

Pakistan / Kashmir 13 years after: 2005 Quake victims still face hardship, Supreme Court told

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The Supreme Court-appointed has regretted failure on part of the state to address the grievances of the quake-affected people. It also blamed the Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority (Erra) for failing to update its project-related information thus resulting in pilferage, failure and stoppages.

“Applicant had also accused that Rs55 billion was transferred to the Benazir Income Support Programme out of Erra funds while another Rs185bn was transferred to other government accounts.”.

ISLAMABAD: The Supreme Court-appointed commission has regretted failure on part of the state to address the grievances of the quake-affected people of Mansehra since the victims still face the same miseries and hardship after a lapse of more than a decade.

The commission also blamed the Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority (Erra) for failing to update its project-related information thus resulting in pilferage, failure and stoppages, said a set of recommendations furnished in a report before the Supreme Court on Tuesday.

The commission also suggested that Erra should hand over all the development projects to the departments concerned which should be placed before the provincial and local governments for early allocation of funds and completion.

The report was submitted in line with a suo motu proceeding by the Supreme Court initiated on an application of Shahzad Mehmood Qureshi of Mansehra who had invited the attention of the court towards alleged embezzlement of funds in the accounts of Erra.

In his application Mr Qureshi had alleged that despite the passage of 13 years, the people of Balakot were still living in makeshift arrangements without water, while their children were studying in schools without any roof and not a single doctor was available for the quake victims.

The applicant had also accused that Rs55 billion was transferred to the Benazir Income Support Programme out of Erra funds while another Rs185bn was transferred to other government accounts.

Earlier, the Supreme Court had ordered setting up of a six-man commission under the chairmanship of Mohammad Zeb Khan with a task to explore the possibilities of addressing the cumulative sufferings and hardships endured by the people of Mansehra in general.

The commission recommended that the government should come up to the legitimate expectations of the downtrodden and quake-stricken people of Mansehra and invest in them what they deserve under the Constitution.

“The state ought to be honest, sincere and upright towards its citizens so as to say the amount that was received as aid in the shape of loan and grants in the name of earthquake affected people should be spent on them for their rehabilitation.”

The diversion of the foreign aid to other sectors, districts and provinces is violation of the solemn pledge made by the state with the quake-stricken people of Mansehra, the commission deplored, adding that in effect people were defrauded as the aid was collected in their name and for the purpose of their rehabilitation.

The commission regretted that the fate of the mega project like New Balakot City (NBC) was still in limbo and there had been a total failure of coordination between Erra, the district administration and police.

Therefore, it is recommended that this stagnancy, lack of interest and indolence justified under the garb of in-coordination ought not be condoned, the commission emphasised, adding that this commission reckons this lack of coordination as inefficiency on a par with criminal negligence for which all officers holding key posts in the district administration, police and the elected local bodies representatives should be made accountable.

Thus remedial actions under the law ought to be taken promptly and even-handedly, the report said.

In case of disbursement of cash and goods, the report explained, this commission finds the matter not amply and properly documented. It is a trust placed in every single officer of the state machinery to safeguard what was entrusted to them or to spend upon or invest in some other person in accordance with the law and in the best interest of the affected people.

Prime facie, the report said, there is a room to probe by the investigating agencies regarding discrepancies in cash disbursement.

It transpired during commission’s proceedings that the valuable construction machinery left by the national and international donor philanthropists and aid agencies was also not enlisted in stocks of the local government. Similar is the case of the field hospitals which were installed through the generous assistance of international communities and some of these were dismantled and entrusted to the local health set-up.

“This commission believes that proper documentation in stocks is not maintained and there are considerable anomalies warranting a criminal investigation in this matter.”

The commission also enlisted different factors leading to the stalemate of NBC since neither the provincial government nor the local government took ownership of this mega project besides the key executing agency/Erra was not stationed at Mansehra, thus the remote execution of work was not manageable. There is a total lack of coordination between the district administration, police and Erra, the commission deplored, adding that the selective and politically motivated acquisition and identification of land created mistrust amongst the landowner viz-a-viz acquiring authority.

The commission also recommended devolving the execution of the project by Erra to infuse a sense of ownership. Moreover, the district police also failed to establish the writ of the state since the role of their operation and investigation wings was not encouraging.

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P.S.

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