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# Lessons from Department of Defense Disaster Relief Efforts in the Asia-Pacific Region

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## Summary

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This report analyzes recent humanitarian HA/DR operations to identify useful lessons for the U.S. government (USG) and the Department of Defense (DoD). DoD has long been able to play a major role in international disaster relief thanks to its budget, manpower, and forward-deployed resources. The Asia-Pacific region is of particular importance to the United States because it bears the brunt of more than half of the world's natural disasters and is home to numerous key U.S. allies. This report analyzes recent HA/DR operations in the region to take stock of lessons that have emerged and ensure greater success in the future.

The United States is only one of many disaster assistance providers in the Asia-Pacific region. Other governments, international and regional organizations, and international and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) intervene as well, often with capabilities that complement those of the United States. Further, some countries have invested major resources in improving their disaster response capacity over the past few years. Future efforts will require, first and foremost, the ability to leverage the comparative advantages of our allies and partners in the region to help cope with HA/DR challenges and the ability to cooperate with these partners during disaster responses. Exploring ways to improve coordination and communication with these different assistance providers will enable DoD to respond more efficiently to disasters; use its unique capabilities where they are most needed; and limit the costs of interventions, which are likely to become even more numerous in the future.

## Study Purpose and Approach

This report seeks to assist DoD and the broader U.S. policymaking community in understanding the key lessons from major HA/DR operations in which DoD played an important role in the response. This report focuses on lessons identified from four relatively recent HA/DR events in Burma, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Japan.

It identifies, in particular, lessons in the following areas:

- interagency coordination
- communication with the affected country
- coordination with other state and non-state actors, including at the regional level
- prospects for U.S. security cooperation and BPC for disaster response
- prospects for the increased involvement of regional organizations in HA/DR.

In addition to developing overarching lessons from the four case studies, this report identifies some of the complementary and unique capabilities and comparative advantages that exist around the region. It also presents options for best leveraging these capabilities to deal with future disasters and assesses various crisis management mechanisms and processes used with allies and partners that can be applied to other contingencies.

The findings and recommendations in this report were informed by DoD after-action and lessons-learned reports, academic and think tank reports, media reporting, and numerous focused discussions with U.S. and foreign officials, representatives of international organizations (IOs) and NGOs, and academics and think tank researchers.

## Case Studies

Our case studies were chosen to illustrate a wide range of contingencies with different types of disasters, levels of damage, levels of access, and variance in the affected country's capabilities. The diversity of these

cases highlights lessons that may be applicable to similar future disasters (e.g., in countries reluctant to accept U.S. aid, as in the cases of Pakistan and Burma), as well as lessons that cut across cases and should be applicable to any contingency the United States will have to respond to in the future.

### **Cyclone Nargis, Burma**

In May 2008, a cyclone devastated the Irrawaddy Delta region of Burma, affecting 2.4 million people. The response to this disaster illustrates the difficulty of providing HA/DR to a population whose government restricts access to foreign assistance providers. For the United States, this event was nonetheless an opportunity to engage with Burma. It also gave the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) a chance to be operational for the first time on the HA/DR front and to play a key role in the negotiations that opened up the country, at least to some extent, to external assistance.

### **Padang Earthquake, Indonesia**

The earthquake that struck Indonesia in September 2009 was one of many natural disasters affecting the region at that time, prompting the United States and the Indonesian government to quickly redirect their assets towards Padang, one of the most affected cities. This event was an opportunity for Indonesia to put its recently created National Agency for Disaster Management to the test and for the United States to deploy, for the first time, a Humanitarian Assistance Rapid Response Team (HARRT), an Air Force field hospital that can be set up quickly to provide care to populations.

### **Monsoon Floods, Pakistan**

When abnormally intense monsoon rains resulted in the flooding of one-fifth of Pakistan's territory in the second half of 2010, the international community's response was massive—and the United States was its greatest single contributor. Although the United States filled an important niche requirement for airlift support, some Pakistani officials, fearful of encroachments on Pakistani sovereignty, accepted U.S. assistance only reluctantly. This case highlights the importance of stra-

tegic communication in HA/DR, even when humanitarian objectives are successfully met, and illustrates the challenges of conducting HA/DR in an insecure environment.

### **The Great East Japan Earthquake, Japan**

The response to the unprecedented earthquake, tsunami, and subsequent nuclear disaster that occurred in Japan in March 2011 involved 24,000 U.S. servicemembers, 189 aircraft, 24 naval ships, and cost \$90 million. This disaster response illustrates the wide array of capabilities the United States can bring to bear on an incredibly complex disaster and also illustrates the special role the United States assumes in a disaster that directly affects its forward-based forces. As a capable and key ally, Japan was generally able to respond to this disaster, with the exception of the nuclear incident at the Fukushima power plant, where considerable U.S. expertise and capabilities were required.

While some common themes emerged from the case studies, many of the lessons were case-study specific. The response to the Japanese disaster was the largest and most complex HA/DR and consequence management operation, and was far from the norm in the region. Some cases, such as that of Indonesia, illustrate the importance of working with civilian humanitarian organizations and inter-governmental organizations. In other cases, such as that of Japan and Pakistan, the military was necessarily relied upon to provide relief. We found that it is important to unpack each case individually to better understand its context, politics, the nature of the response effort, challenges, and overall lessons, as well as to identify ways in which DoD could have been more effective and efficient.

## **Findings and Recommendations**

The analysis set forth in this report suggests that DoD can improve its proficiency in HA/DR and its ability to coordinate with other assistance providers by implementing key lessons from past interventions. The research team broke down these key lessons and their associated recommendations along six imperatives: (1) improving DoD's effi-

ciency as an HA/DR provider, (2) enhancing interagency coordination, (3) improving coordination with affected countries, (4) working more effectively with the United Nations (UN) and NGOs, (5) aligning security cooperation activities and regional HA/DR capabilities, and (6) building goodwill through HA/DR.

### **Improving DoD's Efficiency as an HA/DR Provider**

Case studies offer contrasting views of the quality of DoD's internal coordination in HA/DR missions. In complex disasters, such as that of the Japan case study, the lack of a single military point of contact (POC) made it difficult for civilian U.S. agencies and IOs to identify the most effective channels of communication with the U.S. military. What all case studies show, however, is the importance of personal connections between individuals involved in the disaster response. Such connections considerably facilitate coordination.

#### ***Recommendations:***

- Whenever possible, select personnel with previous HA/DR experience to lead disaster response.
- Encourage the participation of senior military in the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Joint Humanitarian Operations Course.
- Explore making HA/DR a qualification or special skill identifier for individuals with such experience, or ensure that DoD keeps track of individuals with direct HA/DR experience.

### **Enhancing Interagency Coordination**

Our case studies suggest that, while the quality of interagency coordination has generally improved, it depends greatly on the specific circumstances of each disaster. Factors that facilitate or hamper interagency coordination include the following: (1) prior experience in disaster response and knowledge of interagency coordination mechanisms by the individuals in charge; (2) the extent to which individuals in leadership positions have prior personal connections that facilitate communication; and (3) the degree of media exposure of a given disas-

ter, which, when high, can add considerable pressure to act quickly and visibly, sometimes to the detriment of coordination.

**Recommendations:**

- Consider having one or more representatives from the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy (OSD/P) or the Joint Staff on the embassy team during an HA/DR crisis in which there is a significant U.S. response involving multiple USG agencies.
- Clarify authorities and simplify the use of annual Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster Assistance, and Civic Aid (OHDACA) funds, especially in foreign consequence management (FCM)/chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) cases.
- Develop templates for funding requests that can facilitate and expedite this process.
- Develop exercises that help improve interagency coordination (e.g., Special Operations Capability Exercise [SOCEX]).
- Set standards for operating and living in a CBRN environment.
- Integrate civilians in the planning and coordination structure (e.g., consider a civil-military operational center rather than a Bilateral Coordination Council [BCC] structure in FCM cases).

**Improving Coordination with Affected Countries**

Several of our case studies suggest that a lack of standard operating procedures between the United States and affected countries created delays in HA/DR responses. Creating or improving standard operating procedures with potential HA/DR recipients requires a solid institutional and cultural knowledge of these countries. Such knowledge also facilitates almost every aspect of HA/DR interventions and minimizes both tensions with the affected country's government and potential blunders with the population.

**Recommendations:**

- Capture key lessons regarding the institutions, bureaucracy, infrastructure, and key individuals in charge in potential HA/DR recipient countries.
- Articulate a new strategy and doctrine (or at least establish the “business rules”) for HA/DR with first-tier, capable allies, as compared with less capable partners.
- Develop institutional relations and contingency planning with national disaster agencies early on; if possible, set up coordination cell structures with these agencies.
- Improve foreign disclosure expertise during HA/DR deployments; ensure that NOFORN classification is kept to a minimum so as to maintain the highest possible degree of communication with affected countries.
- Reach an early agreement with affected countries on the information-sharing platform to be used.

**Working More Effectively with the UN and NGOs**

While communication between the military and IOs/NGOs has considerably improved in the past 20 years, further means of sharing operational details could be developed through targeted exercises at the operational level. Moreover, finding a commonly accepted platform for communicating with nonmilitary organizations is an issue requiring early resolution.

**Recommendations:**

- Develop exercises that focus on joint planning between the U.S. military and IOs/NGOs.
- Develop shorter events (2–3 days) to optimize participation from understaffed civilian agencies and NGOs.
- Explore how other countries facilitate collaboration between their military and NGOs (e.g., the UK and Australia).

- Improve knowledge of the supply standards between DoD and civilian agencies and make lists available of the commercial providers of supplies that meet these standards.

### **Aligning Security Cooperation Activities and Regional HA/DR Capabilities**

Security cooperation is a primary vehicle to prepare affected countries to respond better to their own disasters, as well as those of their neighbors. It is also a prime mission area in which to improve interoperability and facilitate future HA/DR cooperation. Based on our four case studies, a few countries in the Asia-Pacific region appear particularly promising in terms of HA/DR capabilities. It is also worth noting that the participation of international militaries outside of the Pacific Command (PACOM) area of responsibility (AOR) is infrequent and unreliable. Consequently, HA/DR capacity-building efforts within the PACOM AOR will likely be most effective for Asia-Pacific area disaster response. ASEAN's institutional progress with regards to HA/DR has yet to translate into operational capability. Regional rivalries and tensions are also likely to make some countries prefer outside interveners to regional responders.

#### ***Recommendations:***

- Tailor whole-of-government exercises for practicing HA/DR and FCM in a complex environment.
- Build partner capacity with Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Bangladesh, whose militaries have shown a willingness to engage in HA/DR.
- Encourage greater contributions from South Korea and India, which both have the capacity to do more to support HA/DR operations.

### **Building Goodwill Through HA/DR**

All four case studies clearly show that, although HA/DR is commonly presented as a relatively benign form of foreign military intervention,

affected countries do not always perceive it as such and are acutely aware of potential political repercussions, both internally and externally.

In light of this perspective, foreign assistance should always be seen as being in support of the affected country's greater effort.

***Recommendations:***

- Plan for each contingency what degree of visibility the U.S. response should have in comparison with the affected country's institutions.
- Emphasize the importance of delivering unified USG messages, because conflicting messages can undermine the confidence-building benefits of HA/DR interventions.
- Identify clearly who in the affected country should be the focus of the strategic communication effort.

In addition to these proposed changes, the four case studies highlighted a number of good current practices that should be continued:

- Relationship-building through professional military education (PME) and liaison officers (LNOs), as well as senior-level engagement activities, such as the Pacific Air Chiefs Conference and the Executive Observer Program in Red Flag.
- Flag officer attendance at USAID's Joint Humanitarian Operations Course, which enables them to gain more detailed knowledge of humanitarian principles and USAID's mode of operation.
- HA/DR capacity-building and disaster risk prevention.
- The use of airborne intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) (a U.S. niche capability) in HA/DR contexts and imagery-sharing with other assistance providers.
- Negotiations toward a model contingency arrangement within the ASEAN Regional Forum to cover military personnel participating in HA/DR.