



ROLE OF INDIAN ARMED FORCES IN DISASTER MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The 21st century has seen an increasing number of natural disasters with alarming intensity – the 2001 Bhuj earthquake; the 2004 tsunami; the 2005 earthquake in Kashmir; heavy rainfall in Mumbai in 2006; the 2008 Bihar Kosi river flood; the August 2010 cloud burst in Leh; the September 2011 Sikkim earthquake; and, most recently, in June, the unprecedented flash floods and cloudbursts in Garhwal, parts of Kumaon and Nepal, and Kinnaur region of Himachal Pradesh. Each of these disasters has seen the active involvement of the armed forces in the relief operations. The military's primary task is to guard the nation's borders. In matters domestic, the military is supposed to be a second respondent, except in the case of chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear *incidences. Theoretically, the principle is "last to enter and first to leave". However, when theory is matched with practice, this does not seem to be the case.

KEYWORDS: Armed, Forces, Disaster, Management

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the Administrative Reforms Commissions, the military needs to be taken off from the loop of disaster management gradually. While it may sound sensible on paper, it is not really possible in practice. The civil administration is usually not properly geared up for an effective response. It needs to be noted that discipline and efficiency is the first demand in disaster response and relief tasks, which are often dangerous missions and quite naturally the military brings in order in post-disaster operations. Wherever there is danger, the military has a constitutional duty to undertake tasks and missions. The required wherewithal including the command, control and communication, are available with the field formations. Preparing for military operations other than war (MOOTW), of which disaster is the main component will be a critical part of military training.

Though the government is aware of the urgent need for better disaster response mechanism, the overall trend has indicated that the level of preparedness at both the centre as well as the states is inadequate. The nodal agency for coordination of relief, response and overall natural disaster management is under the Central Ministry of Home Affairs (see Table 1 below). However, when any disaster breaks, it is the Armed forces under the Ministry of Defence that is called upon to intervene as an 'aid to civil authority'.

The Disaster Management Act of 2005 provides the blue print for the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) at the Centre, the State Disaster Management Authorities and the District Disaster Management Authorities. The state and the district level are the weak links in disaster management efforts. It appears that the civil



administration has “got used to military and central help as a norm”.

A tendency to over-rely on the military has stunted the initiative, responsibility and accountability of the civil government and officials. The case of Operation Sadbhavana in Jammu and Kashmir is a case in point. It is this vacuum in delivery and governance that the armed forces, due to their ‘spirit to deliver’ training, have filled. But we need to ask hard questions. In the case of disasters, why should the relief commissioners and civil administration not be held accountable for flouting norms of construction, ignoring drainage congestion and thereby exacerbating conditions leading to man-made disasters? We are aware of large areas of the country that experience floods regularly. Yet the civil administration is found wanting in its prevention and preparedness, which along with response, relief and recovery, are the constitutional duties and responsibilities of the civil administration. The military has no role in regulating the implementation of these principles.

Response to a disaster is a set of inter-related activities, which requires database, logistics, technological needs, self-reliance, communication infrastructure, emergency preparedness and forecasting. Advance study in the field of disaster management will give a better understanding of responding effectively to disasters. A centre of excellence for disaster management in the military must be set up under the aegis of HQ, IDS and the upcoming Indian National Defence University (INDU).

The former army chief, General S. Padmanabhan in his book *A General Speaks* (2005), mentions that during the Bhuj earthquake in 2001, he realised that

the army was inadequately equipped to deal with the extensive devastation and damage. He was impressed by the Turkish team who had come to aid in the rescue efforts, which had structured the unit based on the lessons of past experiences. Ironically, the study he ordered on disaster relief was never used.

2. ROLE OF INDIAN ARMED FORCES IN DISASTER MANAGEMENT

It is interesting to recall that the army pavilion during the India International Trade Fair at Pragati Maidan, New Delhi in November 2005 had the banner: “Brave Hearts: Role of Armed Forces in Disaster Management and Aid to Civil Authorities”. The disaster relief Operation *Rahat*, due to excessive snowfall in Jammu and Kashmir in February 2005 and Operation *Imdad* of the October 2005 earthquake were exhibited for the public. However, there was no database on previous earthquakes in similar terrain, such as one at Uttarkashi in the early 1990s. Military leaders and troops need to be trained and updated on the various aspects of disasters. Not all major disasters are properly recorded. Here, even seminar proceedings are of great value. In 2002, a year after the terror strikes in the US on September 11, 2001, a national-level seminar on “Disaster Management and Armed Forces: A National Effort” was organised by the Army HQ Engineer-in-Chief’s Branch and Institution of Engineers (India). The proceedings of the seminar will make excellent text for general awareness and further detailed research. Seminar reports and proceedings are as important as war diaries and the suggested Centre of Excellence must locate and gather such texts as archival data.

Disaster management is a continuous and integrated process involving many



stakeholders working together to prevent, mitigate, prepare for, and respond to disaster and reconstruction after disaster. It is confirmed that no single organization can handle a disaster situation of any scale alone. It is the collective responsibility of different groups of stakeholders, like various ministries, departments and boards of union, state and local governments, private sector, civil society, Non- Governmental Organizations (NGO), armed forces, Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF), National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) and international institutions etc., and everyone plays different roles in this process. While, some stakeholders have to take a leading role in disaster management, others play a supporting role in this process. Thus, there are different group of stakeholders for disaster management and among them armed forces plays a significant role.

The primary role of the armed forces involves to the defence of the country against external and internal threats and needs no deliberation. The secondary role of the armed forces as an “aid of civil authorities” is a constitutional obligation, although as an instrument of last resort. The armed forces can be called out to aid the civil authorities to meet various unforeseen events. It is noted that when any natural or man-made disaster takes place in any part of the world, the armed forces are frequently deployed for disaster risk management.

Currently, involvements of armed forces to aid civil authority in various events are continuously rising. Given their professional training and spirit to deliver and assist the communities, the armed forces always become the first choice of any state civil authorities in the event of disasters. Both the government and civil society have incredible faith in the armed forces and believe that all the emergencies and crisis can be handled by the

armed forces effectively. The role of the armed forces in disaster management is globally well recognized. The defence services due to their organization, disposition, training and manpower are natural partners in any national effort to combat disaster.

There are two opposite views on this issue: one opposes the prolonged deployment of the armed forces in disaster relief and the other advocates a larger, proactive and more participative role. This latter view insists on continuing participations of armed forces in disaster relief, rescue and reconstruction. Therefore, while analyzing disaster management, it is essential to evaluate the role of the armed forces, and the duties of civil administration during the various stages of disaster management. Keeping in the view that the armed forces play an important role in the disaster management it is necessary to analyze and investigate their role in disaster management of India, how they can prove a better disaster manager and how administration can use their services for better disaster risk reduction. Therefore, the basic objective of this paper is to study the role of armed forces in disaster management of India.

Disaster may be described as a “Catastrophic situation in which the normal pattern of life or ecosystem has been disrupted and extraordinary emergency interventions are required to save and preserve lives and or the environment”. According to The United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) 2009 disaster may be defined as “ A serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society involving widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses and impacts, which exceeds the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources.”



3. DISCUSSION

Disasters may be classified into two categories namely: natural disasters and human-induced disasters. The UNISDR defines disaster risk management as the systematic process of using administrative decisions, organizations, operational skills and capacities to implement policies, strategies and coping capacities of the society and communities to lessen the impacts of natural hazards and related environmental and technological disasters.

The armed forces are called upon to assist the civil administration when the situation is beyond their coping capability. In practice, the armed forces form an important part of the Government's response capacity and are immediate responders in all serious disaster situations. On account of their vast potential to meet any adverse challenge, speed of operational response and the resources and capabilities at their disposal, the armed forces have historically played a major role in emergency support services like communication, search and rescue operations, health and medical facilities, and transportation, especially in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. Airlift, heli-lift and movement of assistance to neighbouring countries primarily fall within the expertise and domain of the armed forces. The armed forces will participate in imparting training to trainers and disaster management managers, especially in CBRN aspects, heli-insertion, high altitude rescue, waterman ship and training of paramedics.

Indian Coast Guard, State Disaster Response Force, State Police Forces, Fire Services, Civil Defence, Home Guards, Central Paramilitary Forces, Border Road Organisation, National Cadet Corps, National Service Scheme, NGO, Self Help Groups and other volunteers' organisation are crucial and immediate

responders to disasters and play an important role in disaster management. Further, these stakeholders are very suitable to support all community-based initiatives in disaster management and are very important instantaneous manager of disaster management.

The Indian armed forces are one of the most dedicated, professional and modernized armed forces in the world. They have made rapid strides in technology development and are adequately equipped with the necessary technical competence, manpower and material resources to undertake any scale of disaster rescue and response operations. The Indian Armed Forces render timely assistance to civil authorities under "Defence Service Regulations" for the maintenance of law and order, maintenance of essential services, assistance during natural calamities, and any other types of assistance which may be needed by the civil authorities.

The armed forces due to their organization, training, manpower and dedications are playing a significant role in disaster management. Their ability to work under adverse ground and climatic conditions is an unusual attribute to help to civil authority during disasters. Government, civil society and all other stakeholders have incredible faith and believe that all types of disaster can be efficiently handled by the armed forces. The Indian armed forces are one of the most dedicated professional and modernized armed forces in the world. They are always in a state of operational readiness to move quickly to any disaster affected area. Besides, NDRF also played an important role in rescue and relief operation in all major disasters in the country; in fact their service during the disasters reduces the pressure on the armed forces. The armed force will continue to play a vital role in disaster response as they are the core of the



government's response capacity in major disaster situations.

4. CONCLUSION

The armed forces should be deployed only in such situations which are beyond the managing capabilities of the civilian administration and deployment should not for long period, more dependence on armed forces for disaster management is not in favor of a country and thus should be minimized. For efficient utilization of armed forces services in disaster management, a proper coordination among different stakeholders is prerequisite. To achieve this first all stakeholders should be included in the process of making disaster management plans at all levels and second all stakeholders should be included in the joint exercises for disaster management. Consequently, it will reduce the conflicts and confusion among different stakeholders, which are the keys obstacles in the various phases of disaster management.

Disaster management training should be an important part of armed forces training, newly posted armed forces in a particular area should be trained and updated about vulnerability and disaster management plan of the areas. However, there is need to reduce the pressure on armed forces, for this specialized forces similar to NDRF should be created or NDRF itself should be strengthened further.

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