.

This could be very dangerous for a city that is vulnerable to a variety of natural and man-made disasters: earthquakes, tsunamis, cyclonic storms, industrial accidents and terrorist activities. In recent years, the city has experienced heatwaves too. Adding to this are occasional incidents such as the drowning of 41 people at Sea View beach on Eid day in 2014 and the recent spread of chikungunya because of poor sanitary conditions — 4,000 cases of the disease were reported from November 2016 to March 2017.

Urban flooding in seemingly well-developed areas such as North Nazimabad, North Karachi, Orangi, Malir, Drigh Road and Nipa is the latest addition to these disasters.

Industrial accidents are becoming another common occurrence. In September 2017 alone, at least four industrial accidents were reported in the city within a span of 10 days. Despite their frequency, no corrective measures have been followed in the form of implementation of improved occupational health and safety regulations.

Instead, the authorities have shown criminal non-seriousness towards public safety. And this has been the case for a long time.

During the 2012 fire tragedy in Baldia town, as at least 250 people were burning to death, the fire brigades ran out of water in the middle of the efforts to control the massive blaze. It emerged that this was because water supply to the Sindh Industrial Trading Estate (Site) area, the largest industrial estate of the country, where the factory was located, was discontinued because of non-payment of bills.

The 2015 heatwave blatantly exposed the limited capacity of mortuaries in a city housing 16 million people. Apparently, the city did not have the capacity to handle the approximately 1,000 deaths taking place within the span of five days. Instead of addressing structural issues responsible for the disaster and preparing for another possible heatwave a year later, the authorities erected a few tents and water coolers at prominent localities to provide temporary sheds for those staying outdoors for work.

This ill-preparedness is also manifested in the extremely compromised fire department. According to Karachi's mayor, only 22 fire stations and four fire engines are operational in the city while there is a need for at least 230 fire stations. The ratio of high-rise buildings stands at 10 per cent of Karachi's constructed area. For this construction landscape, the available fire snorkels cannot go beyond eight floors.

The Karachi Building and Town Planning Regulations of 2002 prescribe a standpipe system equipped with a fire department-approved inlet connection and at least one extinguisher on each floor, but it remains unimplemented. Residents of apartments or occupants of office spaces in high-rises are never given any trainings on emergency evacuation or informed of any hazards they may face.

Last year's fire tragedy at the Regent Plaza Hotel and Convention Centre reveals how the fire exit plan failed to prevent the loss of at least 11 lives.

Every single disaster in Karachi – natural or man-made – is followed by the usual blame game between departments and political parties contesting for power. While hundreds of research studies point to the absence of effective disaster response mechanisms, lack of interdepartmental coordination and unplanned development of the city, there is no denying that Karachi is managed by those who are devoid of the relevant skills and capacities for the job.

What really stands out in the wake of each disaster is the political point-scoring. Disaster response is seen as a spectacle where different groups, institutions and companies publicise their rapid response actions for the consumption of a very opinionated media. Another disservice of theirs is the announcement of compensation. This limits disaster response to monetary benefits while utterly weakening the constituency of disaster management in the city. Just like Karachi's development, Karachi's disasters also become political opportunities for stakeholders competing for political and commercial interests rather than for generating an agenda of public safety and well-being.

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