

City ill-equipped to battle a blaze: CAG report

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By Dilip Chaware/TNN

Mumbai: Mumbai is sitting on a fire bomb. According to the latest report of the Comptroller and Auditor-General of India (CAG), which was presented recently to the state legislature, the city is largely ill-prepared to deal with fire break-outs, given the pathetic state of its fire-fighting equipment.

The report, which covers a six-year period from 1997 to 2003, notes that the Mumbai fire brigade's January 2003 survey of 3,250 highrise buildings built after 1975 revealed that 40 per cent of the structures either did not have fire-fighting systems or, if present, were not in working condition.

The BMC is perhaps the only civic body to have a separate cell to inspect highrise buildings. The cell, created in 1998, has reported that all the 63 highrise buildings constructed in the defence area (Navy Nagar) in south Mumbai either lacked fire-fighting equipment or had equipment that was not fully functional.

The condition of fire-fighting equipment in the city can be gauged from the fact that the fire which broke out in the BMC headquarters on January 13,

2000, could not be fought properly because of defunct fixed and portable fire-fighting equipment. Ironically, the fire brigade is under the BMC.

The report laments the low-budget provisions for fire-fighting. For instance, over the six-

year period, the BMC budgets in aggregate crossed Rs 24,000 crore but just Rs 64.58 crore was allocated to fire services and preventive measures. "This works out to only 0.27 per cent of the expenditure," the report points out. It

further reveals that just about Rs 34 crore of this amount was actually spent on fire services. The Standing Fire Advisory Council, an all-India body, has a norm that there should be one fire station every 10.24 sq km. Against this norm, CAG discov-

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ered that although 220 fire stations were required for the eight municipal corporations it checked, there were only 54. Out of 225 municipal councils checked by CAG, 100 did not have any kind of fire service. Bhiwan-

di-Nizampur and Malegaon municipal corporations, owing to their high population density and a large number of factories, were not classified as high vulnerable areas by the authorities despite the council's clear norms. "The two bodies have only three and one fire stations respectively, against the required 21 and seven," the report says.

The council also stipulates that there should be one fire tender for a population of 50,000. Accordingly, the civic bodies scanned by CAG should possess 506 fire engines. But the state advisor on fire informed CAG that only 386 engines were available.

Mumbai has lost over 2,400 lives in fires in the past six years because of inadequate fire-fighting equipment while the rest of Maharashtra's loss of life for the same period was 1,125. Loss to property caused by fire was about Rs 8,000 crore. Interestingly, the loss of property in Mumbai was only Rs 58.92 crore, while it was a staggering Rs 7,953.40 crore for the rest of the state. However, in the case of Nagpur and Aurangabad, CAG notes that the estimate of property loss was given by the victims and not experts.