

We Need More Focus On Pre-Disaster Preparedness: Early Lessons Learned From Recent Earthquakes in Northwest of Iran

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Dear Editor-in-Chief

Two strong earthquakes with the magnitude of 6.4 and 6.3 at a depth of 9.9 km that rattled Iran's northwest region within 60 km of Tabriz, the capital city of East Azerbaijan province on August 11, 2012 caused extensive damage in about 1000 villages, killed at least 258 and injured 1380 people. The quakes most severely affected villages close to three impacted towns in the disaster area; Varzeghan, Ahar and Heris. Some of the villages were hit are in remote areas with limited access to transport routes.

Within early hours aftermath of the twin devastating incidents ordinary people and those who had relatives in the affected area rushed towards the region to salvage victims mainly by their own cars. Independent groups such as small units from armed forces were also sent to the region to support rescue operation. Some of the survivors meanwhile, tried to transfer severely injured survivors to nearby hospitals and even to the central hospital in Tabriz using public transportation facilities e.g. taxis, vans or any vehicle available at the time. All these unplanned efforts created traffic jams on the roads leading to the disaster area and delayed rescue operation by trained staff.

Now after the earthquakes that rumbled through the disaster area, about 36,000 quake-stricken people were given shelter and are being provided with their basic needs in

makeshift camps. Humanitarian aids are reaching affected zone from all over the country and internationally but there are inadequacies in proper distribution of food stuff and equipments among the survivors. Piles of water bottles in front of tents which left in the heat under the sunshine, clothes and canned foods which were distributed by volunteers and are more than current needs of the victims are observable in the disaster area. This is while, lack of sufficient supply of drinking water, canned foods and portable washrooms were reported by the authorities in the first days after the quake.

Iran is located on major earthquake fault line and occurrence of stronger quakes with more destructive consequences is probable in future. The scale of destruction and number of victims both those who survived without major injuries and those who severely injured or passed away as a result of recent quakes was not very much beyond the national and even the local disaster relief capacity.

Lack of a complete coordination during rescue and also relief operation is indicating pitfalls and inadequacies we suffer in our pre-disaster phase of preparedness programmes nationally and locally. Prior harmonizing of relief workers, scheduled allocation of funds and equipments and adequate delegation of duties are pivotal for efficient disaster relief governance.