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In the shadow of DEATH

Though these villages have been identified as disaster prone, there is no plan in action to shift them

Amitabh Srivastava / Dehradun

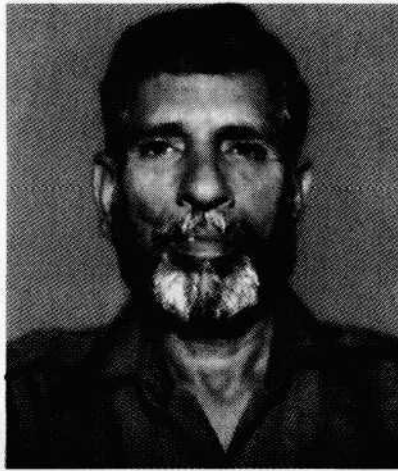
MEETING DEATH is easier than waiting for it month after month, year after year. That is the dilemma around 2900 families are facing, accounting for a population of about 15,000 people in Uttarakhand.

Year after year parts of this population keep getting depleted, as men and cattle are washed away in the torrential rains accompanied by cloudbursts and landslides that has become the destiny of this state.

It would have been easier to find a solution to their problems if they were living together in a cluster. But this population is spread over 97 villages in the nine hill districts of the state.

It is not that there is no information about this impending calamity. Surveys carried out earlier have warned that 12 villages in Tehri, 4 in Uttarkashi, 35 in Chamoli, 18 in Pauri, 23 in Pithoragarh and 5 in Bageshwar, Almora, Nainital, and Rudrapuray respectively are in the danger zone.

These villages have been identified by various governments and NGOs as



Diwakar Bhatt

disaster prone but there is no plan in action as yet to shift them elsewhere.

Uttarakhand was the first state in the country to have a ministry for disaster management because it has a unique topographical and ecological structure.

However, instead of looking for solutions in their own backyard with the help of organisations like the Central Building Research Institute (CBRI), Roorkee, which has expertise in constructing earthquake-resistant houses, the high profile team of officials spent their time trekking around the globe to

study disaster management.

However, the present minister for disaster management Diwakar Bhatt seems to have taken the matter rather seriously. He has already announced a discretionary fund of Rs.1 crore for each of the district magistrates of nine such districts. The fund has been sanctioned well before the onset of the monsoon so that proper steps can be taken in time.

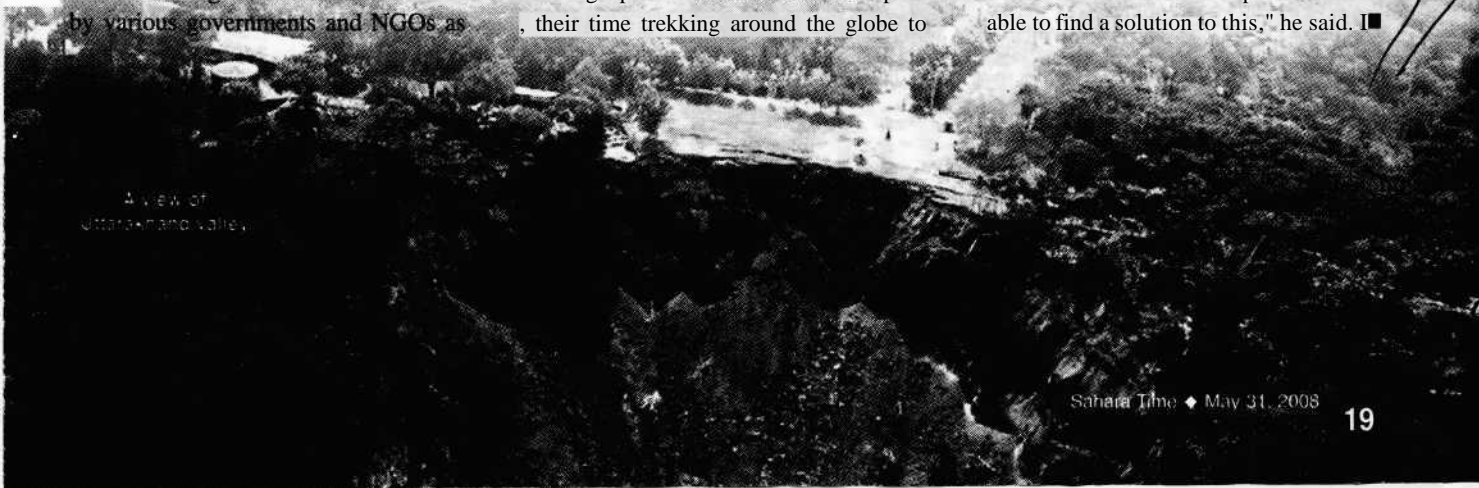
Talking to *Sahara Time*, Bhatt said that he had taken up the matter of rehabilitating the people of these 97 villages elsewhere with Union home minister Shivraj Patil.

"This will be a major rehabilitation plan for which we need funds from the Centre. Both the Centre and the state would have to share this responsibility. The home minister was very sympathetic to our appeal and has asked us to do a proper survey and provide estimates so that the modalities can be worked out urgently," Bhatt said.

Accordingly, he has instructed the Survey of India, the Wadia Institute and the CBRI to carry out an extensive survey and submit a report for follow up action.

Besides funds, one major problem is the availability of land for shifting 97 villages. The Forest Act, which is meant to protect trees and wildlife, has become a major hindrance. Bhatt admits that getting land to shift these people is the biggest hurdle because it is not under the jurisdiction of the state government.

"The issue of getting land for shifting these people is quite tricky. The Centre, the Supreme Court and the Forest Act are involved in this. I hope we will be able to find a solution to this," he said. ■



A view of Uttarakhand valley



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