

## 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.

• 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.

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

 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.

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

- But 2003-04 was a different year, with strong macroeconomic fundamentals.
- India had already graduated to become a "less indebted country" in the IMF ranking.

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

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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.
- 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.
- **Diplomacy** It was felt that assistance would leave scope for interference in internal affairs.

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- $\bullet$  Also, accepting from any one country offers the scope for others as well.
- But it would be diplomatically difficult to refuse from some and accept from others.

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 $\bullet$   ${\bf Concern}$  - 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.
- 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.
- $\bullet$  Under this, the Government does not issue any appeal for foreign assistance.  $\ensuremath{\backslash} n$

• However, if the national government of another country voluntarily offers, it may accept.

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 $\bullet$  The Home Ministry is required to coordinate with the External Affairs Ministry (MEA) in this regard.  $\ensuremath{\backslash n}$ 

• 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.
- Under this, India will accept an offer of assistance from UN agencies.
- 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.
- The respective Ministry/State Government will then have to coordinate with the concerned UN agency.
- 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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- $\bullet$  There is thus a clear mismatch between convention and written document.
- $\bullet$  The recent aid for Kerala was also not accepted citing this "existing policy".  $\ensuremath{^{\backslash n}}$

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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.
- But India should not be mixing up its 20th century security fears with 21st century realities of technological advancements.
- 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.
- Sticking merely to the precedent or pride may not serve the citizens' cause.
- $\bullet$  The decision may also have a negative impact on India's relations with the UAE.  $\ensuremath{^{\text{Nn}}}$

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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.
- $\bullet$  Similar is the case of Qatar, which has offered Rs. 35 crore.  $\ensuremath{\backslash n}$
- 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.
- India should also hold discussions with the UN and the Red Cross with a view to formulating plans for reconstruction.
- $\bullet$  Using the latest technology and adopting such assistance would only benefit India.  $\ensuremath{\backslash n}$

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**Source: Indian Express, The Hindu** 

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