

Foreign Assistance for Disaster Relief - UAE to Kerala

What is the issue?

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- India has turned down the UAE's reported offer of Rs 700 crore as aid for flood relief in Kerala.

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- It has cited the 2004 policy of not accepting aid from foreign governments as the reason, which needs a relook.

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What is the rationale for the 2004 policy?

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- **Self-Reliance** - It was felt then that India could cope with the situation on her own and take help if needed.

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- The idea was that India had become a large economy.

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- Hence, accepting small aid moneys from countries was not in keeping with the times.

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- The policy was also a symbolic signal to end India's dependence on concessional debt.

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- **Economy** - Since 1956, India had severe foreign exchange constraints.

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- But 2003-04 was a different year, with strong macroeconomic fundamentals.

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- India had already graduated to become a "less indebted country" in the IMF ranking.

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- It had also registered a surplus in its current account in 2001-02.

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- Its foreign exchange reserves had also topped \$75 billion by 2003.

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- **Superpower** - One of the contexts for the 2004 policy was the India's superpower dream.
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- It was felt that India should demonstrate its strength to withstand and counter calamities.
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- It should exhibit to the world that it could also help its neighbours.
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- It was thought to strengthen India's case for a permanent seat in UN Security Council.
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- These were believed to hasten the prospect of superpower status by 2020.
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- **Diplomacy** - It was felt that assistance would leave scope for interference in internal affairs.
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- Also, accepting from any one country offers the scope for others as well.
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- But it would be diplomatically difficult to refuse from some and accept from others.
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- **Concern** - There were doubts if the policy would be perceived as a rude gesture in diplomatic circles.
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- Also, External Affairs Ministry was displeased with it as its explicit concurrence was not sought.
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- The MEA thus had to deal with countries bilaterally, and manage the effect of an abrupt change in aid receiving policy.
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- Over the years, the policy has also not made any noteworthy contributions for India to fulfil its ambitions.
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What is the 2016 NDMP in this regard?

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- The 2016 National Disaster Management Plan (NDMP) provides for accepting foreign assistance in the wake of a disaster.
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- Under this, the Government does not issue any appeal for foreign assistance.
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- However, if the national government of another country voluntarily offers, it may accept.
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- The Home Ministry is required to coordinate with the External Affairs Ministry (MEA) in this regard.
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- As, MEA is primarily responsible for reviewing foreign offers of assistance and channelizing them.
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- The 2016 NDMP guidelines also provides for multilateral assistance.
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- Under this, India will accept an offer of assistance from UN agencies.
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- But this is only if the government considers it necessary, based on various factors.
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- If accepted, the Government of India will issue directions.
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- The respective Ministry/State Government will then have to coordinate with the concerned UN agency.
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- Any such financial assistance by UN financial institutions involving foreign exchange will require the Department of Economic Affairs' approval.
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What is the current controversy?

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- The 2016 guidelines have been mostly on paper.
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- So the government has been following the policy on disaster aid decided in 2004.
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- There is thus a clear mismatch between convention and written document.
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- The recent aid for Kerala was also not accepted citing this "existing policy".
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Is the decision justified?

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

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What is the way forward?

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

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- It should also put an end to the 2004 precedent and bring into implementation the latest guidelines.

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- India should also hold discussions with the UN and the Red Cross with a view to formulating plans for reconstruction.

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- Using the latest technology and adopting such assistance would only benefit India.

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Source: Indian Express, The Hindu

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