

The Effectiveness of Foreign Military Assets in Natural Disaster Response

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and Tim Randall**



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Executive summary

This study examines the advantages, limitations and implications of using foreign military assets as part of the international response after major natural disasters. Humanitarian principle dictates that all available resources—including military assets—should be used to minimize the human cost of a natural disaster. In recognition of the fact that humanitarian relief is and should remain a predominantly civilian function, international norms have been established that place conditions and limitations on the use of foreign military assets in disaster relief operations: these assets should be used only if they meet a genuine humanitarian need, operate in accordance with humanitarian principles and complement and coordinate with the other components of the relief effort. Foreign military assets are and will remain a common feature of major international disaster relief assistance. However, significant questions have been raised regarding their deployment, use and withdrawal. The outstanding problems and uncertainties need to be urgently addressed.

This study provides an overview of recent developments in the use of foreign military assets in response to major natural disasters, based on primary and secondary data. Four case studies of recent disaster relief operations that have involved major deployments of foreign military assets have been used to contextualize the general observations and give examples of good and bad practice. These case studies examine the responses to: floods and cyclones in Mozambique in 2000; the 2004 floods and tropical windstorms in Haiti; the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami (focusing on Aceh province, Indonesia); and the 2005 South Asian earthquake (focusing on Pakistan-administered Kashmir).

A changing landscape for emergency assistance

The recorded incidence of natural disasters and, more critically, large-scale disasters (10 000–99 999 people killed or affected) around the world has risen in the past 20 years. Most of this rise has been due to the increasing frequency of hydrometeorological hazards such as floods and windstorms. Predictions of increased climate variability alongside factors such as rapid urbanization, environmental degradation and weak governance suggest that these hazards are likely to happen more often and to have even more destructive effects on populations. In recent years many more actors—particularly non-governmental organizations but also foreign militaries—have started participating in international disaster

relief. The total aid provided for emergency assistance has increased, but the funding that is available for assistance to individual relief efforts may have decreased given the rise in the number of disasters occurring. Competition over resources is intensifying debate about cost-effectiveness in disaster relief.

Overview of the use of foreign military assets: 1997–2006

In the period 1997–2006 the military assets that were most commonly contributed to international disaster relief operations by the responding countries were: (a) air transport, including aeroplanes used for the transport of relief items and personnel; (b) medical assistance (field hospitals and personnel); and (c) expert personnel (in civil–military coordination and liaison, needs assessment and logistics).

Of the countries that provided data for this study, the USA deployed its military assets most frequently and in the greatest volume—15 times between 2003 and 2006 for disaster relief. Besides having unmatched financial and military resources and a network of overseas military bases, the USA has an explicit policy of making its forces available for international humanitarian work. European countries have deployed military assets for natural disaster responses in Africa, Central America, the Middle East and, more recently, Asia, but rarely in Europe. The Netherlands, for example, reported 18 deployments between 1997 and 2006, including in Suriname and Pakistan. Outside Europe, Australia, Canada, India, Japan and South Africa respond more readily to natural disasters in neighbouring countries than to those outside their region, unless they already have military assets in the affected region. Some countries have policies limiting the use of their military assets in international disaster response.

The decision to request and deploy foreign military assets

When a natural disaster strikes abroad, a combination of factors will influence a government's decisions regarding what, if any, military assistance to offer: (a) the scale of the disaster and the humanitarian needs it creates; (b) the country's policies regarding the deployment of its military assets for international disaster relief; (c) whether the affected country has requested foreign military assistance; (d) the availability of military assets that are not engaged in higher priority tasks, and how quickly and easily those assets can reach the disaster site; (e) national interests; (f) diplomatic and historical relations with the affected country; and (g) media coverage of the disaster and the public

pressure it generates. Political and diplomatic considerations have in the past led to military assets being offered—and deployed—that do not match the humanitarian needs of the affected populations and have in some cases even reduced the efficiency of the overall response.

Factors that may influence an affected country's decision to request, or accept offers of, international assistance after a natural disaster include: the scale of the disaster and the humanitarian needs it creates; the level of preparedness for such a disaster at the national and sub-national levels; and how urgently particular capabilities are needed. For most governments, the primary concern is the welfare of the people affected by a disaster. Once it has been established that international assistance is needed, whether that assistance is provided by soldiers or civilians is of secondary importance and will not be allowed to delay its arrival. (This may not be the case in countries that are experiencing conflict or political instability.) A few disaster-prone countries, including China, India and North Korea, have policies against the deployment of foreign forces on their territories.

Countries affected by natural disasters usually turn first to their neighbours for assistance because of the proximity of their assets and of their probable good understanding of the political, social and geographic characteristics of the affected country. Most deployments of foreign military assets in disaster relief come through direct, bilateral negotiations between governments, or even between national militaries, based on established relationships, and rarely through the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). This is especially true in the first days of a disaster relief operation. Regional multilateral frameworks and other methods of coordinating the deployment and use of military assets in international disaster relief assistance have recently been explored.

The Guidelines on the Use of Military and Civil Defence Assets in Disaster Relief (Oslo Guidelines) were created in 1994 to provide an international normative and practical framework for the use of military and civil defence assets in natural disaster response. Application of the guidelines at the national level has been uneven. Most notably, the paragraph calling for foreign military assets to be used only as a 'last resort' has been interpreted and applied very differently by different actors. Integral to the concept of 'last resort' is whether the military asset can offer unique capabilities and availability. There are some areas where militaries unquestionably possess unique capabilities, primarily in transport, logistics and the ability to deploy rapidly. However, there is considerable disagreement among governments and humanitarian actors about how much weight to give these 'unique' characteristics when balancing them against issues such as cost burdens, the risk of militarizing the relief effort and how the presence of foreign troops affects civilian humanitarian actors' safety and freedom to operate.

The effectiveness of using foreign military assets

Six interconnected aspects of effectiveness in the use of foreign military assets were identified for this study: timeliness, appropriateness, efficiency, absorptive capacity, coordination and costs. These are used to examine recent experience in the use of foreign military assets in natural disaster relief and could be a starting point for developing tools for decision making regarding the deployment and withdrawal of foreign military assets.

Timeliness seems to be the main factor affecting the effectiveness of foreign military assets in a natural disaster response, especially in the first days and weeks of the operation. In particular, military aircraft can transport large quantities of relief supplies and other assets and military helicopters can support search-and-rescue operations. However, when promised military assets are slow to arrive and to start operating it may actually impede the response by preventing the deployment of civilian alternatives. The timely arrival of foreign military assets can be affected by their location at the time of the disaster, and bureaucratic delays relating to, for example, status-of-forces agreements.

The *appropriateness* of a military asset is determined by how well its capabilities meet the needs of the response and how suitable it is for the local cultural and political context in which it is operating. The study highlights the importance of needs assessments. Regular comprehensive, multi-stakeholder needs assessments, linked to a coordination framework, can help to ensure that the appropriate assets—military and civilian—are provided when they are needed and to facilitate the withdrawal of assets that are no longer required or appropriate.

The *efficiency* of a foreign military asset in a natural disaster response depends not only on the efficiency with which it carries out its assigned tasks but also on how well its capabilities are used within the larger operation. The former aspect is to a large extent affected by the techniques used; the latter is related to coordination of the relief operation and to how far foreign military contingents submit to coordination by other, often civilian, actors. Some countries that contribute military assets often insist on force-protection measures, which both reduce the efficiency of the operation and may intimidate or be resented by local populations.

The effectiveness of foreign military assets in disaster relief is also affected by *absorptive capacity* in the affected country—the ability of disaster management institutions to coordinate and effectively use the assets during the relief operation. While individual military assets tend to be relatively self-sufficient and thus to place a small burden on absorptive capacity, the arrival of large numbers of foreign military assets from different countries and with overlapping capabilities can cause serious problems.

Coordination between civilian humanitarian actors and military assets has been one of the greatest challenges created by the increasing deployment of foreign military assets. The differences in cultures, priorities and operating modes between military personnel and civilian actors have an impact not least on information sharing between the civilian and military spheres. Information management is crucial to the success or failure of any relief operations. This role is best and most suitably carried out by the United Nations, led by OCHA.

The *costs* of deploying military assets are generally higher than for civilian assets. This has caused concerns that foreign military assets are placing a disproportionate burden on humanitarian funds. However, the matter seems to be more complicated. Several countries have introduced measures whereby their defence ministry covers some or all of the costs of deploying military assets for overseas disaster relief, reducing their impact on humanitarian aid budgets. The implications of this for humanitarian funds at the international level are hard to gauge in the absence of greater transparency in reporting.

Recommendations

The report makes recommendations for potential contributors of military assets, countries that are prone to natural disasters, the UN, including OCHA and UN operational humanitarian agencies and other humanitarian organizations. The key recommendations are as follows.

- The decision to deploy military assets as part of international disaster relief assistance should be based primarily on the humanitarian needs and interests of the relief effort and the affected country and communities. In particular, the burden of coordination and the real and opportunity costs of accommodating and operating the asset for the affected government must be taken into account.
- Steps should be taken to improve the capacity of military commanders and forces in potential contributing countries to take part in natural disaster relief alongside humanitarian actors. This could be done through, for example, military training and ensuring that military doctrines, standard operating procedures and field manuals adequately reference humanitarian principles and elements of the Oslo Guidelines. In addition, humanitarian actors should be involved in the design of military training on humanitarian assistance and disaster response.
- National disaster management plans in countries prone to natural disasters should include provisions on how to assess the need for foreign military assets, how to request them, how to manage offers of military assets from foreign countries and how to manage the assets when they arrive.

- Generic status-of-forces agreements should be prepared to facilitate the timely deployment of foreign military assets in disaster relief.
- The UN should strengthen humanitarian coordinators' and resident coordinators' knowledge of disaster relief. They must be better able to advise the governments of countries prone to natural disasters on issues such as determining the need for specific military assets and transmitting requests for such assets to key actors in the region or, if necessary, to the wider international community.
- Regional capacities to respond to disasters should be developed and relevant institutional relationships strengthened, particularly between existing regional organizations and the UN regional offices. This would improve the effectiveness of foreign military assets in disaster relief, not least coordination with other actors.
- OCHA should expand the skills and expertise of UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) teams to include more civil–military liaison, logistics and information experts. They can be deployed with other key partners for the initial disaster impact appreciation. The UN should also take steps, including developing a funding base, to expand the roster of potential UNDAC team members so that countries in disaster-prone regions are better represented.
- Military actors should be included in needs assessment activities. Military assets can play an enabling role, including providing assets to facilitate the assessment missions. Involving military representatives in these activities can also help civil–military coordination, identifying the most useful role that military assets can play and facilitating requests for military assets that will best complement civilian capabilities.
- Needs assessments should be continually updated and refined. This can help to adjust the tasks of military and civilian actors and, importantly, to identify the earliest opportunities for military assets to be withdrawn and their responsibilities given to foreign or domestic civilian alternatives.
- The humanitarian community should develop indicators or benchmarks for each functional sector of an international disaster relief operation to guide decision making regarding when military assets can be withdrawn and responsibilities handed over to civilian actors. OCHA and the designated heads of the new UN cluster system should take the lead in this process.
- OCHA should review its current practices in the channelling and coordination of foreign military assets in natural disaster relief. While

it often plays a crucial role in the coordination of relief efforts, it is rarely the preferred channel for foreign military assets. In particular, OCHA's Register of Military and Civil Defence Assets has not been effectively used in the past decade. The role of the register should be analysed and reassessed.

- OCHA should maintain and improve its programme to disseminate and raise awareness of the Oslo Guidelines.
- Lessons learned and best practices workshops on the use of foreign military assets should become a regular feature of international disaster relief operations. These should be conducted under the aegis of the UN. The evaluation exercises of the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group would serve as a useful model.
- Governments and regional multilateral organizations should be encouraged to declassify and share any documentation from their own evaluations and assessments of contribution of military assets for international disaster relief.
- OCHA should create, maintain and promote transparent and accessible knowledge- and information-sharing systems on international disaster relief, including the use of foreign military assets. These systems should include a standing central electronic and physical document archive.

Abbreviations

ADF	Australian Defence Force
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASDF	Air Self-Defence Force (Japan)
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
Bakornas	National Coordinating Body for Disaster Management (Badan Koordinasi Nasional Penanggulangan Bencana dan Penanganan Pengungsi; Indonesia)
CARICOM	Caribbean Community
CCGC	Coordinating Council for Disaster Management (Conselho Coordenador de Gestão de Calamidades; Mozambique)
CDERA	Caribbean Disaster Emergency Response Agency
CENOE	National Emergency Operations Centre (Centro Nacional Operativo de Emergência; Mozambique)
CHAP	Common humanitarian action plan
CIMIC	Civil–military coordination
CMCS	OCHA Civil–Military Coordination Section
CMOC	Civil and military operations centre
CSG-I	US Combined Support Group–Indonesia
CTGC	Disaster Management Technical Council (Conselho Técnico de Gestão de Calamidades; Mozambique)
CVM	Mozambique Red Cross (Cruz Vermelha de Moçambique)
DAC	OECD Disaster Assistance Committee
DfID	Department for International Development (UK)
DPCCN	Department for the Prevention and Combat of Natural Disasters (Departamento de Prevenção e Combate às Calamidades Naturais; Mozambique)
EADRCC	NATO Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre
ECHO	European Commission Directorate-General for Humanitarian Aid
EM-DAT	OFDA/CRED International Disaster Database
ERC	Emergency Relief Cell (Pakistan)
EU	European Union
FRC	Federal Relief Commission (Pakistan)
GAM	Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka)
GSDF	Ground Self-Defence Force (Japan)
HAST	Humanitarian assistance survey team
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDRA	International disaster relief assistance
IFPPD	Indonesian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

INGC	National Disaster Management Institute (Instituto Nacional de Gestao de Calamidades; Mozambique)
IOM	International Organization for Migration
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
JLOC	Joint Logistics Operation Centre (UN)
LOC	Line of Control
LST	Tank landing ship
MASH	Mobile army surgical hospital (US)
MCDA	Military and civil defence assets
MDM	Médecins du Monde
MIF-H	Multinational Interim Force–Haiti
MINUSTAH	UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti
MOU	Memorandum of understanding
MSDF	Maritime Self-Defence Force (Japan)
MSF	Mèdecins Sans Frontières
NAC	NATO North Atlantic Council
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OAS	Organization of American States
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFDA	Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance
OSOCC	On-site Operations Coordination Centre
PAHO	Pan American Health Organization
SAAF	South African Air Force
SAF	Singapore Armed Forces
SAHIMS	Southern African Human-Development Information Management Network for Coordinated Humanitarian and Development Action
SANDF	South African National Defence Force
Satkorlak	Provincial disaster management office (Satuan Koordinasi Pelaksana Penanggulangan Bencana dan Penanganan Pengungsi; Indonesia)
SOG	Strategic Oversight Group (Pakistan)
SOP	Standard operating procedure
TNI	Armed Forces of Indonesia (Tentara Nasional Indonesia)
UNDAC	United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHAS	UN Humanitarian Air Service
UNHCR	UN High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UNMOGIP	UN Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan
USAID	US Agency for International Development
USPACOM	US Pacific Command
USSOUTHCOM	US Southern Command
WFP	World Food Programme

