

Good practices and recommendations in response to natural disasters in the Atlantic

Background

The characteristics of natural disasters may vary significantly as they can be basically divided in two main different categories: rapid and slow onset disasters.

This paper will focus on the first category, as it requires an immediate response. However, most of this analysis will be applicable to both cases.

Rapid onset disasters should be addressed on a case-by-case basis, as they may include a diverse set of events such earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, landslides, volcanic eruptions, windstorms, wildfires, typhoons, floods, and avalanches.

In certain cases, the magnitude of the natural disaster may exceed the capability of the affected state and it will require the international community to provide disaster relief assistance.

This kind of disasters and civil emergency situations are increasing in numbers and scale and they have led to more situations where military forces and civilian relief agencies are operating in the same environment. In these cases, coordination between civilian and military actors becomes essential for the success of the international emergency response.

Particularly, the vast majority of the Atlantic region countries are coastal states so in addition to be able to receive support through air assets, they can be reached by projecting humanitarian aid on naval assets across the sea.

Operation Hispaniola

The most valuable good practices and lessons learned for the Spanish Armed Forces emerged after the disaster relief operation conducted in response to the earthquake occurred in Haiti on 12 January 2010. Spain responded to appeals for humanitarian aid establishing the “Operation Hispaniola” as a Humanitarian Response Operation to an emergency situation in this country.

In this particular case, due to the limitation of the local infrastructures in Haiti, even though before the disaster, it was recommended to deploy self-sustaining assets. The decision was made to utilise a large amphibious ship as a mobile base capable to host, support and shelter the multiple capabilities required to conduct this relief operation.

However, as an immediate action, a high readiness Search and Rescue Team of the Military Emergency Unit was detached by air in order to provide immediate reaction aid to the victims. At the same time, an Operational Liaison and Reconnaissance Team was deployed as well, in order to gather all the necessary pieces of information for the planning of the operation.

It can be easily understood that the amphibious ship had to get underway well before the operation planning was totally finalised due to the long period required to cross the

Atlantic and the need to save as many lives as possible. However, the impact of the limited time at disposal for planning and force generation was mitigated by detaching some personnel and equipment by air during her oceanic transit.

Because natural disasters can have cascading effects, the following capabilities were implemented:

- **Public Health.**
It included medical care, provision of medicines and vaccination. The public health campaign was coordinated with the local authorities and with the World Health Organisation.
- **Water supply.**
Besides production of fresh water, a water bottling plant was also identified as a requirement.
- **Logistic transportation and evacuation of victims.**
Land vehicles, helicopters, and landing crafts were utilised day and night.
- **Sappers.**
Demolition and removal of debris.
- **Security and Force Protection.**

Operation figures

The overall results of the operation were as follows:

- **Immediate response:** one Search and Rescue team of 37 people.
- **Planned response:** one amphibious ship, four helicopters, two landing crafts multiple land vehicles, one medical unit, one sapper unit, one security unit. A total of 450 troops were deployed for three months.
- **Humanitarian relief services provided:** 8,246 patients received medical treatment, 21,420 people received vaccination and 611,500 liters of fresh water were delivered to the local population.

Lessons learned and good practices

Based on the experience of “Operation Hispaniola” and other humanitarian relief operations and activities conducted by the Spanish Armed Forces and in order to improve the overall effectiveness in this kind of operations, it is advisable to take into account the following recommendations:

- At the political level:
 - Receive from the host nation authorities a detailed initial description of the humanitarian needs in response to the disaster.
 - Coordinate the initial provision of capabilities amongst all donors through an international or regional organisation (ideally) or entity in the shortest time possible in order to deploy the bulk of the emergency relief assets. National Search and Rescue Teams will likely need to be detached immediately after the disaster and always prior to reach a general international agreement.

– At the planning and execution levels:

- Military activities within a disaster relief operation should always lay under civilian control.
- Consider to provide indirect support to the population through civilian organisations, clarifying whether the conditions recommend direct support. It is advisable to lead only if it is requested by the host nation or the leading international organisation.
- Early identification of the most likely areas where the military may be required to assist. This will allow both contingency and deliberate planning.
- Establish the following permanent coordination structures in order to bolster effectiveness and to avoid duplication of efforts:
 - Civil-Military coordination cell to make sure that information exchange takes place between the military with international organisations and NGOs.
 - Direct liaison with the host nation authorities (both at national and local levels), in order to deconflict activities and coordinate assistance from the host nation if needed.
 - Coordination links with other military relief contingents in the same area of operations.
 - Constantly liaise with the population and create trust and acceptance to avoid confusion over the military's role and presence in relief operations. Include women in these cells in order to establish a gender approach to operations.
- Conduct joint civil-military assessments in order to support planning and execution adequately.
- Identify the international organisations or Atlantic defence cooperation structures or initiatives that may have a role in the relief operation.
 - UN entities, funds and programs related with humanitarian assistance and disaster relief¹.
 - European Union².
 - NATO³.
 - International and regional organisations.
 - NGOs with presence in the area.
 - Clusters of organisations for specific categories of projects.
 - Other organisations.

1 These include the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), World Food Program (WFP), the UN High Commissioner for the Refugees (UNHRC), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Health Organization (WHO), and the UN Development Program (UNDP) as well as many others.

2 European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) is responsible for rapid and effective delivery of EU relief assistance in response to natural disasters.

3 Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) and the Euro Atlantic Disaster Response Unit (EADRU) are basic elements of the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Capability which contributes and supports UN entities during disaster relief operations.

- A framework of security is a key enabler of all humanitarian relief activity for civilian and military presence. In certain cases, only the international military contingents may have the ability to generate such environments.
- Do not overextend the disaster relief support beyond the available capabilities and capacities, as this may endanger the overall military mission.
- Develop an exit and transition to civilian ownership strategy as early as possible for the services that are being provided.
- From a health perspective:
 - A large and varied stock of medicines should be always available as a large consumption rate is always expected in this kind of operations.
 - Include a vaccination campaign and preventive medicine assets for the civilian population.
 - Include medical specialists and medicine spares of gynecology, obstetrics and pediatrics as these areas are expected to be some of the most hampered by any disaster situation.
 - Coordinate with other organisations or agencies in order to establish processes for the distribution of medical material.
- Establish a logistic support structure prior to the deployment of the military contingent. Whenever feasible, private logistic operators should reach the military end-users for deliveries, in order to allocate the military logistic resources to the provision of services to the local population (directly or indirectly through civilian entities).

Conclusions and Proposals

The most significant difficulties observed during the planning phase of these kind of operations are related with the lack of time to develop a comprehensive Operations Plan at the national level.

A recommended action to mitigate these difficulties at the national level is to draw up a Generic Contingency Plan in order to facilitate the drafting of an Operations Plan for a specific Humanitarian Response Operation and its proper coordination with the international relief effort.

Any national level Generic Contingency Plan should be ideally integrated within an overarching Contingency Plan at the international or regional levels, in order to maximize effectiveness, to avoid duplication of efforts and to shorten the coordination needs to trigger the real-world operation. It should include at least the following:

- Set of generic relief capacities associated with any specific type of emergency.
- Initial set of assets required to facilitate and shorten a future force generation process.
- Identify relations with international and regional organisations with responsibilities in humanitarian relief activities. It would include visibility on their regional contingency plans, if they exist.

- Integrate governmental civilian and military resources as national contributions.
- Establish a basic Command and Control structure at the regional and national levels.

The integration of military and civilian resources is not simple, even though belonging to the same country. In the case of the military, it is often easier to integrate with military from a different country as their internal organisation and procedures are usually very similar. In the case of the coordination of the military with NGOs, because the latter have an enormous diversity of structures, it is advisable to establish permanent information exchange links and to deepen this coordination only on a case-by-case basis.

On the other hand, the vastity of the Atlantic space doesn't facilitate the employment of a single organisation in order to coordinate in advance the contribution of all countries that potentially could become donors of a humanitarian relief operation.

Furthermore, it doesn't seem advisable to create brand new inter-regional disaster relief structures that will highly likely increase the complexity of any humanitarian relief planning activity. However, national and international security and defence centres and research institutions could provide a valuable contribution to the development of concepts and doctrine related to this and other matters.

In this regard, single nation coordination through the existing international and regional organisations, structures and initiatives is recommended as the most practical way for the design, planning and execution of contingency measures in response to emergency situations.