

The Tibetan School Shake-Out

4th April 2009, 104th Anniversary of the 1905 Kangra earthquake



in Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Delhi, Meghalaya.

Organised by



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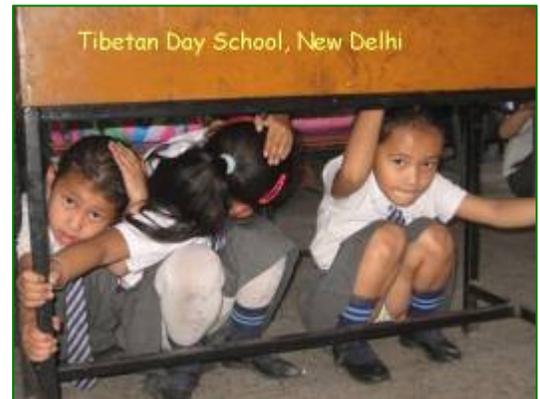
The Tibetan School Shake-Out – School Earthquake Safety Drills in Four States to Mark the 104th Anniversary of the 1905 Kangra Earthquake

Dharamshala, April 4 - More than 15,000 students and staff members of Tibetan schools across the Indian states of Himachal Pradesh, Uttaranchal, Delhi and Meghalaya participated in an exercise called "The Tibetan Schools Shake-Out Drill". This is perhaps the largest school earthquake drill yet in India and according to most school principals, a successful event that should be carried out regularly. The event was organized as a step towards creating a safe learning environment for school children, and to mark the 104th anniversary of the 1905 Kangra earthquake, which killed 20,000 people.

This drill was a collaborative effort of GeoHazards International, GeoHazards Society, and the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives (LTWA) in conjunction with Tibetan schools under Central Tibetan School Administration, Sambhota Tibetan School Administration and Tibetan Children's Village. In Uttarakhand, officers of the Disaster Mitigation and Management Center, Govt. of Uttarakhand facilitated the drill. In Meghalaya, the District administration, East Khasi Hills coordinated the activities. In Delhi, District Disaster Management Authority, North Delhi coordinated with GeoHazards Society to carry out the activities.

"The purpose of the Tibetan Schools Shake-Out Drill is to help all Tibetan schools to prepare for earthquakes and to prevent natural hazards from becoming disasters in terms of death, suffering and losses. Such drills need to be conducted in every school in hazard prone regions on a regular basis" said Tsering Dhundup, GeoHazards International, the coordinator of the Tibetan Schools Shake-Out Drill. Students and staff of these schools were sensitized on earthquake safety earlier and had been practicing the drill regularly. Posters, coloring books and other resource materials were distributed for further reference.

At the drill held in Upper Tibetan Children's Village (TCV) School, Geshe Lhakdor (Director, Library of Tibetan Works and Archives) and Tibetan Welfare Officer of Dharamshala were present to observe the event. Besides them, TCV General Secretary, TCV Education Director and Village Director of Upper TCV were among those present to observe and assess this landmark event that had evoked so much interest in the community.



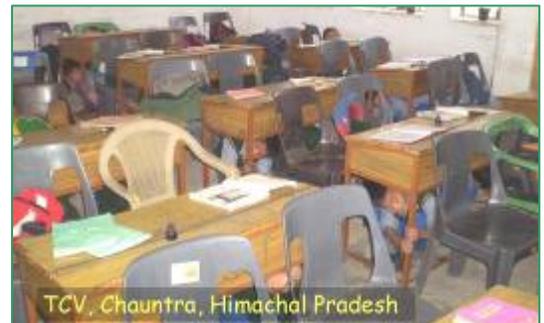
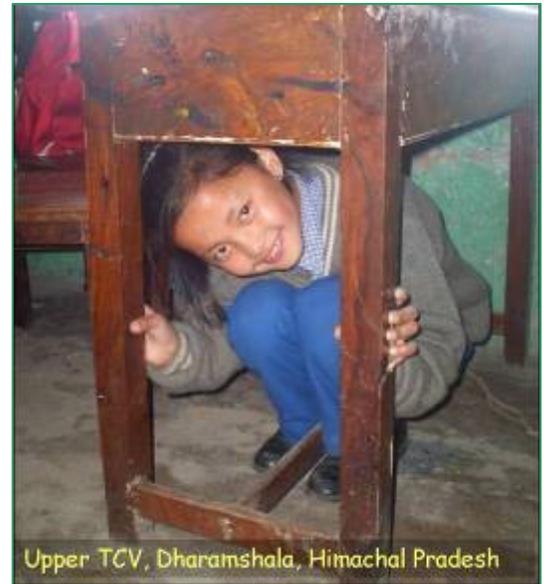
At precisely 10 a.m. local time, when the drum started to beat, all the students of Upper TCV School practiced drop, cover and hold on under their desk. A minute later, when the drum-roll stopped, the teachers got out of their positions under their desks, stood outside the door and observed the evacuation of students in a systematic manner without any rush or disorder. All the students started out from their classrooms covering their heads with their hands and gathered at the school ground, where class teachers took a roll-call to check if all have been safely evacuated.

"If we are prepared, it gives you an automatic sense of calmness. So practicing earthquake drills is extremely important as there will be less panic, fear and anxiety. Hence, lesser casualties when the real one strikes." said Yangzom, a student of the senior section of the school. At one side of the football ground, a medical post was set up where 'injured' victims, some wearing gory make-up, were given treatment while those having 'major injuries' were ferried to the nearest hospital.

At the same time as the drill in Upper TCV School, similar drills were also conducted in Tibetan Schools across Himachal Pradesh, Uttaranchal, Delhi and Meghalaya. When the first alarm bell sounded to indicate the start of the earthquake, staff and students responded immediately by dropping under their desks for cover. They dropped to the ground, took cover under their desk and held on to it until the warning stopped. After that, they safely evacuated from the school building and gathered at their designated safe areas for the roll-call.

At TCV Chauntra, the earthquake safety drill was conducted twice. Much after the first scheduled drill at 10 a.m. was concluded; the school organized a surprise drill to test the actual level of preparedness in the school. Namdol Tashi, the principal of the school, said his students responded very well. "They did exactly what they'd been practicing and did a wonderful job."

Various Disaster Response Teams formed at CST (Central School for Tibetans) Paonta School including the Search and Rescue Team, Medical Team and Fire Safety Team also performed their respective roles. Search and Rescue Team members dressed in yellow rescued those 'trapped' in the building, while those injured were treated by the Medical Team wearing blue jerseys.



The Fire Safety Team, in red, geared up with fire extinguishers to fight fire, if any.

In the Northeastern Indian State of Meghalaya, another school conducted the drill twice. Along with the other schools, the Sambhota School in Shillong had carried out the drill at 10:00 am when the students were in their classrooms. However, the Principal used the opportunity to conduct another drill when the students were back in their hostels as well. The only difference this time were that the children did the 'drop, cover and hold' exercise under their beds rather than tables! After the drill they evacuated safely. Here again, the response teams were quick to swing into action. Search and Rescue Team members helped those 'trapped' and handed them over to the First Aid post where they were treated and triage was done with red, yellow and green ribbons tied on the wrist of the patients according to the severity of the injury.

In all the schools that took part in the drill, the students and staff had short debriefing sessions to discuss the value of the effort, identify mistakes and ways of improving the actions. When contacted, the principal of all schools overwhelmingly supported the idea to, "conduct it on a regular basis" with some even wanting to do it on a monthly basis for various hazards.

The response to the drill has exceeded expectations and students, staff and parents in these schools have promised to carry forward the initiative. This has been the first ever drill involving Tibetan Schools in the country and has sent the message of preparedness to all the Schools in hazard prone regions. GeoHazards International, California, USA and GeoHazards Society, India have been working together in the region in various aspects of disaster risk reduction with special focus on school and hospital safety.

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