

NATO's growing humanitarian role

Maurits Jochems examines NATO's role in disaster relief in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and the South Asian earthquake. He is deputy assistant secretary general in NATO's Operations Division, responsible for the Alliance's work in the field of civil-emergency planning, among other areas. His article was first published in NATO Review.

[Picture #1]



Air lifeline: Helicopters have proven essential in the first phase of a disaster-relief operation when roads are too badly damaged to be passable (© SHAPE)

NATO's responses to both Hurricane Katrina in the United States and the South Asian earthquake in Pakistan last year propelled the Alliance into the disaster-relief spotlight. Although NATO has been involved in disaster relief since the 1950s, so high-profile a role is unusual. Moreover, some analysts and commentators, including representatives of certain Allies, question whether this is an appropriate activity for the Alliance.

In the case of the assistance provided to the United States, NATO made a useful practical contribution and demonstrated Alliance solidarity by offering hurricane victims much-needed supplies in their hour of need. It was not, however, critical to the wider relief effort. (See *Katrina relief operation* below.) By contrast, NATO's contribution to the Pakistan relief effort was substantial. Indeed, if the many bilateral contributions of NATO Allies, and especially that of the US military, are added to the NATO operation, the overall Allied effort was critical to the wider relief operation and helped save many lives. (See *Pakistan relief operation* below.)

Recent disasters have highlighted how useful certain military capabilities can be when first responders find themselves overwhelmed

Although the NATO operation in Pakistan clearly made a great difference to the overall relief effort, it also raised a number of questions. Why, for example, should military capabilities be deployed in international disaster-relief operations? Why should NATO be involved? What added value can NATO bring to relief efforts? And who should lead operations dealing with the consequences of natural or industrial disasters?

Some commentators clearly believe that disaster-relief work can be done

better and more economically by civilian actors, whether they be national authorities, international organisations, or non-governmental organisations. While this may be the case for most disasters, there are unfortunately occasions when the scale of the disaster is so great that first responders – local authority and/or interior ministry forces – are simply overwhelmed. It is in these instances that the military can and should become involved. Indeed, helping national authorities in responding to natural or industrial disasters is a fundamental mission of the armed forces in most NATO (and non-NATO) countries.

Deploying military capabilities

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.

While the military clearly has useful capabilities to bring to disaster-relief operations, such assistance should be provided according to the principle of subsidiarity. Civil responders should always be in the lead and must formally request military support. It is demand-driven assistance, not a supply-driven relief contribution. In principle, local authorities and/or the interior ministry or other competent national body should ask for external, including military, assistance, if and when they decide that the scale of the disaster is too great for them to handle alone.

In the case of both Hurricane Katrina and the South Asian earthquake, the respective national governments formally requested NATO assistance. In addition, in the case of Pakistan, the United Nations publicly and emphatically asked NATO for assistance in putting together its own relief operation. As a result, most of the crucial shelter material provided by the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees was transported to Pakistan via NATO's air-bridge before the onset of the harsh Himalayan winter.

NATO recognises that the United Nations, specifically the United Nations' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), should always be in the lead, together with the authorities of the stricken country, in any international disaster-relief operation. Indeed, NATO's Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC), the Alliance's principal crisis-response mechanism involving 20 Partner countries in addition to the 26 Allies, hosts a UN OCHA liaison officer, who advises NATO, where necessary. In the case of the Pakistan relief operation, NATO also

participated in the overall coordination meetings in Islamabad, jointly led by Pakistani government officials and the UN resident representative, as well as in the relevant UN-led cluster meetings, such as the health and shelter clusters.

NATO's added value

If one recognises that military capabilities may usefully be deployed in disaster-response operations the next issue to address is that of NATO's added value. Clearly, military contributions do not have to come via NATO and may be made on a bilateral basis. Moreover, decision-making in response to disasters needs to be rapid and the Alliance's multilateral approach is in theory slower than that of individual Allies.

Given that no two disaster-relief operations are identical and that innovative and pragmatic solutions are almost invariably required, it is not possible to say definitively that NATO should automatically be involved or that individual Allies should take the lead. However, several factors should be taken into consideration. Firstly, only very few Allies, such as the United States, are capable of transporting significant relief capabilities rapidly over great distances to stricken areas and to sustain the effort. Secondly, NATO's primary contribution is the coordinating, liaising and facilitating function that the EADRCC and the Alliance's military structures provide. These enable smaller Allies to contribute capabilities, such as a military hospital or water purification unit, that they would not be able to contribute on their own. In addition, this coordination role that characterises NATO-led operations has proven useful both to the authorities of the receiving country and to the United Nations, who were thereby able to deal with a single actor rather than many.

Can NATO take a decision on disaster relief almost as quickly as a national government? In general, when there is a precedent, the Alliance is able to move rapidly. The decision to set up an air-bridge to Pakistan, for example, could be taken quickly, above all, because there was already a precedent, namely the airlift to the United States in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The decision to send medical personnel and engineers to Pakistan, by contrast, took longer as there was no precedent at the time for sending military personnel to a non-NATO (or Partner) country for a disaster-relief operation.

In the wake of both the Hurricane Katrina and Pakistan relief operations, the Alliance is now carrying out a lessons-learned exercise. Once this has been completed and issues such as the funding of certain elements of the operation are resolved, it might be possible further to reduce response times. In this way, NATO decision-making could be almost as quick as that of the national authorities of an individual Ally.

Funding reform

Looking ahead, one of the most important issues that needs to be resolved before either NATO as a whole or individual Allies again make military capabilities available for disaster-relief operations is that of appropriate

funding mechanisms. If, as at present, the defence ministries of those countries that are asked to provide helicopters for a future disaster-relief operation are also expected to carry the entire financial burden of their engagement, they may decide that they cannot afford to become involved. Unless new funding mechanisms are developed, intervention for disaster relief would eat up a great portion of the defence budget. Meanwhile, the first responders, both nationally and internationally, would essentially be receiving help for free.

Some steps to reform and improve funding mechanisms were already put in place during the Pakistan relief operation by individual countries. In the United Kingdom, for example, the Minister for International Development, Hilary Benn, decided to cover the additional operating costs caused by the deployment of three Chinook helicopters and a regiment of engineers out of the international development budget. By using another budget line, Minister Benn was also able to make a significant financial contribution to the NATO "trust fund" that met the costs of the air-bridge.

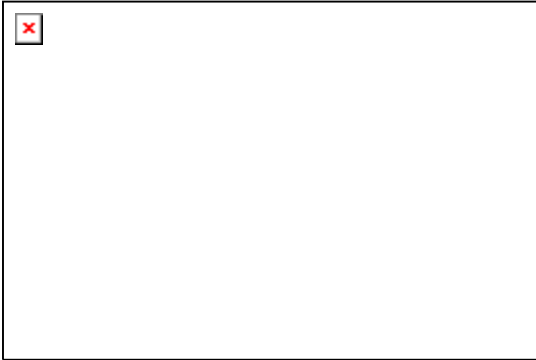
The benefits of Minister Benn's improvised arrangement are clear. In this way, a department for international development does not need to operate and deploy its own fleet of helicopters, thereby avoiding duplication of assets. Moreover, depending on how costs are calculated, this solution is likely to be considerably cheaper than any arrangement involving the leasing of commercial helicopters, if, indeed, they are available. To be sure, there may be other consequences of such an approach. A defence ministry might, for example, decide to acquire more helicopters. But even in this case, overheads, training and maintenance can be limited to one organisation instead of two or more.

In order to institutionalise such arrangements, however, it will also be necessary to revise definitions of what constitutes official development assistance (ODA). It seems that the financing of military helicopters for disaster-relief operations does not qualify as official development assistance under current definitions. As a result, there is a disincentive for development ministers to copy the initiative of their UK counterpart in Pakistan. But given that many countries are forging ever stronger working relationships between ministries of international development, defence and foreign relations, it might be time to reassess the ODA criteria.

In the case of the Pakistan relief operation, such a move would be especially appropriate since the United Nations asked NATO to provide an air-bridge and to deploy helicopters. Logic demands that either NATO nations be allowed to book some of the additional costs incurred by their militaries to the international assistance and development budgets or that the United Nations reimburse them directly out of funds collected to pay for the relief operation. Since 1989, many walls – both real and virtual – have been removed. It may now be time to tear down some of the institutional divisions that exist between the worlds of international assistance and development, on the one hand, and the military, on the other.

[Picture #2]

Katrina relief operation



Loading relief aid for Hurricane Katrina victims (© SHAPE)

As the scale of the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina in the states of Alabama, Florida, Louisiana and Mississippi on 29 August 2005 became apparent, NATO's Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) offered its services to the United States. That was on 2 September. A day later, an official US request for assistance was received and forwarded within an hour and a quarter to the capitals of all 46 members of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council. At Washington's request, an EADRCC liaison officer was deployed on 4 September to work with the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance in Washington DC.

The first two offers of assistance arrived on 4 September and, in total, 39 EAPC members provided assistance through the EADRCC. On 8 September, the North Atlantic Council authorised a NATO transport operation consisting of NATO's Airborne Early Warning fleet training and cargo aircraft and NATO Response Force (NRF) air and sealift to help move urgently needed items from Europe to the United States. The EADRCC acted as a clearing house, matching requests and offers of assistance. Donations needing transportation were coordinated by the Allied Movement and Coordination Centre, in conjunction with the EADRCC. Additionally, two civil aviation experts were deployed to the EADRCC on 9 September to help coordinate civil transport requirements.

Relief items were consolidated at Ramstein Air Base in Germany. Donations were moved there either by road or by NRF-assigned tactical airlift under the command of Joint Command Lisbon. All cargo consolidation in Ramstein from European donors was completed by 19 September 2005. More than 90 flight hours were flown by French, German, Greek and Italian C-130 and C-160 tactical NRF-assigned transport aircraft.

By 2 October, 12 NATO cargo flights had taken relief supplies from Europe to the United States and some 189 tons of relief goods, including food, first-aid kits, medical supplies, generators and water pumps, were delivered via the NATO air-bridge.

[Picture # 3]

Pakistan relief operation



NATO medics treat young earthquake survivor (© SHAPE)

Two days after the South Asian earthquake of 8 October that left more than 73 000 people dead, 70 000 injured and some four million homeless, Pakistan requested NATO assistance for the humanitarian relief operation it was mounting. The North Atlantic Council agreed to help and approved a two-stage Alliance response.

The first stage focused on the air-bridge. The Euro-Atlantic Disaster Relief Cooperation Council (EADRCC) established links to its members' national aid-coordinating bodies and the Pakistani authorities. The EADRCC worked in conjunction with the NATO Military Authorities to coordinate the response of members of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) willing to channel their assistance through this mechanism.

On 13 October 2005, the EADRCC received the first request from the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to airlift 10 000 tents, 104 000 blankets and 2 000 stoves from Turkey to Pakistan. Several other requests from UN agencies followed. The first NATO relief flight to Pakistan arrived on 14 October. At the request of the Pakistani authorities, priority was initially given to moving tents and blankets, with the majority of the relief items being provided by the UNHCR. Eventually, some 160 flights delivered about 3500 tons of relief goods.

Forty-two out of 46 EAPC members provided assistance to Pakistan, including through the EADRCC. The NATO air-bridge was used by 19 EAPC and two non-EAPC countries – Malta and Bosnia and Herzegovina – as well as by the UNHCR, the World Food Programme and the United Nations' Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance.

Military liaison officers were dispatched to the EADRCC and embedded in the Centre's working structure while civilian experts from the Senior Civil-Emergency Planning Committee's Transport Planning Boards provided assistance to the EADRCC, Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers, Europe and the NATO Maintenance and Supply Agency from their usual places of business when needed. By the end of the operation, all assistance offered to Pakistan through the NATO air-bridge had been delivered.

The second stage of the operation added elements drawn from the NATO Response Force, including a deployed headquarters command and control structure, engineering units, helicopters and military field hospitals, all with appropriate support. NATO worked closely with both the government of Pakistan and the United Nations on a daily basis and was plugged into the UN cluster system. NATO's contribution to the relief operation was to maintain the air-bridge, support intra-theatre lift, restore critical road infrastructure and provide makeshift shelter and medical support. The aim of these relief activities was to help earthquake survivors make it through the winter.

By early December 2005 most elements were in place and contributed effectively to the relief efforts in the Bagh region, which the Pakistani authorities had identified as the area for the NATO relief operation on the ground.

NATO helicopters lifted more than 1700 tons of relief from Islamabad to forward supply dumps and from there directly to the point of need. They moved more than 7500 sick, injured and displaced from the immediate earthquake zone. The NATO helicopter refuelling site refuelled more than 1000 helicopter flights from the international helicopter force. The NATO field hospital accepted nearly 5000 patients and treated a further 3500 with mobile medical teams. NATO engineers built more than 110 multifunctional shelters at high altitude and cleared and repaired 60 kilometres of road, removing some 42 000 cubic metres of debris. NATO engineers also provided fresh water for more than 1000 people per day and repaired a permanent spring water distribution and storage system to serve a further 8000 people per day. By 1 February 2006, all NATO units had left the Bagh region for a staging area, from where they then travelled back to their home countries.

In addition, after initially contributing to the relief effort on a bilateral basis, Canada placed its response team, the Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART), under the NATO operation. DART medical personnel treated some 10 000 patients and left a clinic behind when they withdrew. Ottawa also made helicopters and water-purification units available and financed three helicopters for three months for the United Nations.