



What is a 'national disaster'?

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What is a 'national disaster'?

Amid calls for declaration of Kerala floods as a national disaster, a look at how govt classifies calamities, and how such a classification helps determine the extent of central relief and funding.

How does the law define a disaster?

- As per the Disaster Management Act, 2005, "disaster" means a catastrophe, mishap, calamity or grave occurrence in any area, arising from natural or man-made causes, or by accident or negligence which results in substantial loss of life or human suffering or damage to, and destruction of, property, or damage to, or degradation of, environment, and is of such a nature or magnitude as to be beyond the coping capacity of the community of the affected area.
- A natural disaster includes earthquake, flood, landslide, cyclone, tsunami, urban flood, heatwave; a man-made disaster can be nuclear, biological and chemical.

How can any of these be classified as a national disaster?

- There is no provision, executive or legal, to declare a natural calamity as a national calamity.

Has there ever been an attempt to define a national calamity?

- In 2001, the National Committee on Disaster Management under the chairmanship of the then Prime Minister was mandated to look into the parameters that should define a national calamity.
- However, the committee did not suggest any fixed criterion.
- In the recent past, there have been demands from states to declare certain events as natural disasters, such as the Uttarakhand flood in 2013, Cyclone Hudhud in Andhra Pradesh in 2014, and the Assam floods of 2015.

How, then, does the government classify disasters/calamities?

- The 10th Finance Commission (1995-2000) examined a proposal that a disaster be termed "a national calamity of rarest severity" **if it affects one-third of the population of a state.**
- The panel did not define a "calamity of rare severity" but stated that a calamity of rare severity would necessarily have to be adjudged on a case-to-case basis taking into account, inter-alia, the intensity and magnitude of the calamity, level of assistance needed, the capacity of the state to tackle the problem, the alternatives and flexibility

available within the plans to provide succour and relief, etc.

What happens if a calamity is so declared?

- When a calamity is declared to be of “rare severity”/“severe nature”, support to the state government is provided at the national level.
- The Centre also considers additional assistance from the NDRF.
- A Calamity Relief Fund (CRF) is set up, with the corpus shared 3:1 between Centre and state.
- When resources in the CRF are inadequate, additional assistance is considered from the National Calamity Contingency Fund (NCCF), funded 100% by the Centre.
- Relief in repayment of loans or for grant of fresh loans to the persons affected on concessional terms, too, are considered once a calamity is declared “severe”.

How is the funding decided?

- As per the National Policy on Disaster Management, 2009, the National Crisis Management Committee headed by the Cabinet Secretary deals with major crises that have serious or national ramifications.
- For calamities of severe nature, inter-ministerial central teams are deputed to the affected states for assessment of damage and relief assistance required.
- An inter-ministerial group, headed by the Union Home Secretary, studies the assessment and recommends the quantum of assistance from the NDRF/National Calamity Contingency Fund (NCCF).
- Based on this, a high-level committee comprising the Finance Minister as chairman and the Home Minister, Agriculture Minister, and Planning Commission Deputy Chairman as members approves the central assistance.

How do other countries classify disasters?

- In the US, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) coordinates the government’s role in disaster management.
- When an incident is of such severity and magnitude that effective response is beyond the capabilities of state and local governments, the Governor or Chief Executive of a tribe can request federal assistance under the Stafford Act.
- In special cases, the US President may declare an emergency without a request from a Governor.

The Stafford Act authorises the President to provide financial and other assistance to local and state governments, certain private nonprofit organisations, and individuals following declaration as a Stafford Act Emergency (limited) or Major Disaster (more severe).