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Regional Disaster Relief Mechanism

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This editorial analysis is based on the article **“India needs to invest in regional disaster relief mechanisms”** which was published in Hindustan Times on 13th of September 2020. It talks about the need for disaster relief mechanism for South Asian Region

Recently, Indian Coast Guard (ICG) and Navy conducted a disaster relief operation wherein they doused the fire on a crude carrier, rescued crew members, and prevented an oil spill.

Historically, a key feature of India’s humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) strategy has been the emphasis on bilateral engagement with the affected country.

However, recently India's response was initiated through a regional framework (**South Asian Cooperative for Environment Protection (SACEP)**) for addressing environmental emergencies in the South Asian region.

While this is a commendable initiative, there is still a long way to go towards building an effective regional disaster relief mechanism. Moreover, humanitarian emergencies due to climate uncertainty, in the South Asian region (SAR) are poised to grow.

In this context, India being a responsible regional power, should invest in regional frameworks for disaster management and take the lead in setting up a road map for greater cooperation.

Need for Regional Disaster Relief Mechanism In SAR

South Asia is exposed to a variety of hazards due to the geo-climatic characteristics of the region. These hazards range earthquakes in the Himalayas, droughts and floods in the Plains, and cyclones in coastal areas that originate in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. But more importantly, many countries in the region share common geological formations (Indian sub-continent) and river basins, and natural hazards frequently transcend national boundaries.

Hazards in SAR

- **Climate Change:** The monsoon carries more than 70% of South Asia's annual precipitation in a brief four-month period.
 - A good monsoon brings strong harvests and financial security, but a poorly timed monsoon, can result in human suffering and economic loss due to either flooding or drought.
 - Moreover, cyclones are the second most commonly occurring hazard in the region. Although human vulnerability to cyclones has decreased somewhat, economic losses associated with tropical cyclones have increased.
 - Climate change has a direct effect on the monsoon pattern and cyclones occurrences in SAR.
- **Active Seismic Zones:** The world's youngest mountain belt, the Himalaya and Hindu Kush, envelopes South Asia all along its northern fringe, from Afghanistan in the west to Bangladesh in the east.
 - With over 600 million people living along the fault line across the Himalayan belt, where the earthquake exposure is very high.
 - In the South Asia Seas region, major population centers live on key fault lines and in coastal areas that are exposed to hazards like Tsunami in 2004.
- **Increasing Exposure to Hazards:** The impacts of hazard events are escalating not only due to the increased incidence and intensity of events, but also because of changes in the underlying factors that influence exposure and vulnerability. Exposure is driven by a number of socioeconomic dynamics, including:
 - Increasing population growth and density in hazard prone areas.
 - Unsustainable economic expansion.
 - Concentration of economic assets in expanding megacities and rapidly growing secondary cities.

Existing Regional Disaster Relief Mechanisms in SAR

SAARC Institutions

- SAARC has codified disaster management by adopting the comprehensive framework on disaster management in 2006 and establishing the SAARC Disaster Management Centre (SDMC) as part of its mandate.
- Also, the SAARC Food Bank was established in 2007.
- In 2011, SAARC approved the Agreement on South Asia Rapid Response to Natural Disasters (SARRND), which formalised a policy for a cooperative response mechanism in the region.

BIMSTEC Institutions

Under BIMSTEC, India has been leading efforts towards the “Environment and Disaster Management” priority area and established the Bimstec Centre for Weather and Climate as a platform to share information and build capacities on disaster-warning systems.

Note:

In 2018, India signed an MoU with SACEP assigning the Indian Coast Guard as the competent authority for implementation under the initiative.

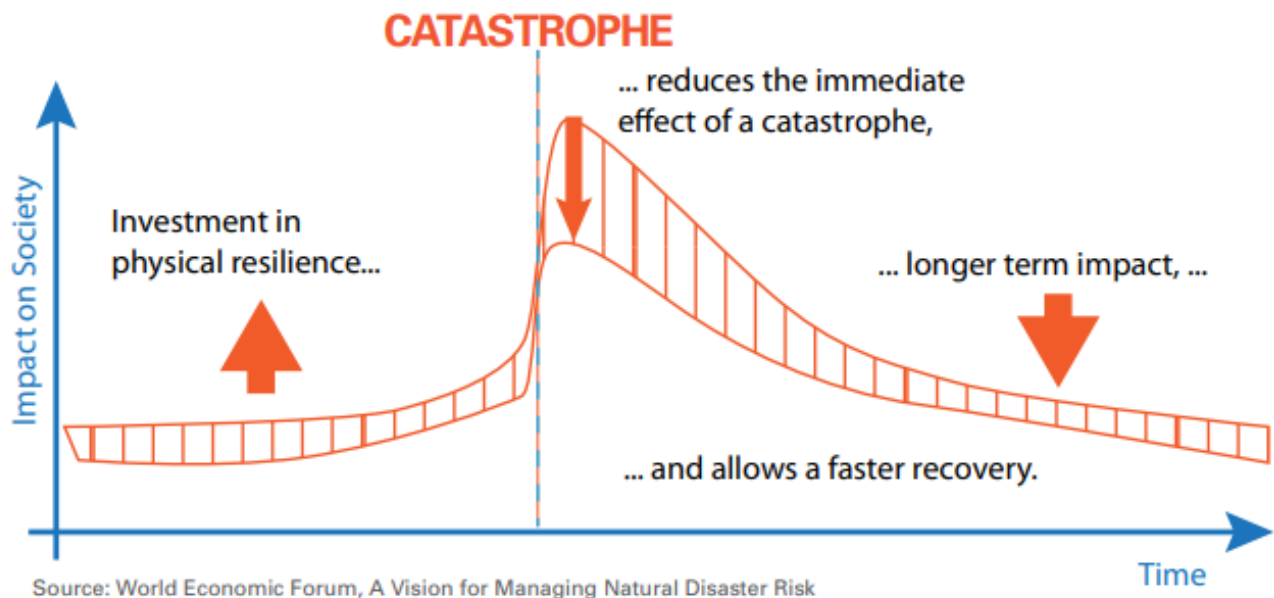
Issues in Regional Disaster Relief Mechanism

- **Dormant Regional Institutions:** Despite having an official policy in the form of SARRND, no SAARC-level contingent has ever been deployed during emergencies in the region.
Similarly, in BIMSTEC, although member-countries have shown a willingness to work together on relevant issues, there is a large gap to fill in terms of establishing operating procedures for joint relief campaigns.
- **Reactive Approach:** The traditional approach to disasters in SAR has been to focus on responding to events and reconstructing damaged assets in the aftermath.
By and large, the response of the major stakeholders has been **reactive rather than proactive**, and this approach has resulted in accumulated casualties and economic losses that were higher than necessary.
- **Lack of Coordination:** Ineffective regional disaster relief mechanisms result in an uncoordinated relief effort which hampers disaster recovery process.

Way Forward

- **Risk Identification:** Any effective strategy to manage disaster risk must begin with an identification of the factors that cause disasters.
 - Inputs should include physical hazard data and localized socioeconomic and demographic data of the region.
 - More specifically, hazard mapping of the region will serve as the base layer of information and provides data on the probability of occurrence and intensity of a hazard event.
- **Risk Awareness:** Once disaster risks have been identified, they must be communicated in a manner that motivates individuals to increase their resilience to disasters.
 - Governments, civil society, and the private sector can raise awareness of risks and risk-mitigation principles at the national, regional, and community levels.
 - This is the crucial step in cultivating behavioral and institutional changes necessary to shift from a culture of emergency response to one of advanced preparedness across SAR.

- **Risk Mitigation:** Reducing disaster risk calls for all stakeholders to alter their perceptions and prioritize resilience in a country's planning and development efforts.
 - It comprises actions to prevent, mitigate, and prepare against the damaging impact of hazards and thus minimize the potential consequences on physical and human capital.
 - In this context, SAR should devise and implement a regional disaster risk reduction mechanism based on **Sendai Framework**.
- **Risk Financing and Transfer:** In the developed world, risk transfer mechanisms such as insurance cover approximately 30% of economic losses.
 - However, in most low-income countries including those in South Asia, these tools only cover 1% of losses.
 - Hence, there is a need to develop risk transfer mechanisms in the SAR.
 - Also, the World Bank's help can be leveraged to alleviate this burden and assist governments and their citizens to more effectively manage disaster risks.



Conclusion

India being a regional power and one of the worst disaster affected countries in the world, should actively pursue a regional disaster relief mechanism which makes disaster risk reduction a priority and strengthens preparedness for response.

Further, building capacities through training and joint exercises and coordinating comparative advantages for collective action will help India leverage goodwill among its neighbours through its disaster relief programmes.

Drishti Mains Question

“Due to Climate uncertainty and humanitarian interventions, disaster related emergencies are poised to grow in the South Asian region”. In light the statement, discuss the need for a regional disaster relief mechanism and role of India therein.
