When Disaster Strikes:
Understanding FHA/DR Key Players and Processes

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The Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Jonathan Greenert, has made it exceptionally clear through his strategic guidance that Navy’s principal tenet is “Warfighting First.” However, further examination of the CNO’s Sailing Directions, Navigation Plan, and policy speeches reveal that while warfighting is the Navy’s primary mission, it exists alongside many other missions that the Navy must be ready to execute 24/7.

In January 2012 President Barack Obama and Secretary Leon Panetta promulgated strategic guidance to the Department of Defense (DOD) in “Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense,” which clearly states that a key mission of United States (US) armed forces is to conduct Foreign Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief (FHA/DR) (sometimes referred to as disaster response) operations when required. Providing justification for the rationale behind using DOD capabilities to conduct such missions, the document further explains that “the nation has frequently called upon its armed forces to respond to a range of situations that threaten the safety and well-being of its citizens and those of other countries. US forces possess rapidly deployable capabilities, including airlift and sealift, surveillance, medical evacuation and care, and communications that can be invaluable in supplementing lead relief agencies, by extending aid to victims of natural or man-made disasters, both at home and abroad.”

The Navy has been, and will continue to be, called upon to provide rapid support to disaster events around the world. Over the past eight years alone, from the southeast Asia tsunami in 2004, to the Pakistan earthquake in 2005, the earthquake in Haiti in 2010, and the Japan earthquake and tsunami in 2011, the Navy has played a critical role in providing support where needed. In virtually every FHA/DR operation that has been conducted, after-action reports and lessons learned have consistently highlighted the confusion that exists during the initial planning and response period while the affected nation, the United Nations (UN), the US, other supporting nations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and intergovernmental organization (IGOs) attempt to work together to provide the most efficacious response possible.

This is the first in a series of MOC Warfighter articles that investigates FHA/DR issues, and focuses on the key organizations and processes that DOD will interface with and support, as well as some of the basic principles that must be understood in order to provide MOC planners with a baseline level of knowledge to effectively plan a coordinated response and function within the typically ad hoc command and control (C2) structures that exist during FHA/DR operations. In particular, this article addresses several time-tested and emerging aspects of UN and US Agency for International Development (USAID) organization and doctrine that may be unfamiliar to many staff members.

Unlike most military operations, where a combatant commander is tasked to lead US activities, during FHA/DR the US military finds itself in a supporting role to the affected nation, through the US Government’s (USG) lead federal agency for FHA/DR, the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) within USAID.

The Host Nation

Regardless of the severity of the disaster and the host nation (HN) government’s ability to respond, from a strategic perspective the HN government will always remain in charge of disaster response operations within its borders. However, what often happens when the HN government’s capacity to respond is exceeded is that other organizations may need to take on leading roles in particular sectors of humanitarian action. In principle and in practice though, all organizations that respond, regardless of their affiliation, will be acting in support of the HN government.

The USG will normally only respond when a formal request has been received to provide support of some kind. The requirements for, and significance of a request of this nature are covered in more detail later in this article. The principle of the HN government remaining in the lead is important to remember, as all strategic guidance for FHA/DR operations should ultimately be disseminated from the HN government to each organization that is providing support.

The United Nations

The UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Activities (OCHA) is the primary organization responsible for coordinating international disaster response in support of an HN, and plays a pivotal leadership role within whatever ad hoc disaster response structure is developed for each incident that requires outside assistance. One of the key tenets the UN strives to adhere to during a relief effort is to conduct a needs-based, rather than a capacity-driven, response.

OCHA seeks to lead the international community’s efforts to create and execute a more effective architecture for FHA/DR operations, including strong on-scene humanitarian leaders, known as Humanitarian Coordinators (HCs), proficient and inclusive Humanitarian Country Teams (HCTs) that assist the HCs in planning and responding to crises, and a systematic and comprehensive framework that allows all players to contribute in an efficient and focused manner. While HN authorities have overall responsibility for the FHA/DR effort, the HC, or senior UN official on-scene, is responsible for helping to lead and coordinate the efforts of UN and non-UN organizations that are providing support. The HC and HCT play pivotal roles in coordinating and synchronizing the international response to an HN.

In an effort to better integrate civil-military (Note: the UN and other NGOs prefer the term “civilian-military”) coordination, the UN focuses heavily on its ability to harmonize its activities effectively with international militaries. OCHA works tirelessly during crises to enable effective response coordination to facilitate “dialogue and interaction between civilian and military actors, essential to protect and promote humanitarian principles, avoid competition, minimize inconsistency and, when appropriate, pursue common goals.”

UN “Cluster Approach”

The current UN international humanitarian coordination framework was created by General Assembly resolution 46/182 in December 1991. However, new elements were introduced by the Humanitarian Reform of 2005 in an effort to improve response capacity, accountability, predictability, leadership, and partnership. Despite the significant transformation of this humanitarian coordination system, there is still widespread misunderstanding of the most visible part of the reform, the “Cluster Approach,” which consists of groups of UN and non-UN humanitarian organizations that work in the primary sectors of HA action. These clusters are formed when clear humanitarian requirements exist within a sector, when national authorities request coordination support, or when there are many actors within sectors who are trying
to coordinate a response. When DOD is called upon to respond, it is usually during a crisis where there are many organizations involved, so the Cluster Approach will likely be active. The Multinational Planning Augmentation Team (MPAT), an organization established by US Pacific Command in late 2000 to facilitate the rapid and effective establishment of a multinational force headquarters, published version 2.8 of its meticulously detailed and useful 1128-page Multinational Force Standard Operating Procedure (MNF SOP) in August 2012. This document helps bridge the gap between civil-military humanitarian assistance planning by taking the cluster system into account and incorporating it throughout this superb planning aid. The MNF SOP can be accessed at www.mpat.org.

Figure 1 shows the eleven functional clusters, along with the organizations responsible for leading each cluster, that all work together to better enable a comprehensive response to crises. While some of the clusters coordinate on a routine basis during the “prevention, mitigation, and preparedness” phases depicted along the bottom of the picture, the true benefit of this approach is best realized once a disaster occurs and the number of actors dramatically increases. By dividing the clusters into these functional areas such as emergency shelter, protection, and sanitation, water and hygiene, it allows not only leadership but also each supporting organization, to more effectively focus its capabilities and resources in a more efficient and timely manner. There are a number of academic studies available on line that have evaluated the Cluster Approach use during major crises. The majority of them assess that this system has improved international efforts to address gaps and seams between the sectors, and have fostered more predictable and stronger leadership during responses. Perhaps the most significant observation is that prioritization of response needs has become more systematic and effective at identifying the most critical requirements in a time-constrained environment.

Figure 1. United Nations Clusters
Source: http://www.unocha.org/what-we-do/coordination-tools/cluster-coordination

From a MOC staff perspective, understanding the Cluster Approach can provide valuable insight into how planning takes place and strategic/operational decisions are made at the UN level. It also allows planners to think through each cluster while also considering the six joint/operational functions (command and control, intelligence, movement and maneuver, protection, sustainment, and possibly fires) that must be integrated and synchronized during military FHA/DR activities.

US Embassies and Annex J to the Emergency Action Plan

Once an HN has requested assistance, the US embassy is the principal liaison with the HN government. While the Chief of Mission (COM), usually the Ambassador, plays a crucial strategic-level role, it is the Mission Disaster Relief Officer (MDRO) who is the linchpin in coordinating the USG response. The MDRO is appointed by the COM and is the “point of contact at post for disaster-related information, planning, and activities” that facilitates the best possible USG actions.

The MDRO is normally a regular member of the embassy’s Emergency Action Committee (EAC) and responsible for developing and maintaining Annex J of its Emergency Action Plan (EAP), which is entitled “Assistance to Host Country in a Major Accident or Disaster.” The EAP is a living embassy-specific plan that provides options for responding to foreseeable contingencies at a particular post. The MDRO also serves as the incident commander for Annex J and plays a decisive role in helping USAID/OFDA coordinate the USG response. The MDRO is familiar with the HN’s disaster relief authorities and capabilities and normally drafts the Disaster Alert Cable and/or the Disaster Declaration Cable for the COM’s approval. While the alert cable is informative in nature and may be sent to provide background regarding the disaster regardless of whether USG support will be requested, the declaration cable is required for USAID/OFDA to initiate FHA/DR activities.
From a MOC planner’s perspective, understanding “who does what” at the Embassy or Mission is important, but because of the administrative layers between Navy staffs and the MDRO, it is more significant to appreciate that there may be a pertinent (or even detailed) Annex J that can aid interested parties in coordinating a response. Requesting access to Annex J through proper channels is a necessary first step for planners to take during the mission analysis phase of the Navy Planning Process.

USAID and OFDA

OFDA is part of USAID’s Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance and is “responsible for providing international disaster and humanitarian assistance and coordinating the USG response to declared disasters in foreign countries.” As mentioned earlier, because USAID/OFDA is the lead federal agency for foreign disaster relief, any DOD relief activity will be in a supporting role to OFDA – which is a critically important point for operational planners to keep in mind, as all military actions should ultimately be coordinated with and prioritized by OFDA’s direction and guidance to ultimately achieve unity of effort during a response.

In order for OFDA to respond, a disaster must satisfy three criteria:

1. The disaster is of such magnitude that it is beyond the HN’s ability to respond adequately;
2. The HN has requested or will accept USG assistance; and
3. It is in the interest of the USG to provide assistance.\(^8\)

If all criteria are met and OFDA is directed to begin its assessment and planning activities, there are several response options including deployment of OFDA regional staff, an assessment team, or a Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART); provision of relief commodities from pre-positioned stockpiles; and disaster funding to the HN as well as NGOs, UN agencies, and other IGOs. It is essential for operational planners to understand the composition of the OFDA footprint that has deployed to the HN because the disaster assessment may vary widely depending on the number of personnel and expertise that has been tasked to respond. Depending on the response option OFDA deploys, initial coordination with DOD may be limited due to the number of personnel OFDA has on scene.

OFDA has three primary response teams.

1. **Regional Advisors** are the primary points of contact for the MDRO and usually the first OFDA staff to arrive in the HN. These personnel already reside in the region, and conduct vulnerability and damage assessments, initiate coordination with other support organizations, and begin to determine the relief needs.
2. **Assessment Teams** are normally comprised of regional and sector-specific specialists, and provide additional expertise in crises that requires more detailed assessment and response recommendations.
3. **Disaster Assistance Response Team**. If the scope or complexity of the disaster requires even more comprehensive assessment and coordination assistance, a DART may be deployed to assist the post with the management of the USG response. The DART brings additional expertise and assessment/planning capacity to bear upon the situation.

Combatant command planners, and possibly even Navy component/numbered fleet planners, may actually have relationships with some OFDA personnel who are assigned to Military Liaison Teams (MLTs), which provide routine engagement and coordination with DOD. MLT personnel provide expertise on chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and high explosive (CBRNE) hazards prior to and during crises, and many are permanently based at geographic combatant command headquarters around the world.

**OFDA Humanitarian Sectors**

In a manner very similar to the UN’s Cluster Approach, OFDA uses a humanitarian sector framework to analyze, fund, and respond to crises. Figure 2 depicts the eleven sectors.\(^9\) It is important to note that OFDA support focuses on, but is not limited to, just these sectors. In the same manner that Navy operational planners use the six joint/operational functions to assist them in developing courses of action, OFDA uses the eleven sectors to apply a systematic approach to planning and response. It is important to note that while similar, the eleven OFDA sectors are not an exact match with the eleven UN Clusters.

**Mission Tasking Matrix**

During the initial days, or even weeks of complex crises, there is often a lack of accurate and actionable information to help drive well-informed decisions on how to best prioritize immediate life-saving response options. A future MOC Warfighter article will explore some of the challenges the Navy faces when tasked with being a “first responder” prior to OFDA personnel completing their initial assessments and being able to function in a systematic and comprehensive manner.

Once OFDA’s response team has had time to conduct its initial assessment and has established communications with HN authorities and other key players, it will begin to coordinate in as timely a manner as possible to respond to the most critical needs as well as planning the long-term response. During large USG FHA/DR events, OFDA will likely validate and prioritize, via the Mission Tasking Matrix (MITAM), specific support missions that need DOD assistance to accomplish. The MITAM is in effect a support request that allows DOD to effectively plan and conduct the broad range of key FHA/DR tasks of which it is capable, including ground, air and sea transportation; surveillance and assessment activities; communications; engineering expertise; medical support; and other life-saving activities. A detailed example of a notional MITAM is available at this link: [MITAM Example](Excel Spreadsheet, Right-Click then select “Save Target As”).

If a MITAM is used during a crisis, MOC planners will quickly realize its utility in facilitating timely and detailed near- and mid-range planning. During a major Joint Chiefs of Staff-sponsored exercise in the US Southern Command area of responsibility last year, one senior
officer lauded the MITAM as the equivalent of a well-vetted joint integrated prioritized target list, a planning tool that has been used extensively during joint operations over the past decade.

Looking ahead

The intent of this article was to provide MOC staffs with a better understanding of some of the key organizations, principles, and processes that Navy will face during future FHA/DR operations or exercises. Comprehending how the HN, UN, and OFDA operate following a crisis should improve the courses of action developed during the Navy Planning Process and facilitate greater unity of effort. Speed of response is one of the most critical aspects of any disaster event in order to save lives and alleviate suffering, and a knowledgeable MOC planner who is able to grasp and help manage the complexities of formal and informal FHA/DR relationships is a huge asset on any staff!

7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.

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