Foreign Assistance for Disaster Relief - UAE to Kerala

What is the issue?

\n\n

\n
- India has turned down the UAE’s reported offer of Rs 700 crore as aid for flood relief in Kerala.
\n
- It has cited the 2004 policy of not accepting aid from foreign governments as the reason, which needs a relook.
\n

\n\n

What is the rationale for the 2004 policy?

\n\n

\n
- **Self-Reliance** - It was felt then that India could cope with the situation on her own and take help if needed.
\n
- The idea was that India had become a large economy.
\n
- Hence, accepting small aid moneys from countries was not in keeping with the times.
\n
- The policy was also a symbolic signal to end India’s dependence on concessional debt.
\n
- **Economy** - Since 1956, India had severe foreign exchange constraints.
\n
- But 2003-04 was a different year, with strong macroeconomic fundamentals.
\n
- India had already graduated to become a “less indebted country” in the IMF ranking.
\n
- It had also registered a surplus in its current account in 2001-02.
\n
- Its foreign exchange reserves had also topped $75 billion by 2003.
\n

- **Superpower** - One of the contexts for the 2004 policy was the India’s superpower dream.
\n
- It was felt that India should demonstrate its strength to withstand and counter calamities.
\n
- It should exhibit to the world that it could also help its neighbours.
\n
- It was thought to strengthen India's case for a permanent seat in UN Security Council.
\n
- These were believed to hasten the prospect of superpower status by 2020.
\n
- **Diplomacy** - It was felt that assistance would leave scope for interference in internal affairs.
\n
- Also, accepting from any one country offers the scope for others as well.
\n
- But it would be diplomatically difficult to refuse from some and accept from others.
\n
- **Concern** - There were doubts if the policy would be perceived as a rude gesture in diplomatic circles.
\n
- Also, External Affairs Ministry was displeased with it as its explicit concurrence was not sought.
\n
- The MEA thus had to deal with countries bilaterally, and manage the effect of an abrupt change in aid receiving policy.
\n
- Over the years, the policy has also not made any noteworthy contributions for India to fulfil its ambitions.
\n

\n\n

What is the 2016 NDMP in this regard?

\n\n

\n
- The 2016 National Disaster Management Plan (NDMP) provides for accepting foreign assistance in the wake of a disaster.
\n
- Under this, the Government does not issue any appeal for foreign assistance.
\n

- However, if the national government of another country voluntarily offers, it may accept.
  \n
- The Home Ministry is required to coordinate with the External Affairs Ministry (MEA) in this regard.
  \n
- As, MEA is primarily responsible for reviewing foreign offers of assistance and channelizing them.
  \n
- The 2016 NDMP guidelines also provides for multilateral assistance.
  \n
- Under this, India will accept an offer of assistance from UN agencies.
  \n
- But this is only if the government considers it necessary, based on various factors.
  \n
- If accepted, the Government of India will issue directions.
  \n
- The respective Ministry/State Government will then have to coordinate with the concerned UN agency.
  \n
- Any such financial assistance by UN financial institutions involving foreign exchange will require the Department of Economic Affairs' approval.
  \n

\n\n

What is the current controversy?

\n\n

\n

- The 2016 guidelines have been mostly on paper.
  \n

\n\n

\n

- So the government has been following the policy on disaster aid decided in 2004.
  \n
- There is thus a clear mismatch between convention and written document.
  \n
- The recent aid for Kerala was also not accepted citing this "existing policy".
  \n

\n\n

Is the decision justified?

\n\n

\n
- Offers of aid from foreign governments must naturally be scrutinised for national security interests.
\n
- Also, state governments forming their own bilateral aid and assistance would be like allowing them to conduct an independent foreign policy.
\n
- But India should not be mixing up its 20th century security fears with 21st century realities of technological advancements.
\n
- Irrespective of policies, democracies should be flexible enough to respond to emergencies.
\n
- The intention and objective should only be the greater good of the victims.
\n
- Sticking merely to the precedent or pride may not serve the citizens' cause.
\n
- The decision may also have a negative impact on India’s relations with the UAE.
\n

\n\n

What is the way forward?

\n\n

\n
- Notions of self-reliance have to be reassessed in the larger context of a multilateral world.
\n
- In the case of bilateral assistance, India needs to examine offers case by case.
\n
- E.g. UAE's assistance comes as an obligation to help Kerala in distress, in accordance with the Islamic faith.
\n
- As, Keralites have served their country well over the years.
\n
- Similar is the case of Qatar, which has offered Rs. 35 crore.
\n
- The need now for the central government is to use all assistance, Indian and foreign, to rebuild Kerala.

\n
- It should also put an end to the 2004 precedent and bring into implementation the latest guidelines.
\n
- India should also hold discussions with the UN and the Red Cross with a view to formulating plans for reconstruction.
\n
- Using the latest technology and adopting such assistance would only benefit India.
\n

\n\n

\n\n

Source: Indian Express, The Hindu

\n