Recent experience suggests that humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations are a growth industry for military forces. In the last 12 months alone, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) has provided emergency aid to victims of the Pakistan earthquake; the Indian Ocean tsunami; the Nias, Indonesia earthquake (in which nine ADF personnel died in a helicopter crash); and Cyclone Larry, a category 5 tropical cyclone that tore across the north Queensland coastline of Australia in early 2006.

Figures from the World Health Organization’s Centre for Research on Epidemiology of Disasters show that from 1990 to 2003 there was a 180% increase in the number of people affected by natural disasters: 255 million people in 2003 up from 90 million in 1990. Between 1990 and 2000 in Asia alone there were 215 so-called “non-complex” relief operations (floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, etc., where host nations were the primary responders).

* Lieutenant Colonel, Australian Defence Force. The author is not authorized, nor does he purport, to speak for the Australian government or the Australian Defence Force.
example, saw the ADF come to the aid of Papua New Guinea following a tsunami on July 17, 1998 that killed over 3,000 people.

Complex relief operations, on the other hand, involve the delivery of humanitarian assistance to societies riven by warring factions, civil disorder or population displacement, any or all of which problems might be compounded by the misery of a natural disaster. One example is the multinational force led by the ADF to render humanitarian aid, provide security and instill the rule of law in guiding Timor-Leste to become the first new nation of the twenty-first century.

However one might categorize emergency relief operations, it is traditionally the case that military forces are called upon to provide the humanitarian or disaster aid required often with little, or indeed no, notice. Military forces have the resources at hand to quickly reach inaccessible places. But increasingly, some non-government organizations (NGOs) rival the capacity of military forces to transport large volumes of supplies in relief operations. The Brookings Institution cites a case in point: “During the highly visible airlift of food into Afghanistan during the winter of 2001–02, the U.S. military delivered only a tiny fraction of the total brought in through conventional operations by WFP [World Food Program] and NGOs like IRC [International Red Cross].” Not only do such NGOs have the capacity to deliver aid where required—they can do it cheaper than military forces.

Perhaps relief operations should be left to specialist NGOs. This is the preference of some NGOs, such as Médecins Sans Frontières, who seek to provide aid relief unencumbered by politics and military association. This would permit military forces to maintain their focus on their core function of warfighting. Military forces usually are only too pleased to hand over the reins of relief operations as soon as practicable to NGOs or UN agencies. For some time the United States has been uneasy about the resources of its armed forces being diverted from its core function, as noted by the US Congressional Research Service (CRS):

For over a decade, some Members of Congress have expressed reservations about U.S. military involvement in peacekeeping. The Bush Administration’s decision to reduce the commitment of U.S. troops to international peacekeeping seems to reflect a major concern: that peacekeeping duties [defined by the CRS to include “providing security for humanitarian relief efforts”] are detrimental to military “readiness,” i.e., the ability of U.S. troops to defend the nation.4

Certainly there is no shortage of NGOs around the world ready and willing to assist in relief operations. It is estimated that within three weeks of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami in Southeast Asia there were over 109 NGOs operating in Indonesia, 84 in Sri Lanka and 35 in Thailand.5
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The fact remains, of course, that military forces are indispensable for relief operations in hostile or uncertain security environments. Moreover, despite the capacity of NGOs for economical long-term lease of aircraft in relief operations, military forces are unmatched in their ability to rapidly deliver aid to remote places, particularly in the maritime environment. The day after the 2004 tsunami, Australian soldiers departed for Sumatra and within a week had established a water purification plant in Banda Aceh. Military forces have the capacity to bring instantaneous infrastructure to a devastated area. As simply stated in Royal Australian Navy doctrine: "Naval forces are self-supporting and do not create logistic burdens in situations where infrastructure has been destroyed or severely damaged."

The NATO Review neatly assessed the military contribution to relief operations in these terms:

The recent disasters in the United States and Pakistan have highlighted how useful certain military capabilities can be when first responders find themselves overwhelmed. Strategic airlift is crucial to transport urgently needed relief supplies as commercial aircraft are not always available in sufficient numbers. Moreover, helicopters have proven essential in the first phase of a disaster-relief operation when roads are often too badly damaged to be passable and sealift capabilities are critical to sustaining the relief effort in a more cost-effective way in the weeks and months following a disaster. Rapidly deployable military hospitals and medical personnel can also help out overburdened first responders. In addition, military engineers, water purification units and search-and-rescue teams all have the skills that can greatly improve crisis-response capabilities and save lives.

Whether wrought by climate change or happenstance, the world has recently witnessed a succession of natural disasters of such scale as to pose transnational challenges that require international cooperation and understanding. This need was clearly evident in the most devastating of these disasters, the Indian Ocean tsunami of Boxing Day 2004. The tsunami was triggered by an enormous undersea earthquake (9.3 on the Richter scale) that ruptured the earth’s crust for over 1,000 kilometers, releasing tremendous energy. This, the second most powerful earthquake ever recorded, generated a tsunami whose destruction in the immediate region was shocking, and a global tragedy.

What frameworks exist for civilian-military and international cooperation in relief operations? On December 19, 1991, UN General Assembly Resolution 46/182 created the Department of Humanitarian Affairs, designed to strengthen the coordination of humanitarian emergency assistance. The resolution outlined 30 guiding principles “in accordance with the principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality” for the provision of relief aid. It reaffirmed the primary responsibility of States
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to care for the victims of natural disasters within their borders but asserted that "the United Nations has a central and unique role to play in providing leadership and coordinating the efforts of the international community to support the affected countries." The resolution makes it clear that coordination is the key tool in humanitarian operations.

The UN Charter makes no specific reference to the use of military forces in humanitarian operations. There is an inherent tension between the roles of civilian agencies and military forces in relief operations. This was evident, for example, in 1994 during Operation Restore Hope in which US military and international civilian aid agencies worked through a Civil Military Operations Center (CMOC) to overcome their "cultural differences" for the common good of Rwandan refugees in Zaire.

In a perfect world there should naturally be complementarity between military forces and NGOs in relief operations. The Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols refer to impartial relief societies concerned with the provision of humanitarian aid and the protection of relief agency personnel. Surely this provides common ground with military forces whose duty it is to protect civilians under the law of armed conflict.

In 1994 the Oslo Guidelines on the Use of Military and Civil Defence Assets in Disaster Relief were adopted by various nations to provide effective interaction of military and civilian actors in disaster relief operations. In subsequent years, the Oslo Guidelines were developed by the UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). After a review of a number of operations, OCHA conceded that in a range of international relief operations:

[T]he coordination between the international military forces and the responding UN humanitarian agencies and other international civilian actors has been critically examined by a number of participants and observers and found to be in need of improvement. The success that was achieved in the use of military resources and coordination was due largely to the extraordinary efforts of the personnel in the field.

Also in 1994, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement published its Code of Conduct for disaster relief operations. This code stipulates ten principles founded upon the need for impartiality—that aid should be given on the basis of and in proportion to need alone.

The conduct of civil-military relief operations requires impartiality and cooperation but also cultural sensitivity and political sagacity. This was evident no more so than in the international relief operation in the wake of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami.
About 250 kilometers from the epicenter of the earthquake, Aceh suffered the full brunt of the tsunami’s force. This was a catastrophe in one of the most isolated and politically charged areas of Southeast Asia and a source of political instability for more than a century. Before the arrival of international aid workers, the Indonesian government had quarantined Aceh. Indonesian forces regularly clashed with the Free Aceh Movement, or GAM, rebels. The local population is as devoutly Muslim as anywhere in the world and Sharia law is in force. For nearly three decades, Aceh was embattled, silent and closed off from the outside world. The earthquake and tsunami left survivors devastated and prey to the entreaties of al-Qaida and Jamah Islamia, whose members, undoubtedly, were gathering to hand.

The first foreigners on the scene and with the greatest lift capacity were forces from Australia, Singapore and the United States. Troops were unarmed and relied upon Indonesian security to conduct relief operations. As an Indonesian commander remarked, “If you want to carry a weapon, you’d better choose a side.” During the three months that the ADF conducted relief operations in Aceh, some 200 people were killed in skirmishes between GAM and Indonesian forces.

It was into this situation that thousands of troops and hundreds of civilian relief workers descended. While foreign forces and NGOs scurried to organize themselves, stoic Indonesian soldiers set about the grimmest of tasks, tirelessly clearing waste and debris and disposing of the dead in accordance with local practice. Many of these soldiers had themselves lost loved ones. Many had no family or homes to which to return. When the tsunami struck, Indonesian troops were conducting an amphibious landing exercise. All those soldiers perished, along with some 1,000 of their comrades at their headquarters at Banda Aceh. Offshore the USS Bonhomme Richard Expeditionary Strike Group and USS Abraham Lincoln provided considerable muscle and heavy lift. US Navy aviation assets were crucial to the aid effort.

The ADF’s primary concern was to ensure that the relief effort was in accordance with Indonesian priorities. The view that Indonesians knew best what Indonesians required was a fundamental precept of Australian, Singaporean and American forces. Through the Civil-Military Aid Coordination Conference (CMAC) this view was shared by other foreign forces and the majority of NGOs. The CMAC met daily in Medan, the transport hub of northern Sumatra. An Indonesian colonel, with an Australian lieutenant colonel as deputy, chaired the meetings. The CMAC was the principal means of sharing information about the progress of the mission, road conditions, security concerns, aid priorities, bottlenecks and expectations.
Expectation management was a prime concern for the CMAC. The thousands of military and civilian aid workers who descended upon Indonesia burned with the desire to help. The mood was reflected by Dr. Fiona Terry, founder of the Australian section of Médecins Sans Frontières: “Humanitarian action is more than a technical exercise at nourishing or healing a population defined as in need; it is a moral endeavor based on solidarity with other members of humanity.” The role of the CMAC (and its Secretariat comprised initially of ADF, Singaporean and US officers, with representatives of the Australian Government Aid Program (AUSAID), the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the UN Joint Logistic Centre (UNJLC)) was to manage the prosaic but crucial tasks of setting priorities, allocating scarce air assets and ensuring that relief supplies were efficiently and effectively distributed.

In those early weeks of the operation, certain misconceptions about the needs of Aceh proved difficult to dispel. It fairly quickly became evident that the survivors suffered relatively few serious injuries and that there were sufficient medical staff and equipment for their needs. It proved challenging to stem the tide of doctors and nurses to the region. The real needs were engineers for reconstruction, environmental health officers to counter disease and qualified NGOs to manage the camps of displaced persons.

A considerable amount of aid donated from around the world was undoubtedly well intended but misguided. The warehouses in Medan were brimming with sweaters, Western-style tinned baby food, hillocks of canned baked beans, crates of boiled fruitcake and mounds of precooked meals for which the people of tropical Aceh had neither the need nor the appetite. Truckloads of disposable diapers were a mystery to these people and contributed yet more waste in a region blanketed in litter. The pressing need was, in fact, for dried fish, rice noodles, powdered milk and cloth diapers.

The best NGOs were informed, organized and relatively self-sufficient. In particular, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) had vehicles and was well organized. The World Food Program (WFP) had aircraft and their own temporary accommodation. The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Médecins Sans Frontières were experienced, politically informed and focused on finding solutions, and Caritas efficiently directed its energies to pastoral care.

The NGOs who experienced the most frustration and were perhaps less effective were those who were impractical, ignorant of Sharia law, failed to calibrate security concerns into their plans, complained that the Indonesian government did not understand them and failed to appreciate that a humanitarian disaster must be addressed in its context. Some NGOs, in their callow enthusiasm, failed to appreciate that the consent of any nation to welcome large and diverse numbers of
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international military and civilian relief workers is rarely unconditional and open-ended. The most egregious error by a few naive aid workers was to unilaterally set off for Aceh by road through Sumatran jungles only to break down and themselves become “secondary victims” of the disaster requiring assistance.

The most effective NGOs were not necessarily the large, established organizations. A capable group of well-connected volunteers from a Sydney suburban council proved effective. Surfers Without Borders diligently hired boats and accessed the otherwise inaccessible parts of western Sumatra to paddle ashore with supplies. And, improbably, Save the Sumatran Orangutans delighted the CMAC by arriving with a sumptuous swag of donations to put to good use—for humans.

The ADF completed its mission in Aceh in three months. “Completed,” of course, is a relative term. The measure of success in relief operations is a matter of delivering the greatest good in the time available. The CMAC worked efficiently, certainly diligently, and aid was directed purposefully and quickly. It proved an effective mechanism, as OCHA describes, for bridging the “humanitarian gap between the disaster needs that the relief community is being asked to satisfy and the resources available to meet them.”

Notes

8. The 2004 Boxing Day tsunami is listed by the Congressional Research Service as the sixth-deadliest natural disaster since 1900:

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Estimated Fatalities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July 1931</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Flood</td>
<td>3.7 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1959</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Flood</td>
<td>2 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1939</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Flood</td>
<td>500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 12, 1970</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>Cyclone</td>
<td>300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 27, 1976</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Earthquake</td>
<td>242,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec. 26, 2004</td>
<td>Indian Ocean</td>
<td>Earthquake and Tsunami</td>
<td>224,495</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Note: Other figures estimate the tsunami death toll at between 229,866 and 275,000]

May 22, 1927 | China | Earthquake | 200,000 |
Dec. 16, 1920 | China | Earthquake | 180,000 |
Sep. 1, 1923 | Japan | Earthquake | 143,000 |
1935         | China | Flood      | 142,000 |

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18. In 1883 when Krakatoa exploded in the Sunda Strait, the noise impelled the Dutch garrison at the other end of Sumatra to battle stations, they having assumed that A Chinese insurgents had blown up a local fort. See Simon Winchester, Krakatoa: The Day the World Exploded 264 (2003).


20. For further discussion of these issues, see Steven Hansch, Humanitarian Assistance Expands in Scale and Scope, in Security by Other Means, supra note 3.