

Annual Bhutan School Preparedness Drill 2013

A brief report

At 10:15 am, September 20th



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Bhutan is an earthquake prone country and the region has witnessed major earthquakes in the past resulting in huge loss of lives and property. On 21st September 2013, an earthquake of 6.1 magnitude struck eastern Bhutan resulting in loss of lives and property. Many school buildings were damaged but it was fortunate that children were not in schools due to the Blessed Rainy Day holiday preparations. This was followed by the September 18, 2011 Sikkim earthquake at the Sikkim-Nepal Border, which also affected many schools in Western Bhutan. The event happened on a Sunday and also did not result in human losses in schools. Bhutan and the region have been fortunate that recent earthquakes have hit during non-school hours.

After the 2009 earthquake, GeoHazards Society (GHS) initiated school safety training in Bhutan with support from the Department of Disaster Management (DDM) and UNDP in the earthquake affected Western Bhutan. This was followed by another four day training programme for representatives from all districts of Bhutan at Thimphu in coordination with DDM. DDM continued its efforts and many schools developed preparedness plans and carried out drills. In the meantime, GHS and its International partner assisted the Government of Bhutan in developing a National Action Plan for school earthquake safety. One of the visions of the plan was to ensure that every school in Bhutan is prepared. To realise this vision, since 2011, GHS has been planning to organize a nationwide drill involving each and every school in Bhutan.

Marking the anniversaries of past disastrous events is important for keeping the memories alive and communities prepared. GHS has, during the past several years, conducted drills for children in Northern India on the anniversary of the 1905 earthquake in Kangra which had resulted in devastating losses. GHS finally got an opportunity to carry out this ambitious programme in Bhutan in 2013 with the support of the Czech embassy in New Delhi.

GHS initiated consultations with the two important partners in the exercise, the Department of School Education and the Department of Disaster Management (DDM), Government of Bhutan. All the partners including the Czech Embassy viewed this as an excellent opportunity to not only enhance the preparedness in the schools of Bhutan but also to reach out to the community in general and increase awareness about the earthquake risk and the importance of preparedness. To reinforce this message, a Press Meet was organized before the Drill where the Minister of Education stressed the importance of the drill and announced the Ministry's

plans to institutionalise the event and hold it every year on September 20 to commemorate the earthquakes in 2009 (September 21) and 2011 (September 18). In his address to the Press, the Minister stated that ‘every child in every school will take part in the drill’ and added that he is “not only passionate about school safety, but also emotional about it!”



Hon'ble Minister of Education, DG, DDM and others during the declaration of the Annual Bhutan School Preparedness drill during a press briefing in Thimphu.



Even with the remarkable support from all the stakeholders, coordinating this drill in every school in every district required a monumental effort. GHS strengthened the GeoHazards International's Office with a Drill Coordination Officer who liaised with every district to ensure that the drill was conducted smoothly and districts were receiving all necessary assistance. The GHS team developed a set of resource materials including dual language posters, and leaflets with guidance on the methods of planning for the preparedness drills. These resource materials were reviewed and revised by representatives of the Government before printing and distribution to every school and extended classroom schools in the country.

In order to capture the important lessons from the drill, it was decided to organise a ‘Lessons Learnt Workshop’ a day after the mass drill. Representatives of stakeholder departments, NGOs etc. were chosen as observers and given training on important points to be observed at schools across the country during the drill.



Schools displayed the resource materials (posters) on notice board and banners were hung out for display. The posters and banners were depicting how to do Drop Cover Hold On during earthquake.

On Friday the 20th September 2013—the day of the drill—almost all schools started with morning assembly sessions devoted to the drill and related activities, to ensure that all the teachers and children were suitably briefed and reminded about their expected roles. At 10:15 AM, a special siren/bell was rung in every school across the length and breadth of the country. On this cue, the schools carried out the drill—evacuating students to their planned evacuation sites. Teachers carried out the roll call and reported ‘injuries’ and names of ‘missing’ students to the Principal, who then instructed Disaster Management teams. The DM teams swung into action, providing first aid, carrying out search and rescue operations and transporting the injured ones to hospitals. After everyone was accounted for, the Principals/Incident Commander called off the drills and debriefing meetings were held where teachers, student captains engaged in discussions with their respective Principal and Observers about the Drill and identified the specific steps that could have been done differently to enhance evacuations in future. On the basis of the experience of the Drill and subsequent brainstorming sessions, many schools decided to make revisions in their disaster management plans.

Moments of the Drill Day from a few schools.

Drop, Cover, Hold on and Evacuation



Drop Cover Hold on and evacuation



Roll call at Assembly Area after safe evacuation



Injured one was being transferred to First Aid Point after Search & Rescue



First Aid Point



Lessons Learnt Workshop: Following the National Holiday for the Blessed Rainy Day on Saturday, (21st September 2013) a Lessons Learnt workshop was held at the Yangchenphug Higher Secondary School , Thimphu (YHS), one of the participating schools. The Workshop had a number of distinguished participants—the Honourable Minister for Education, HE the Ambassador of the Czech republic, Director General(DDM), Director (School Education), the Secretary (Education) , Observers from various Districts, representatives from participating school, NGOs etc.. Despite the day being a holiday, it was heartening to see that all invitees were present at this Workshop. The Czech Ambassador and the Hon. Minister inaugurated the event and reiterated the importance of continuing these initiatives. Observers at various districts presented their findings and suggestions for improving the drills in schools. All District Education Officers were contacted in a phone-in programme for feedback and suggestions on future drills. In the breakout sessions, teams discussed major concerns that had evolved in the observations from various districts. In the concluding session, the Department of Education and the Department of Disaster Management thanked participants for making the discussions participatory and GeoHazards Society for assisting in coordinating in this massive earthquake drill with support from the Czech Embassy, New Delhi.

Moments from Lesson Learnt workshop:

Hon'ble Minister of Education and Ambassador of Czech Republic during their speech.



The School Safety Drill observers' presentation and problem solving discussions by participants

