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SUBHEADLINE: January 16 is Earthquake Safety Day in Nepal _ the day the `Big One', registering 8.4 on the Richter scale, devastated the region 67 years ago

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`She is 90 years old now, frail and wrinkled with age. Her memory is fading despite the neuro vitamins prescribed by her doctor. But even today Asha Devi, a resident of Barasuani village near the border town of Birgunj, clearly remembers the terror of 1934.

`The house shook. There were no deaths in my village. But we heard that Kathmandu had been totally destroyed. The ground shook so violently that people were knocked off their feet," the old lady recalls with grief.

As featured in the Kathmandu Post of October 13, 1998, that distant day when the ``Big One" hit, registering 8.4 on the Richter scale, killing about 4,000 people in central Nepal and the bordering Indian state of Bihar, is still vivid in Devi's memory _ as in the memory of all elderly Nepalis.

But 64 years after the horrifying disaster, what would happen if a similar earthquake was to strike the region again?

Although far from being haunted by morbid and frightening thoughts, many experts agree that the Himalayas are prone to such killer earthquakes and as cited in the Kathmandu Post ``there are sure to be regular repeats of earthquakes as strong as the 1934 event."

The National Society for Earthquake Technology, Nepal, estimates that if an earthquake of similar intensity were to occur today in the densely populated area with many more lethally unstable concrete structures, as many as 40,000 people could be killed in Kathmandu valley alone.

With this awareness in mind, an annual Earthquake Safety Day (ESD) has been established in Nepal, held for the first time on January 16, 1999, the 65th anniversary of the Great Bihar-Nepal earthquake of 1934.

As part of the first ESD, an Earthquake Safety Day National Committee was instituted by the royal government of Nepal with activities combined under the Kathmandu Valley Earthquake Risk Management Programme (KVERMP).

This year for the third time in a row, ESD activities are being held in Kathmandu today. Activities actually started on January 12 and will continue until January 19.

The programme includes : An international symposium on natural disaster risk management with a focus on earthquake risk management, an exhibition _ to be inaugurated by Girija Prasad Koirala, Prime Minister of Nepal, awareness raising activities, shake table demonstrations _ twin models, one with seismic resistant elements and the other without are tested on a shake table simulating earthquake vibration to demonstrate the efficacy of earthquake-proofing in school building architecture and construction.

Recently, four schools have been selected to be retrofitted and reconstructed with seismic-resistant features. They are Upayogi Primary School, Alapot, Bal Bikash Secondary School, Sirutar, Gadagade Primary School, Nagarkot, Vaishnavi Secondary School, Kirtipur. This programme also incorporates training of the school community (teachers, children and parents) on earthquake safety and preparedness.

The week-long seminar also includes a high-level meeting attended by Nepali government organisations, NGOs based in Nepal and other parts of the world, donor agencies, representatives of the country's private sector, technical and research institutions as well as international organisations from all over the world.

The KVERMP is in fact a part of the Asian Disaster Preparedness centre (ADPC) based in Bangkok, located in the campus of the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), and more precisely of the Asian Urban Disaster Mitigation Programme. It is managed by the National Society for Earthquake Technology (NSET-Nepal) with assistance from GeoHazards International, a non-profit foundation based in Stanford, California.

“The Asian Urban Disaster Mitigation Programme (AUDMP) is one of the largest programmes within the ADPC. It is supported by the American government, precisely the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance. At the moment, it covers some ten countries in Asia and focusses, as the name indicates, on urban areas because they are the most affected in terms of infrastructure and loss of human lives,” explained Dr Suvit Yodmani, Executive Director of the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre, a day before his departure to Kathmandu to join the seminar.

“Nepal is one of the ten countries under the AUDMP programme and is probably one of the most successful examples. The project, with which we have been involved since 1997 has produced concrete results, for example the announcement and approval by His Majesty the King of Nepal of an earthquake day,” he continued.

The ADPC has set priorities in Thailand _ so far spared major earthquakes and having only experienced a few tremors _ on the management of natural disasters such as floods, droughts, typhoons and forest fires, with training, meetings and various programmes being regularly organised.

“Disasters are probably not going to decrease in the future. But if we are more prepared, the losses can be minimised. That is the really our aim. Risk management ability can contribute to a country's sustainable development, otherwise development is set back several years,” Dr Suvit said, hoping the forthcoming government would look at this issue more seriously.

The massive earthquake that shook Central America and Southern Mexico last Saturday, killing more than 349 people, most of them in El Salvador, gives even more relevance to this week-long seminar on earthquake preparedness in the Himalayas.