

Advancing the U.S. Sea Services' Capacity to Respond to Urban Humanitarian Disasters and Complex Emergencies

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The role of the United States Sea Services during Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response (HADR) events will become a critical component of international relief efforts in an era of increasing global warming and coastal urbanization. Core amphibious operational capabilities and the ability to remain fully self-supporting during prolonged crises will provide an unparalleled opportunity to influence lifesaving efforts on a global scale. However, the ability to fully utilize the immense capability of the U.S. Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard team requires continued emphasis on coordination with civilian counterparts as well as a renewed appreciation for the mastery of the core guiding principles required during these complex relief operations. With millions of lives potentially in the balance, it is imperative for the Sea Services to expand education, training, and partnership focused exercises and simulations in order to fully realize the potential of the fleet.

Coastal urbanization is a critical vulnerability throughout the globe and comprises a significant region of risk encompassed by U.S. Sea Service operations. Littoral and amphibious operations to address the emergent needs of these areas has been demonstrated in recent years to be not a matter of determining “if” it will happen, but a question of “when” it will happen. Operations within these coastal regions can be considered most hazardous in countries already plagued with poor infrastructure, growing population, and sparse job opportunities. Migration towards coastal regions typically supporting port or other seafaring activities can dramatically impact the natural protections afforded by marshland and rugged vegetation as areas are cleared for housing, subsistence activities, or port development. These dramatic perturbations in the natural ecosystem can be further enhanced by failures to manage human waste and free flowing waterways. In this setting, urbanization can result in concentric ecosystems of poverty, poor education, criminal activity, and decaying societal values unless fully managed by a competent and effective national system of governance. Without this strong national leadership, the focus on infrastructure development and maintenance as well as the protection of the population become secondary to the daily management of crises. Even small perturbations in weather, environment, disease management, or an infrequent catastrophic event can cripple the patchwork support network of the community. Without this marginal support, humanitarian activities become mired in community level chaos as dysfunctional organizations and counter-productive management interrupt the flow of recovery personnel and supplies. It is within this potentially cataclysmic region that the U.S. Sea Services will be

expected to execute sustained and highly efficient operations.

Key to the creation of a competent and highly resourceful U.S. Sea Service response is the development of an educational system fully prepared to meet the leadership and operational demands of this dynamic environment. Embracing the spirit of the Oslo Guidelines and in particular the concept of “resource of last resort,” U.S. military leaders must fully comprehend the impact of employing military personnel, equipment, and capabilities into existing humanitarian community actions during crisis response efforts. While military operations can easily overrun a region, it is the measured employment of critical assets in coordination with civilian responders that will dramatically impact the overall response. Areas of particular emphasis for educational endeavors include security cooperation, coordination and integration of logistics (including integrated airlift capability), heavy equipment and construction operations, internally displaced personnel and refugee management, the revolution in information communications technologies used to assess and manage crises, Sphere Standards, and the basics of the UN cluster systems.

Equally important to comprehensive education is the implementation of intense training programs that emphasize the critical military capabilities that cannot be easily replicated by civilian organizations. Core training leading to expertise in mass casualty response, high intensity and sustained logistics, and more effective command and control functions provide the opportunity to create the framework for concurrent or follow-on life saving operations. These functions, while practiced outside of strictly military organizations, are ingrained in military operations and married to the stress and horrors of battle that can also be expected during critical or catastrophic disaster and complex emergency response events. More importantly, the presence of experienced military personnel that consider these operations as an accepted duty and responsibility will provide an opportunity for daily mentorship to junior personnel and the backbone of a sustained community. Collectively, this cadre of experts develops a persistent and resilient force capable of adapting to the intense variability of rescue operations.

Finally, education and training programs, while of vital importance to HADR operations, are of secondary importance to the necessity for partnership with the humanitarian relief community. The benefits of inclusive education and training programs that consider the value of partnerships, and develops the network, relationships, and camaraderie required for sustained operations is the true future opportunity for success. A deeper understanding for the people, processes, and governing thought within the humanitarian community creates the foundation of an integrated and intelligent relief system that is significantly more responsive, flexible, and agile than current efforts. These partnerships can and should be nurtured through routine and periodic exchange programs, combined exercises, and collective planning activities that allow organizations with differing cultures and structures to learn to work together.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that HADR is currently prioritized twelfth out of twelve U.S. military missions in the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review, it is the one crisis mission area that we definitively know will be executed on a routine basis. The relatively low cost of increasing and improving current education, training, and partnership opportunities is a critical investment in the future success of the U.S. Sea Services. Greater attention to these areas will ensure the professional execution of these critical lifesaving missions in increasingly complex urban environments as well as during complex emergencies for decades to come.