

Zafar Taj from Pakistan



My name is Zafar Waqar Taj and I am from a landlocked cluster of beautiful valleys in the extreme north of Pakistan, the Northern Areas (NAs), at the convergence of three mightiest mountain ranges in the world: the Himalayas, Karakurum, and Hindukush. These ranges have many of the world's highest peaks, as well as the largest concentration of glaciers outside the polar regions. In the Karakurums alone, 30 peaks tower over 24,000 feet (7,500 m). The highest, K2, at 28,500 feet (8,612 m), is second only to Mt. Everest in elevation. Sheer rock walls and ravines plunging thousands of vertical feet down to the rivers flowing below, mark the scenery.

As Assistant Commissioner in the General Administration Department of the NAs, I have been entrusted to serve as the Deputy Chairman District Disaster Management Authority in that area. I am responsible for the implementation of pre- and post-disaster plans and for ensuring close coordination between the provincial and district Disaster Management Authorities as well as other departments and NGOs functioning in the region. At present, we are working to complete the legal, institutional, and infrastructural formalities for the Disaster Management Authority, which is just being established in the area.

Like other south Asian countries, Pakistan, including the NAs, continues to suffer from a plethora of natural and human-induced hazards that threaten the lives and livelihoods of its citizens. Pakistan is prone to many disasters including floods, droughts, earthquakes, health epidemics, traffic accidents, and fires. The entire Northern Areas, including the capital of Gilgit, lie in a seismic zone. As such, earthquake tremors are common in the region. There are also constant threats of drought, landslides, avalanches, floods, and flash floods.

Admittedly, disasters were being addressed through traditional practices and procedures up until 2005. It was only after the massive earthquake of 8 October 2005, which severely jolted the North-West Frontier Province, Azad Jamu & Kashmir, and Islamabad, and claimed about 73,000 lives, that public policy-making bodies were forced to think about adopting new, comprehensive, and modern mechanisms for addressing unexpected emergencies. The establishment of the Earthquake Relief & Rehabilitation Authority and the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), and the introduction of National Building Code are a few examples of the efforts made thus far. The field of disaster reduction is a new discipline for Pakistan, a country that is still in the initial stages of disaster management. I am greatly indebted to the ADRC as well as the government of Japan for offering me the opportunity to participate in this research program, as it is sure to enhance my knowledge and understanding of disasters. I am quite optimistic that this research program, which encompasses the examination of pre- and post-disaster strategies as well as field visits, will enable me to supplement the efforts of the NDMA Pakistan in the practical application of best practices in the disaster reduction field.