

Still in the Damkal age

The country is poorly prepared for fire threats in terms of both training and equipment.



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It is indeed very welcome news that we will soon receive four sophisticated fire trucks with 24-m high and 30-m long aerial ladders from Italy. Additionally, a number of light emergency rescue vehicles and necessary equipment have arrived at Kolkata bound for Nepal. We must thank the Rotarians from Kathmandu mid-town who took the initiative to acquire such important emergency hardware for Nepal. At the same time, we have to be grateful to the donors who have provided these essential elements to enhance our capacity for emergency crisis management.

Despite being very poorly equipped and trained, Nepal's fire service, popularly known as Damkal, has been doing a good job. This service was established in the 1930s when Juddha Shamsheer Rana was the prime minister. His name deserves to be linked with this emergency service as the rulers after him have not even been able to maintain what he established with such foresight. Not only did he establish the firefighting service, but he also installed fire hydrants in almost all the neighborhoods of the capital city. Unfortunately, today most of these hydrants have been removed. The ones that we can see in some places do not have a water connection.

Today, there are only four fire stations in the Kathmandu Valley, one each in Kathmandu, Lalitpur, and Bhaktapur, and another at Tribhuvan International Airport (TIA). Additionally, the army and the police are also being used for firefighting missions with their water tankers. The condition outside the capital is even more pathetic where most of the emergency management system is based on the human resources of the regular security forces. Their firefighting equipment, mainly designed for use within the premises of the security camps, is usually the only resource available.

The recent fires in Siraha, Kalimati vegetable market, Asanibi, and TIA are some examples that have set alarm bells ringing, indicating the high risk and vulnerability of fire hazards in Nepal. There have been major incidences at Singha Durbar, Bhrikuti Paper Factory, and the Mayos factory. Moreover, thousands of hectares of wild forests are being destroyed by fire annually. All these fires clearly point to the requirement to enhance our capacity to deal with fire. At the same time, we have to take concrete steps to reduce risks through preventive measures.

The main purpose of the fire rescue department is to save lives and property by being committed to proactive public safety programs and quality in operational performance. The fire department needs to accomplish service through the delivery of fire prevention and education, inspection, training, suppression, emergency medical services, and emergency incident management. This concept is based on facilities available in the developed nations. We may not be able to meet that level for some time, however, we can try our level best to achieve as much as we can.

In Finland, they don't have different varieties of hazards as we have in Nepal. Their main disaster threats are fires, storms, and cold weather. Therefore, the fire department gets high priority to deal with emergency situations. They have a separate university to produce firefighters at a city called Kuopio. The government's National Level Crisis Management Centre is also located on the same premises. Their city-level fire departments are also capable of maintaining medium-level search and rescue teams. They have a very high-level standby system for these rescue workers.



Norway has a separate force to deal with emergency crisis situations. It is known as the Civil Defense Force. Disaster management is their primary role. The fire department is deployed at the community level and is mobilized at short notice to reach the incident site to react as early as possible. They are also used for rescue missions in traffic incidents. Singapore also has a civil defense force with similar roles and responsibilities.

In the US, the Emergency Management Centre has been established at the county level. They can be activated by 911 calls and are kept under the mayor. In case of an emergency, firefighters, rescue workers, police, ambulance, or even helicopters are mobilized from standby locations. They react very quickly in the most professional manner to deliver quality service to the public. They are given very high value and respect for their wonderful service to the people and the country. Many firefighters have received national recognition and are recognized as heroes, at par with soldiers who have made the ultimate sacrifice in the line of duty. Such efforts at strengthening emergency services are not exclusive to developed countries. Our neighbor Bangladesh has achieved substantial development in firefighting capability and also in managing other disasters.

In Nepal, firefighters have been neglected for a long time. They don't get proper education, training, facilities, or welfare. Normally, they receive on-the-job training when they join the service or upon receiving new equipment. There is no training institution for them. Even their career development opportunity is very limited. So it is necessary to develop an institution to make them more effective and motivated firefighters.

Receiving a few vehicles will not be sufficient for our actual needs. Most importantly, we have to have organizational development capable of maintaining the capacity on a sustainable basis. At the same time, we have to develop our crisis management mechanism to make it more effective to deal with emergencies ranging from small fires to large complex emergencies. The firefighters should be well-trained and fully equipped. They must be not only capable of responding to crises but educating and training the public too. They must be able to visit and inspect critical facilities and areas, to identify vulnerabilities and advise rectification as preventive measures.

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