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Cities need disaster drills, better buildings

Max Wang

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MY trip to Fukushima during the National Day holiday last week was not for leisure, quite the contrary: it was all about disaster.

First, I got "trapped" in a huge, all-rights-out building and had to grope my way out. For the first time in my life I used an extinguisher to put out a fire. I was involved in a simulated magnitude-7 earthquake with the floor shaking violently under my chair.

These scary experiences were a prelude to an international symposium on creating disaster-resilient cities held by the UN Habitat Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific to observe the World Habitat Day.

The theme was appropriate since a spate of natural disasters has hit Asia this year, such as the devastating earthquake and tsunami in Japan on March 11, the rain-triggered mudslides in Seoul on July 27 and the huge floods in downtown Manila on September 27.

The forum discussed challenges of disaster prevention and mitigation as well as the experiences of different countries.

All participants agreed that education is vital for building disaster-prevention capacities at community levels and that the success of government anti-disaster measures hinges on community participation.

This was the message from the forum.

A disaster-resilient city can limit the loss of life in the event of a catastrophe and quickly recover from damages.

Cities can ward off floods with adequate drainage systems and dikes, but they can’t stop an earthquake. Retrofitting old or weak structures, early warning, timely evacuation and well-planned reconstruction are needed.

Unlike Japan and the eastern and northern parts of China, Shanghai is less vulnerable to earthquakes. The city is about 250 kilometers west of the closest tectonic fault in the Yellow Sea, which historically experienced tremors usually smaller than magnitude-5. The latest one was felt this past January 12.

But the city is prone to typhoons, tidal waves, dense fog (a cause of traffic accidents) and epidemics like SARS and bird flu.

Man-made disasters also threaten the city.

The high-rise inferno that killed 57 people last November still haunts many locals and the subway collision that injured 270 people two weeks ago reminded us there is no room for complacency.

After China designated May 12 National Disaster Prevention and Reduction Day, a reminder of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, Shanghai became the first city in the country to issue a local law on earthquake crisis management. It requires all new buildings to be built to withstand a magnitude-7 earthquake. Schools, hospitals, stadiums and theaters must endure shocks stronger than magnitude-7, and buildings more than 160 meters high must be evaluated for seismic hazards before construction.

Two weeks after the tsunami hit Japan, the Shanghai government announced a plan to build 20 emergency shelters in urban parks by 2015. A budget of 500 million yuan (US$78 million) has been earmarked to store food, medicine, drinking water and tents in the shelters where waste can be recycled, rainwater collected for use, and electricity is generated by solar panels.

According to the plan, A-type shelters are at least 20,000 square meters and can serve residents within a radius of 5,000 meters from the park for as long as 30 days. B-type shelters cover at least 4,000 square meters and can serve residents within a radius of 1,000 meters for 10 to 15 days.

Residents near Zhongshan Park say they are glad to know there will be an emergency shelter nearly.

It has been proven that emergency drills can significantly reduce the loss of life in a real crisis, but these are hard to carry out in a fast-paced society like Shanghai where people are busy and businesses are reluctant to let the drills interrupt their operation.

As a result, emergency drills often take place in schools and a few buildings in complete isolation.

In our 46-story office building, three floors are designated as emergency shelters with water, food and medicine stored there, but few of us know where these floors are, and no fire drill has been held since we moved into the building in 1999.

During this year’s National Disaster Prevention Day, Shanghai’s Baoshan District organized an evacuation drill. Within eight minutes, more than 90,000 students and teachers filed out of their school buildings in an orderly exercise. Without proper training, I am afraid there would be total chaos even if a calamity befalls just a fraction of the city’s 20 million people.

To address the problem, Shanghai should make it compulsory for every citizen to take part in a disaster drill every year on May 12 and devise a way to make the training more practical. The Japanese city of Fukushima is a role model in this regard.

The Fukushima Citizens’ Disaster Prevention Center, run by Shanghai scientists and foreign experts, experienced a building fire, an earthquake and a typhoon, receives more than 100,000 visitors a year and teaches them survival techniques through simulations.

Quick recovery is another indicator of disaster-resilient cities. At the Fukushima symposium, both UN officials and experts spoke highly of the Chinese government’s ability to respond quickly to the Sichuan earthquake.

They were also impressed by China’s unique one-to-one support program, under which each well-off province or municipality is paired with a city or a county in the disaster area to assist in reconstruction with financial aid no less than 1 percent of the better-off area’s local GDP.

Professor Peng Zhenwei of Shanghai Tongji University presented a case study of Shanghai’s post-disaster aid for Dujiangyan. His school was involved in the planning and reconstruction of the city damaged in the earthquake.

Too many ‘servants’ idle at public trough

A TOWNSHIP Party secretary in Chongqing was reported in June to have organized gambling at mahjong in a resort villa while attending a 10-day training course on anti-corruption.

Four months have passed, and the local Party discipline department has failed to make any progress in its investigation. A spokesman for the department said on Sunday, “We’re still investigating it.”

This hardly qualifies as “news” in China today, where the three major officials preoccupied with anti-corruption are termed renminbi (Chinese currency, literally “people’s money”), not renmin (the people).

Playing cards or mahjong at work can be legally considered a training program on the family planning law.

This case serves only to draw attention to the 2.45 million officials across China. That’s one official for every 26 ordinary taxpayers, 306 times that of the level in Western Han Dynasty (202 BC - 9 AD), one of China’s strongest empires.

While the 2005 figure might have been a bit of exaggeration, one is still aghast at the official figure of official servants. The Ministry of Education looks after the job descriptions for their vice ministers’ posts.

Today, 1.42 million officials have been identified in the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Science and Technology, and the Ministry of Land and Resources.

Some officials rely on secrecy and clubs

Two unrelated news events over the weekend reveal one of the thorniest political problems: bureaucratic indifference to public interest.

On Sunday, Li Yan, a graduate from Nanjing University, withdrew her lawsuit against three central government departments, including the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Science and Technology, and the Ministry of Land and Resources.

About a month ago, she had filed suit in Beijing against the three ministries for refusing to make public the job descriptions for their vice ministers’ posts.

Li said she dropped her lawsuit because the three ministries — under public pressure — had clarified the legal issues with court mediation — and had finally satisfied her request. She made her initial request in May as she was researching an academic paper about China’s deputy officials.

This case serves only to show how silly many of our “public servants” are. The Ministry of Education looks especially foolish and igno- rant in this case — how can you educate China to become an enlightened democracy if the officials themselves are so often blind to the law?

In another betrayal of public trust, a group of chengguan (“hats”) in Kunming, Yunnan province, beat a local boy to death last Friday — and later admitted that they had beaten the wrong target.

In a five-minute press conference afterward, a local government spokesman refused to answer questions about why the thuggish chengguan had clubbed the wrong person and why they wanted a man to die on the street under the blows of iron rods.

The “spokesman” even refused to give his own name.

Thanks to a bold reporter from CCTV, now everyone can see the video of that pseudo press conference.

So silly and thuggish are many of our government officials that even good laws cannot prevent them from being silly or thuggish. The good news, though, is that people can now speak up — and hope to be heard.

MAX WANG