the magnitude of 7 or 8 in Richter scale will certainly destroy most of the urban infrastructure with the loss of lives in the thousands. There are only two earthquake forewarning systems in the world that give a warning of only 15 seconds ahead but unfortunately Bangladesh owns neither. But the key reason behind such devastation, if God forbid ever it would occur, it will be due to the unplanned urbanisation of the country. Even though in recent years PWD commenced the application of Earthquake Resistant Designs in constructions but given the nature, distribution and characteristics, the majority of infrastructures in the capital are not earthquake resistant. As a result, the likelihood of the response of those infrastructures to major earthquakes will be ruinous. According to the regulations of RAJUK, buildings in residential areas generally cannot go beyond the sixth floor. But in reality we see a completely different picture as many buildings go up to 10 floors or more violating the vital regulations. The owners, along with the Government authorities must shoulder the blame for such atrocities which have increased the vulnerability of these structures. And this is just one example of how humans increase this vulnerability. This extent of damage will not only be limited to infrastructures and lives but also will put severe loss on the country's economy reaching millions of dollars. One can only shudder at the thought of how a city with a population of over 12 million and being the centre of economy, commerce, politics and society, would be able to function as the capital of Bangladesh with such immense loss of lives and property.

It certainly is a grim picture. However, there are several efforts through which one can prepare to minimise the damage and save lives. Since earthquakes strike violently and without warning, identifying potential hazards ahead of time and advance planning can reduce the dangers of serious injury or loss of life. Repairing potential hazards like fixing cracks in ceilings and foundations, anchoring overhead lighting fixtures, repairing defective electrical wiring and leaky gas connections should be some preliminary steps of such preparations. This could be followed by identifying the "safe spots" in the home, such as against the inside walls, as well as the "danger spots" in the home such as windows, mirrors and hanging objects and equipping the family with disaster supplies such as flashlight, first aid kits, emergency food, water, medicines, cash and contacts of ambulances and fire and rescue services. Lastly, advanced planning efforts could be strengthened by educating families with the do's and don'ts during and after an earthquake and developing mitigation plans involving the communities.

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But what does one do when the real thing happens? It must be remembered that most earthquake-related casualties result from collapsing walls, flying glass, and falling objects. The surprising nature of earthquake compels us to react instantly from exactly the situation that we find ourselves in. If indoors, the suggestion is to take cover under a sturdy table or furniture. But in the case of high-rise buildings, one needs to move away from desks and tables, and other heavy equipment and take position against an interior wall and protect the head with arms. It is further suggested that one should stay inside until shaking stops and it is safe to go outside, since research has shown that most injuries occur when people inside buildings attempt to move to a different location inside the building or try to leave. If outdoors, the lucky persons should stay out in the open and move away from buildings, streetlights, and utility wires. If in a moving vehicle, stop the car quickly to a spot that is no way near or under buildings, trees, overpasses, and utility wires. In the case of crowded places, the advice is not to panic and rush towards exits but to calmly move away from objects that could fall. If the earthquake happens to be a major one then unfortunately many would find themselves under debris however it is recommended that one does not light a match, cover the mouth with any clothing and try not to move about with certain knowledge of the infrastructural damage. It is also recommended to tap walls or pipes to seek rescuers' attention since shouting can cause a person to inhale dangerous amounts of dust. Immediately following an earthquake one also should be prepared to endure aftershocks, check for fire, water and gas leakages and administer first aid if there is any injury.

Precautions and proper application of level-headedness are the best defenses against the aggression of nature, especially in the form of an earthquake. While we the citizens could prepare ourselves from individual perspectives, the respective authorities should also express their solidarity and sincerity in matters concerning earthquake and its aftermath while there is still time. If not, then tragically we all might end up witnessing a catastrophe chiefly instigated not by earthquake but due to insincere management and inadequate mitigation approach from the authorities. ■